Navigating Liminality: Region-Making and Political Practice on the Myanmar-China Border

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Navigating Liminality:

Region-making and Political Practice on the Myanmar-China Border

A dissertation presented

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnography of region-making through political practice in Wa region, an autonomous region on the Myanmar-China border, governed by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the strongest Ethnic Armed Group in Myanmar with 30,000 troops. I argue that the political practices of the UWSA produce and maintain Wa Region as a liminal space within its geopolitical and economic realities, navigating a course between autonomy from and integration into the Myanmar nation-state through the intermittent building and breaking of connections.

Over 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Wa Region, I studied the political practices of elites and ordinary people – peace negotiations and meetings with Myanmar, China and other armed groups, movement and trade across boundaries, governance and campaigns of UWSA territory, visiting and hospitality amongst Wa leaders, and commercial practices amidst scams and the mining economy. I also draw upon historical representations of the Wa to chart their autonomy up to the 1950s, the subsequent intrusions by foreign troops, the establishment of Wa Region and the UWSA in 1989, initial disengagement and ultimately the taking up of a leading role in the nationwide peace process with the Myanmar government in 2017. *Navigating Liminality* offers a perspective on Wa Region and the UWSA that does not confine it to the registers of a “non-state actor”, regard it as a “rebel” group necessarily at odds with the Myanmar government, or treat the stalemate in the peace process as failure. Instead, it proposes liminality as an ongoing and open-
ended process that is productive for the UWSA, allowing it to negotiate the terms of its incorporation into the Myanmar state and safeguard its survival.
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**Introduction**

In September 2016, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest of the ethnic armed groups in Myanmar (Burma), walked out of the country’s most ambitious peace talks since armed insurgencies erupted across the country in the 1950s. The “21st Century Panglong Conference” was meant to be a shining symbol of Aung San Suu Kyi’s new National League for Democracy (NLD) government’s commitment to peace and development. The UWSA, by this stage increasingly seen as the “big brother” of the armed groups, had endured an uneasy truce with the Myanmar government, never engaged in outright fighting and yet rarely attending the several rounds of peace talks with ethnic armed groups (EAGs). The walkout was a serious blow to the image of the peace process, having been ostensibly boosted a year before in October 2015 with the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the military government and eight EAGs.

The “21st Century Panglong Conference” was a resurrected version of the consultative pre-independence dialogue between ethnic minorities and the Burmese majority, hosted in 1947 by the much-revered General Aung San, late father of present-day State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The talks of September 2016 supposedly held great promise for peace between a host of EAGs, the Myanmar military (*tatmadaw*), and the new democratically-elected NLD government of Aung San Suu Kyi¹. The official explanations for the Wa delegation’s walkout was that they had been mistakenly given observer status and had no opportunity to read a prepared statement to the

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¹ Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD momentously won the November 2015 General Elections and came to power in April 2016. The previous NCA was signed in October 2015 between the military government under President Thein Sein, and 8 EAGs. The Myanmar military retained 25% of the seats in Parliament by the 2008 constitution however, and also the heads of the Interior, Defence, and Border Affairs Ministries. For commentary on the fraught political situation caused by this separation of power, see ICG 2016b.
conference. Moreover, the UWSA representatives had been seated wrongly and not paid the respect commensurate to its status. The Burmese government countered by arguing that it had been an administrative mix up, and that the Wa delegation had refused to stay at the prearranged hotel. Yet it was clear that the delegation had been half-heartedly sent by the Wa authorities; they were unknown low-level officials who had probably been ordered to return home by their bosses.

The Wa representative interviewed by the news media declared, “we support the conference. We left because we didn’t like the accommodation, the environment and the way they treated us. I want to see peace prevail in the entire country. We came to the conference for peace.” This sounded remarkably similar to the series of reasons the Wa ordinarily made after avoiding or withdrawing from peace talks, either saying that they already had a ceasefire, or that they were deliberately invited too late to travel, or that they had not been allowed to bring soldiers or the right delegates with them, yet ultimately reaffirming their commitment to peace and never seeking confrontation.

In April 2017, the UWSA announced the formation of a new political coalition called the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), consisting of 7 northern EAGs which sought to negotiate with the Myanmar government as a bloc, and proposed an amended version of the NCA. This proposal was rejected by the Myanmar government, despite Wa claims that they had been promised a fair consideration. The Second Panglong Conference of May 2017 also ended in stalemate, despite China’s efforts to bring the Myanmar government and the FPNCC members to the table. By mid-2017, the Rohingya crisis in the West of the country had diverted all international attention from the ongoing peace process, further entrenching the stalemate.

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This dissertation is an ethnography of region-making and the production of liminality through political practice in an autonomous region at the peripheries of Myanmar, on the border with China. Formed in 1989 when the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) disintegrated into a host of EAGs, Wa Region is governed by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest and most well-armed EAG in Myanmar. The UWSA maintains an uneasy ceasefire with the Myanmar military, with complete de facto sovereignty over its own territory, an entire administrative government, and extensive extractive and plantation economies, engaging in licit and illicit trade in the shadow economy of the borderlands. Yet, unlike many “de facto states” around the world, Wa Region is not secessionist and does not seek independence from the Myanmar nation-state. Under the 2008 Constitution, it is known as “Wa Self-Administered Division”, and prior to that was called “Myanmar Shan State Special Region No. 2”. There is a stated interest in a type of federal autonomy that UWSA leaders
describe as similar to Hong Kong. Hong Kong however, does not have a powerfully-equipped standing army, which is ultimately the key point of contention in any political settlement.

The Myanmar nation-building project is tenuous, laced with seven decades of mistrust between the Bamar-majority government and the ethnic minorities living mainly at the peripheries, who make up 30-40% of the country's population. The 20 or more EAGs contesting authority across the country provides the tatmadaw with one of the strongest rationales for its existence and renewal as the defender of national unity. It has masterfully co-opted the British tactic of divide and rule, pitting one armed group or militia against the other, signing ceasefires and breaking them, instigating divisions within the armed groups, and forging and unforging alliances. The Myanmar “state apparatus” is complex and messy; shifting relations between political leaders and the tatmadaw’s competition for power with the NLD-led civilian government confound easy interpretations of the makeup of the “state”. These are the shifting sands across which the UWSA treads, often painted as a dangerous ethnic “Other” lurking at the margins of the Burmese nationalist imaginary, an imaginary which seeks to bind disparate ethnic groups and regions together under the rhetoric of national progress and development.

My dissertation argues that Wa Region is a liminal place, produced through political practices – histories of place-making, warfare, movement, political negotiations, governance, authority, and political economy. I study the historical and contemporary political practice of the UWSA throughout the dissertation, finding it to be characterized by the constant rupture and renewal of connections, an intermittence that produces and maintains liminality by navigating the balance between incorporation into the Myanmar state and autonomy from it. The liminal condition of Wa Region is ambiguous, tenuous, and unstable, with no necessary resolution in sight. I argue that the
status quo of liminality is productive in its own right, and observers should not mistake stalemate or protracted conflict for failure.

Wa Region poses a conundrum for observers and analysts. It is an in-between space – marked by *de facto* but not *de jure* sovereignty, balancing the geopolitical interests of the Chinese and Myanmar nation-states on its flanks, slowly developing its economy and administration amidst the vicissitudes of regional and international market forces. Its fierce autonomy, shrouded by secrecy, rumor, and partial knowledge, has led it to be dubbed a “state-within-a-state” by various observers.

What does the UWSA really want, they ask – secession, independence, a state in a federal union, or special autonomous status? Why, as Myanmar’s strongest armed group, does it seek to bring other armed groups together in an alliance to negotiate with the government? Why does it not engage meaningfully in the peace process, in Southeast Asia’s longest-running ethnic armed conflict? And why has the UWSA’s ceasefire held, despite stalemate, constant tensions and troop movements, and fighting between the tatmadaw and other EAGs?

Assessing political intentions and weighing Wa Region against criteria of statehood are inadequate framings for a region that is at once incorporated and autonomous, engaged and withdrawn, across a variety of political and economic domains. I avoid such speculative pronouncements about the obscure intentions and motives of the UWSA, or prognoses on the potential outcomes or solutions for peace talks and negotiations, focusing instead on the *political practices* of UWSA, both past and present. Rather than measuring Wa Region by its “stateness” or “non-stateness”, its fulfillment or lack of particular criteria for statehood, I examine the *production of liminality* and ambiguity through ambivalences of practice. Liminality offers us a tool for understanding the coexistence of contradictions within a spatiotemporal frame, utilizing the in-between of van Gennep’s (1960) and Turner’s (1967, 1969) separation and incorporation, of autonomy and integration. Its inherent
ambivalence and contradiction accommodates possibility and potential – both change and stasis, creation and destruction.

**An In-between Space**

The UWSA governs a mountainous region on the border with China, known as Wa Region, or Wa State to others (see below under “Key Terminology”), an area of 12,000km² roughly the size of Northern Ireland or Connecticut². Wa Region is a *de facto* autonomous region of Myanmar, protected from Myanmar military incursions by 30,000 well-armed Wa troops. A population of around 450,000³ is spread across the hills, its border location with China positioning it within the geostrategic concerns of these two large nation-states. Since the colonial period, it has been lumped loosely under the wider jurisdiction of the Federated Shan States, and after Burmese independence in 1948, Wa Region became a part of Shan State in the Union of Myanmar. Amidst the patchwork of territories and zones of control of the different ethnic armed groups across Myanmar, the UWSA is one of only a handful to have a strong standing army and an inviolable territory of its own. Using Chinese as its administrative language, the UWSA runs a functioning governmental apparatus with 7 “Ministries” or departments ranging from Finance to Political Works, overseen by a Politburo and Central Committee, and headed by Chairman Bao, also the Commander-in-Chief of the UWSA. Despite having officially eradicated opium-growing in 2005, their location in the northern part of the Golden Triangle means that accusations of heroin and methamphetamine production have

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² Lintner records the 4 districts in Wa areas controlled by the CPB in 1986 as totaling around 12,224 km² (Lintner 1990:Appendix 2). This appears to include Seleu which is no longer part of Wa Special Region 2, along with other boundary changes. A GIS mapping of the Region calculates it at 12,000 km².

³ By comparison, the population of Myanmar stands at 51.4 million, according to the 2014 Census.
continued, allegations lent weight by the sheer amounts of wealth accrued by the Wa leadership. This wealth has been invested into an impressive portfolio of property, plantations, extractive industries, and other investments across the country and even abroad, and supplies the Wa army and infrastructure projects in Wa Region.

Figure 2: Map showing location of North and South Wa, shaded

The Wa people occupy the highland regions between present-day Myanmar and China, numbering around a million, and are acknowledged by the inhabitants of the region to be the oldest indigenous peoples of the area (Fiskesjo 2000:57). The Wa have traditionally been and largely remain
subsistence agriculturalists, growing upland rice, millet, maize, and other crops, dependent on rainfall without irrigation systems. They speak Wa, a Mon-Khmer language with various dialects, the most prolific being Paraok of the Cangyuan and Kunma areas (Watkins 2014). Central to the movement of the Wa into the hills was the long history of encroachment and demands for tribute from the constellation of Shan principalities in and around the China-Laos-Burma border areas from the 1400s to the 1700s⁴ (Fiskesjo 2000). Silver mines and their exploitation by Wa and Chinese miners have been a key mode of historical contact with the Chinese power center from as early as the 17th century (Fiskesjo 2010a; Wang 2010). The creation of the Sino-Burma border during the colonial era, with a final demarcation in 1960, led to the partition of “Wa country” into the Chinese and Burmese nation-states, with approximately 2/3 of this population on the Burmese side (Fiskesjo 2013:2). Magnus Fiskesjo, the key scholar of the Wa who has trawled extensively through sources from the Chinese, British, Burmese, and Shan literatures⁵, describes the Wa as fiercely autonomous and egalitarian, engaging these foreign polities in diplomatic relations while resisting encroachments of any external governance up to the mid 20th century. Their fearsome reputation in the highlands for headhunting, warring, and raiding, has intrigued and imperiled the few travelers to the remote region (Fiskesjo 2011).

From the Burmese perspective, Wa Region has long been a breakaway zone where the terrain, geographical distance, and the contingency of history gave rise to specific forms of political turmoil,

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⁴ Fiskesjo provides a useful list of the various Shan polities: now the present-day Ruili and Gengma in the North, the Menglian and Sipsongbanna areas to the East, Kengtung in the South, and Manglun in the West (2000:60-6). These Shan areas, half in China and half in Myanmar, currently surround the area of Wa Special Region 2 (see also Sai Aung Tun 2009).

⁵ See Fiskesjo (2013) for an in-depth overview of the state of Wa Studies, with material listed from archaeological and linguistic studies, and Chinese, British, Burmese, missionary, and NGO sources.
autonomy, and shadow economies. Its heartlands were where the fiercely independent “Wild Wa” lived, never governed by the British or Chinese, nor coming under the leadership of Shan saophas or Chinese tusi (Fiskesjo 2000). The daunting hills have long offered hideouts for insurgents, rumor, and illicit goods, mired in caprices and ruptures of all forms. Particular forms of political economy and governance have taken hold since the 1950s, as armies and traders have entered from the outside in search of strongholds, resources, and alliances. The 1950s saw the retreat of the Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang, KMT) from Yunnan Province into the border areas of Burma, particularly eastern Shan state and the hilly regions of Kokang and Wa, threatening the sovereignty of the Burmese nation-state. By 1961, coordinated efforts between the Burmese and Chinese Communist government had driven the KMT towards the Thai border. Soon after, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), battling the Burmese military, took up strongholds the Wa hills, and with the support of China, drove out Burmese government forces and affiliated militia. Troops under various flags moved back and forth through the hills, securing roads, towns, and allegiances of local leaders. By 1973, the bulk of today’s Wa Region had come under the control of the CPB.

In 1989, the CPB splintered into mutinous ethnic armed groups – Wa, Kokang, Kachin, and Monglar, with its mainly Burmese leadership disintegrating into China and neighboring areas. The newly formed UWSA was quick to sign a ceasefire with Khin Nyunt, the Burmese Military Intelligence chief, leading to the formation of “Myanmar Shan State Special Region 2 (Wa Region)”. Several years of continued battles with various Shan militias were followed by a decade of consolidation and development. Cobblestone roads and dams were built, and the town of Pang Kham grew gradually. Shadow economies expanded through the opium and heroin trade and illicit networks of contraband trade. The Chinese Yuan (CNY) was the currency of use in Wa Region, and Chinese markets were the preferred destination for minerals, timber, and plantation crops. With China keen
to stabilize the border regions and prevent disorder and criminality from spreading into its peripheries, it continued to cautiously support the UWSA. In 2005, the UWSA instituted a ban on the growing of opium, and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) entered the region to support it in its efforts, marking a new era of engagement with the international community.

The population of present-day Wa Region can be estimated at around 450,000\[^6\], which includes the South area on the Thai border. The official figures however, provided by the Wa authorities following the 2014 Census showed 599,068 inhabitants in Wa Region (North and South, without breakdown), with Wa forming the majority at 75%, Lahu at 11%, Han Chinese at 6%, and Shan at 5%. Criminologist Chin Ko-Lin’s estimated figures are different with 320,000 in North Wa and 280,000 in South Wa\[^7\] (2009:27). Unsurprisingly, population statistics are not easy to come by in Wa Region, since the Wa authorities neither allow easy access to Myanmar census takers\[^8\], nor do

\[^6\] These figures are estimated from partial township and district records obtained from Wa authorities, observations and conversations at township and district levels, and comparisons with the records of the 2014 Myanmar Census and official census results released by the Wa government.

\[^7\] I use “North Wa” and “South Wa” to differentiate between the UWSA-controlled territory on the Chinese border (North) and Thai border (South). In CPB terminology of the 1970s and 1980s, both “Northern Wa District” (Nam Tit, Mengmao, Yin Phan areas), “Southern Wa District” (Wein Kao, Pang Yang areas), and ”Northern Kengtung District” (Mong Pawk, Mong Phen) made up the area I now call North Wa (for maps see Lintner 1990: Appendix II).

\[^8\] Despite being administered by the Myanmar government, figures for the 2014 Census were collected by the Wa authorities through the reporting of statistics at the township seat by village leaders. Only in less “sensitive” rural areas of Wa Region was information gathered by door-to-door visits. To complicate matters, the census takers were ill-equipped to carry out the collection – I was told that even where the Myanmar authorities were able to recruit Wa speakers to collect data, they were unable to communicate in the various Wa dialects, or in Lahu villages. Shan was a more widely accessible language in the southern parts of Wa Region.
they maintain careful consolidated statistics of their own⁹. In addition, the Myanmar government has yet to release its figures from the 2014 Census broken down by ethnic groups¹⁰. There were also a series of campaigns launched by the Wa authorities that further complicated the demographic of the hills. In the early 2000s, the Wa authorities relocated tens of thousands of villagers to South Wa both to ease the population pressure in the land-scarce hills, and to increase ethnic Wa numbers in the lowlands. The 2005 opium ban also saw a marked decrease in business opportunities and urban population, both of which were eventually noticeable from 2012 onwards.

Mountainous terrain, poor roads, linguistic diversity, heavy rains, and patchy mobile signal pose challenges for maintaining connections. Fluctuating and unreliable backing from China remains a constant strategic concern at the back of the Wa leadership’s minds, as the China uses the armed groups as bargaining chips against the Myanmar military and government. Poverty and dire social inequality, poor education and employment opportunities, lack of legal permits and ID cards have restricted social mobility and heightened a sense of isolation. Yet inhabitants and political incumbents have always found ways to navigate the complex political terrain. Routes and networks crop up inevitably and in ways both surprising and unsurprising, perpetuating the delicate oscillations of connection and rupture, of flows and blockage, of travel and isolation.

***

⁹ CPB statistics from 1986 counted 263,029 people in the Wa hills under its control (Lintner 1990:36). Lintner’s Appendix 2 also gives a breakdown of CPB statistics, although the figures do not seem to add up neatly (1990), perhaps owing to incongruent administrative boundaries.

¹⁰ As of February 2018, the Myanmar government (now led by ASSK’s NLD instead of the tatmadaw’s USDP) stated that there still was still no timeframe for the release of data on ethnic populations, citing controversies over ethnic classification and terminology. See San Yamin Aung. 2018. “Still No Date for Release of Census Findings on Ethnic Populations.” The Irrawaddy, 21 Feb 2018.
Figure 3: Wa Villagers at a shelter in their fields, Man Tun township, October 2015

Following two decades of uneasy ceasefires and shifting alliances between the tatmadaw and armed groups at its peripheries, significant fighting broke out in the neighboring Kokang area in 2009, and later in Kachin areas in 2012. The tatmadaw called for all ethnic armed groups to convert their forces into subordinate Border Guard Forces (BGF), a call that was roundly rejected. The UWSA began
developing its army in earnest, in preparation for a Myanmar offensive, even as peace talks and negotiations between the government and the 20 or so armed groups began on a nationwide scale. During this period, the UWSA largely scoffed at and abstained from peace talks. Speaking to leaders and officials from the Wa government, the oft-repeated mantra was that the Myanmar military government could simply not be trusted, a bilateral ceasefire was already in place, and hence talks had “no meaning”. Officials would cite ongoing tatmadaw talks with other armed groups, noting how deadlocks were never broken, promises were reneged on, ceasefires quickly broken, and unreasonable demands constantly tabled.

After a second round of fighting in February 2015 in the Kokang area, the UWSA called for an Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) summit in its headquarters in Pang Kham. This brazen disregard for the Myanmar military was unheard of. Fifteen EAGs were invited in May 2015, but not a single observer from the Myanmar government. 6 months later in November, and shortly after the signing of a “Nationwide Ceasefire” between the Myanmar government and 8 EAGs, the UWSA decided to invite the remaining 11 non-signatories for a second meeting in Pang Kham, in full defiance of the military junta. Another slap in the face to the Myanmar government, which was revealed as powerless to prevent the travel and gathering of armed rebel groups in and across its own territory. But this also signaled the emergence of the UWSA as leader among the EAGs in opposition to the government. By February 2017, a leading Myanmar observer and veteran journalist Bertil Lintner declared that “the UWSA has now emerged as the new collective leader of Myanmar’s ethnic armed resistance – and thus holds the key to peace in the war-torn country” (Lintner 2017a).

The rumor mill began spinning in 2015 as political pundits attempted to decipher the intentions and next moves of the UWSA, and continues to churn. Media commentaries are filled with speculation each time a peace talk approaches, discussing attendees, demands, motives, and
prospects for peace. The military strength, weaponry, and strategies of the UWSA, along with its relationship with China, are constantly under scrutiny. Journalists visiting in 2015 and 2016 produced narratives of the UWSA and Wa Region as a secretive and breakaway region of Myanmar, with Pang Kham’s architecture and culture far closer to China than anywhere in Myanmar. Others speculated on the UWSA’s role as a strategic “proxy” for China. The imperative to produce knowledge and demonstrate expertise, coupled with the opacity of Wa Region and problems of linguistic and cultural translation, lent itself to an environment where punditry and commentary took on a life of its own.

Writing about Contemporary Wa Region

The difficulty of access to EAG areas on Myanmar’s peripheries meant that contemporary and historical writing on Wa Region is sparse, divisible into four main lenses or approaches, which I label as romanticization, autonomy, conflict resolution, and “bad governance”. I engage throughout the dissertation with these four approaches.

Romanticized Narratives of Travelers: Backward, Isolated, and Lawless

The first approach might be described as a romanticization stemming from historical accounts of travelers and the occasional visits by media or journalists today, from which two main narratives emerge (see chapter 1). One describes Wa Region as a secretive, remote, and backward domain within which a powerful rebel army masks its weapons and intentions. The Was’ reputation as poor, uneducated headhunters and later as fierce fighters of the CPB period, their prior absence from peace negotiations, and rumors of acquired weaponry, have all fomented such fears. Short visits by journalists sensationally portray the Wa leadership as authoritarian, intransigent and belligerent, returning to Yangon with more photographs of soldiers and rifles than stories of ordinary
inhabitants. Most recently, Reuters journalists proclaimed in a spirit of unabashed self-congratulation: “[we] traveled across the rugged Wa territory, possibly the least-known part of Southeast Asia where Westerners have had less access than to North Korea”, simplistically describing Wa Region as “secretive” and “China-dominated” (Lee and Shwe Yee Saw Myint 2016).

The other narrative depicts Wa Region as a violent and lawless arena, one of the many narco-fiefdoms that pockmarks the Burmese periphery. The focus here is on Wa region’s reputation as a drug-producing zone on northern edge of the Golden Triangle, which persists despite the official eradication of opium growing in 2005. The borderlands are seen as beyond the reach of ordinary forms of state sovereignty, where criminals and illicit materials travel across porous borders, in and out of the protection zones of warlords, or as TIME would have it, “the lawless hills of northeast Burma [are] an empire built on guns, drugs and blood” (Marshall and Davis 2002). Sensational stories abound of drug kingpins, prostitution, human trafficking (particularly of women), gangsters, and “hopelessly corrupt” warlords with armies (Lintner and Black 2009). More recently, Reuters and BBC journalists, excited at having gained access to supposedly forbidden border regions, produced sensationalist pieces on the illicit wildlife trade, narcotics, and casino economies, romanticizing what were everyday livelihoods and movement for locals (Fisher 2016; Lee and Slodkowski 2017).

**Autonomy and Agency: Rebels/Evaders/Agents?**

A second area of writing is the historical studies attempting to conceptualize and historicize autonomy and agency in Wa country and the Wa hills, during the British colonial period and prior to the 1950s. Magnus Fiskesjö is the main scholar of this work, describing the Wa hills as egalitarian and “anti-state” (2010a), not engaging in secondary state-formation or mimicry of the political forms
of surrounding states. Neither the Qing nor the British managed to administer most of Wa country, either directly or indirectly. Fiskesjo notes how colonial explorers were surprised to find the Wa hills more prosperous and densely populated than surrounding areas at the turn of the 20th century, yet without kings, state institutions, or observable social hierarchies (2010a:244). Autonomous and fiercely independent, the Wa seemed neither in a peripheral situation or a kingship system, actively resisting the hierarchical accrual of power by individuals, maintaining an egalitarian society.

Fiskesjo respectfully declines the premises of James Scott’s Art of Not Being Governed (2009), which posited the highland areas of SEA, or zomia, as zones of refuge where peoples fled to escape the control of lowland states. According to Scott’s famous argument, the social structures and cultural forms of these highland societies bore structural similarities conducive to state evasion and impermanence, from swidden agriculture to the lack of family names and a written script. Fiskesjo writes instead:

“The genesis of the polity that was the autonomous Wa lands is not easily accounted for in a history emphasizing an agency of refuge. Their social space was certainly non-state, but not mainly because they ‘resisted the projects of nation-building and state-making of the states to which it belonged’. They were not part of any state, and their social formation emerged from a trajectory involving complex factors (including resistance to others’ statemaking) adding up to more than the negation of state-making.” (2010:263, my italics)

Fiskesjo instead sees agency in the Wa context not merely as resistance and refuge, but as project-making in its own right. He rejects the characterization of historical Wa country being mired in a “peripheral situation”, where structure is dependent and defined in relation to other political centers. Instead, he asserts that it formed a “predatory periphery” with its fierce autonomy, egalitarianism, prosperity, and raiding prowess (2000:13). Autonomy, for him, is not mere evasion.

In the contemporary context, these issues of autonomy and agency translate into questions of how the UWSA and Wa Region should be framed – are they rebels or insurgents, ethnic nationalists, or
simply agents of their own destiny? What are they evading, and what are they projects are they building? Visitors are similarly surprised by the autonomy the UWSA possesses, its military might and weaponry, and its sovereignty over its territory. Bertil Lintner remarks, “with a population of 400,000 and its own local administration, schools, hospitals and even a bank, this “mini-state” is almost unique in recent Asian history” (2014). Elsewhere, he writes with Michael Black that “the Wa State’ has by all intents and purposes become a semi-independent, but unrecognized, buffer state” (Lintner and Black 2009:29). Jonah Fisher describes it as a “state within a state”, which has “spent the last two decades astutely playing their two large neighbors [China and Myanmar] off against each other” (2016). Many local media reports brand the UWSA as rebels, aggressors, or even secessionists.

**Conflict Resolution and Drug Economy Approaches**

A third approach might be described as “resolution-oriented”, that which seeks to understand the UWSA’s motivations in the context of conflict resolution, the drugs economy, and the wider peace process (see chapter 3). Much of the scholarly literature on Wa Region focuses on the political economy of heroin and methamphetamines (Chin 2009; Jelsma et al 2005; Kramer 2007; Lintner and Black 2009; Lone 2008), cognizant of the inextricable ties between conflict and development, and shaped by the “greed and grievance” debates of intra-state conflict from the 1990s (e.g. Keen 1998; Collier 2000). Here, debates over culpability and “root causes” emerge, along with a host of policy implications and recommendations.

The political scientist Tom Kramer subtitles a working paper on the UWSA with a telling question: “Narco-Army or Ethnic Nationalist Party?” (2007) He describes the governance, goals, and objectives of the UWSA, primarily that it seeks a state (like Shan State) within a federal union. He
sympathetically suggests that “powerful Chinese syndicates” and business elements have strong a hold over the UWSA through the shadow economy, and argues that “demonizing and isolating the UWSP[A] will make them more dependent on these groups” (2007:65), calling instead for a considered engagement with the leadership. Other writers however, have challenged the extent to which these supposed Chinese syndicates have actual control over the UWSA, refusing to absolve the UWSA from its central role in drug production and trafficking (Chin 2009:231, ch8; Lintner and Black 2009). Patrick Meehan examines the “politics of production” of the drug trade as paradoxically central to state-consolidation in Myanmar (2015), and suggests briefly how elements of the UWSA are in cahoots with the Myanmar government in the extractive and drugs economies, drawing them closer together in joint enterprise (2011). In addition to the political science scholarship, a variety of other think-tanks and foundations have published reports that locate the UWSA within the complex tapestry of EAGs involved in the peace process (ICG 2016; Jolliffe 2015; Sun 2017; TNI 2012, 2016, 2017; Felbab-Brown 2015; ISDP 2015), analyzing the links and alliances between groups, negotiations between the Myanmar government and the UWSA, and the role of China in Myanmar’s peace process (see chapter 3). Much of the journalistic reporting on Wa region, too, focuses on the peace process and political economy, in particular the links between the shadow economy of resource extraction in the borderlands and conflict.

**Development and “Good Governance”**

A fourth and related approach deals with questions of the UWSA’s capacity for governance and development. While noting the overt forms of statehood and autonomy that Wa Region displays, observers in this vein stress that Wa Region is not a “real” state, lacking the administrative capacity and recognition. In the scholarly realm, writers adopt a liberal democratic lens of “good governance” and participatory development, through which they find the UWSA wanting (see chapter 4).
Implicit is a sense that governance offers a solution to developmental problems of poverty, inequality, food insecurity, and poor literacy and health indicators.

Chin (2009), Renard (2013a), Milsom (2005), and Kramer (2007) have all written in part about the state apparatus and administration in Wa Region, detailing the challenges faced by an armed group with little experience in governance. These accounts, however sympathetic, attribute “bad governance” to the UWSA’s lack of exposure to the “outside” and the poor rates of literacy and education in the region. Ron Renard, the former United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) manager in Pang Kham, wrote an article entitled “The Wa Authority and Good Governance, 1989–2007”, in which he noted:

“I often dealt with officials who did not have (in my judgment) their people’s best interests in mind. I was not alone in this opinion – one of the last comments my predecessor as manager, Jeremy Milsom, made to me in February 2006 was, “the next issue [after the opium ban] I have with the Wa is good governance.” (2013a:144)

This “lack of exposure and political experience and weak capacity in the leadership” (Kramer 2007:64) is said to affect also the UWSA’s capacity to engage with national politics and the peace process. Kramer however, concedes that “after years of isolation, the UWSP has made great efforts to establish good relations with the international community... relations with China are relatively strong” (2007:64).

**Statehood, Autonomy, and Borderland Studies**

Wa Region then, is heavily implicated in the political project of the Myanmar state, its own forms of authority concurrently opposing and reproducing that of the Myanmar nation-state. While Wa Region lacks the status and legitimacy of a nation-state, it possesses full sovereignty and jurisdiction over its territory, and dictates its external relations with other armed groups and governments. It
handles its own economic affairs and internal governance with almost complete autonomy, despite pressures exerted by China and to some degree, the international community. At the same time, it operates within the legal and political confines of the Myanmar nation-state, and relies on Myanmar and China for markets and trade, enmeshed in the flows of capital within the borderlands. Its inhabitants are not accorded the mobility and rights of Myanmar citizenship unless they register for Myanmar IDs, and even so most still lack the linguistic skills and cultural capital to access the rest of the country. The relationship between the Myanmar government and the UWSA has both domestic and regional dimensions, given China’s use of the UWSA and other EAGs as a bargaining chip in its ties with the Burmese leadership.

The central question then emerges – how might one study a seemingly fully autonomous polity within a nation-state, a polity that is *de facto*, but not *de jure* sovereign? How does it measure up by the criteria of statehood or the lack of it, and might this be the appropriate measure for such a polity? What are the difficulties and theoretical baggage in an attempt to study autonomy as a value or as a political status? I turn briefly to three theoretical fields in anthropology and political science that might lend analytical insights and nuances to this problem – theories of statehood, the interrogation of autonomy, and the literature from borderlands studies.

**State, Non-state, and Stateness**

Myriad phenomena turn up in places like Wa Region that resemble state apparatuses – administrative structures, external relations, bureaucratic practices, documents and identity cards, and infrastructure projects. Yet Wa Region defies easy classification, and is often evaluated for its falling short of Westphalian statehood – as a “non-state” actor, unrecognized and unsanctioned in the international order. Alternatively, tethered to the analytical preponderance of the state, a series

By framing Wa Region as imperfect form, or a negation or opposition to the state, the metrics of statehood ultimately incarcerate the type of polity being studied, measuring Wa region and the UWSA by adherence or deviation from Weberian norms of governance, territoriality, economy, and the monopoly of violence. Little room is left for exploring the expression of other forms of political authority. It limits our capacity to identify and examine local sensibilities of the type of polity or project being built in Wa Region, reproducing analyses that are inextricable from conventional state imaginaries.

In addition, while brands of political commentary pride themselves in speculation as to the intentions and motives of political actors, there is far more uncertainty than they betray. They ask: What does the UWSA want, and how do they articulate and intend to achieve it? What is their vision or plan? But observing statements and interviewing leaders often tells us more about the circumstantial production of these texts and statements rather than the wider political context. Wa leaders and authorities are also adept at the political performance of the various registers of appropriateness and decorum, in an attempt to boost their political legitimacy. It would be next to impossible to elicit more than the party rhetoric from a one-off interview with them. They also are disparate individuals and agentive in their own right, thus not necessarily representative of “the Wa” or the UWSA. They have different jurisdictions and their political positions or personal power fluctuates over time, meaning that one requires a deep local understanding of the locations of these leaders and their roles within the organization, in order to interpret their statements. A lack of this context leads to confusion and political punditry that is often garbled and contradictory.
It also appears that much of political commentary seems to be underwritten by an assumption that resolution and settlement are the desired outcomes, and that stalemate is failure. The ultimate goal of political observers often tends toward conflict resolution, to deduce policy recommendations in support of the peace process. If we could only figure this out, they imply, we might come to a compromise, a negotiated political settlement.

In this vein, we might ask: how do we describe and analyze forms of political authority without being mired in the sense that they are lacking or deficient, a diminished form of the ideal-typic state? How do we make sense of political practices and phenomena that are neither easily characterized as state-formation nor outright resistance or opposition to the Myanmar state? What are the alternative analytical frameworks for forms of project-making that fluctuate between autonomy and integration, between rebellion and encompassment?

**Autonomy**

The notion of “autonomy” requires some clarification; I differentiate four senses of autonomy that can and are used in descriptions of Wa Region as a collective: (1) as a political status of devolution within a federal nation-state; (2) a capacity to exercise sovereignty over territory, the ability to ensure political survival; (3) an empirical fact of being unconquered and not subordinated by external forces, and a structural freedom from oppression or coercion; and (4) a value that orients political action. Because of the overlapping senses of the term, and the slippage between them, it becomes difficult to center analysis around “autonomy” as a concept, with the temptation to measure “degrees” or autonomy as one of the many pitfalls.

Wa Region possesses some large degree of autonomy in both political status and capacity, with the official title of “Myanmar Shan State Special Region 2” following the ceasefire with the Burmese
government in 1989, where it was allowed to and self-govern and maintain its own army. Under the 2008 constitution, it was later given the status of “Self-Administered Division”, although the territory marked out by law did not match up with the area of Wa Region controlled by the UWSA”. It has, however, never called for independence and makes clear that it has no desire for secession.

The historical autonomy of the Wa States and Wa country that Fiskesjo describes is an **empirical** one where “chiefs” in the Wa States remained unmolested by colonial powers and exacted tribute from surrounding polities in predatory fashion. This ended in the 1950s, with the overwhelming arrival of KMT intruders in the hills. The demarcation of the China-Burma border by 1960 signaled the **de jure** partition of the Wa hills into the Burmese and Chinese nation-states, a territorial bifurcation imposed on the Wa without them being consulted or fully understanding the process. From then on, encroachment was inevitable – from KMT invaders to the CPB’s establishment, to its demise and the beginnings of the UWSA. But Fiskesjo also treats autonomy as a **value** within Wa society, where an egalitarian ethos ensured relatively equal social rights of individuals, and a deliberately blocking of individual aggrandizement.

I use “autonomy” in Fiskesjo’s sense as a value which guides political practice in Wa Region, an insistence on their own freedom of political action and self-determination (see chapter 2). And yet I also use “autonomy” in the empirical sense, as a freedom from external control, and juxtapose it against incorporation into the Myanmar nation-state. It is the navigation between these two poles

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" Wa Region was afforded “Self-Administered Division” status in the 2008 Constitution, while 5 other ethnic regions were given “Self-Administered Zones” in recognition of Wa Region’s greater autonomy (see chapter 2 for details).
of autonomy and incorporation that produce and maintain the liminal position of Wa Region. I discuss the term and in its implications in Wa Region in chapter 2.

**Borders**

The vast literature on border studies also offers themes for thinking through the dynamic phenomena of Wa Region. Broadly speaking, there appear to be at least three perspectives in the border studies literature. The first, reliant on spatial imaginaries linked to sovereignty and territoriality, deploys concepts such as spaces of exception, enclaves (Nyiri 2012), regions of graduated (Ong 2000), disaggregated (Slaughter 2004) overlapping or uneven (Benton 2010; MacLean 2008), or centripetal models of sovereignty (Tambiah 1977). Others look at “zones” (Baud and van Schendel 1997), state frontiers and margins (Prescott 1987), unambiguous borders forming a “geo-body” essential to national imaginaries (Winichakul 1994), spatial notions of incarceration and confinement (Navaro-Yashin 2003), and yet others study specific nodes of state sovereignty at jurisdictional limits, such as border or road checkpoints (Jeganathan 2004; Walker 1999), airport customs and immigration documents (Chalfin 2010; Jansen 2009).

The second related perspective is that affiliated to movement, networks, and flows, which Warwick Anderson describes as drawing upon “hydraulic” metaphors (2011). These tend to flows and flux (Appadurai 1996), movement and enclosures (Cunningham and Heyman 2004), porosity of boundaries (Tagliacozzo 2005), and routes (Clifford 1997), breaking spatial metaphors into that of movement. It also includes the work on mobility, which looks at actual and potential travel of people (Chu 2010; Ong 1999; Lindqvist 2009; Malkki 1995; Lucht 2012), networks and relationships between people and institutions (Chang 2006), things (Spyer 1997; van Schendel and Abraham 2005), and state agents (Kearney 1991; De Leon 2015) across borders, regimes, and spaces.
The third perspective examines borderlands through notions of identity, as areas of cultural hybridity and flux (Alvarez 1995; Anzaldúa 1987; Ballinger 2004; Rosaldo 1993; Gupta and Ferguson 1992), producing or enabling particular types of subjectivities (Latham 2010; Campbell 2015). This dialect traces a genealogy back to Frederick Jackson Turner’s text on the American Frontier (1920), where “wildness met with European civilization along an ever westward-expanding boundary, paving the way for debates on assimilation, acculturation, and Boasian cultural relativism (see Klein 1996; Deloria 2006). Borders are themselves symbolic agents of processes of sovereignty, culture, and citizenship within nation-states on either side (Donnan and Wilson 1999; P. Sahlins 1989), with implications for identity formation.

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In this dissertation I grapple with related themes and problems: of borders and boundaries that create political, legal, and economic disparities – disparities that attract movement, co-option, extraction, and exploitation. Of marginality, being left to one’s own devices or excluded from nation-states and economies, yet demonstrating an agentive engagement with surrounding states and political actors. Of problems surrounding autonomy – navigating the contradictions between self-determination and agency, and the structural constraints of geopolitical realities. Of governance and authority, as well as incompatibilities with conventional definitions of statehood, state processes, and state functions. Of in-betweenness, hybridity, thirdness, and ambiguity in the borderlands, neither fully autonomous nor fully incorporated.

**An Anthropology of Liminality**

I seek then to study the *production of liminality through political practices* – peace negotiations and external relations, governing mechanisms and assemblages, modes of authority, and political
economy and accumulation – without being caught up in definitional debates about margins or limits of statehood, non-stateness, or anti-state resistance. Nor do I ultimately attempt to engage in political punditry, defining what the UWSA’s goals are or deploying political science models that implicitly or explicitly tend towards conflict resolution. Political practices compose ambivalent representations of both stateness and non-stateness. While performing the “languages of stateness” to seek recognition and legitimacy, Wa Region simultaneously exhibits forms of “non-stateness” in order to exert its autonomy from the Myanmar state. Measuring the Wa polity by its adherence to or lack of statehood falls short of reality, since a curious tournament of performances, gestures, and material actions, unfolds contingently and intermittently.

Mitchell’s call for anthropologists’ attention to the techniques and practices that produce the “state effect”, is instructive: “we must analyze the state as such a structural effect. That is to say, we should examine it not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, apparently metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist” (2006:180). But, in Wa Region, it is the production of liminality – an in-between, an ambiguity that is neither just the production of the “state effect” and state-society distinctions¹², nor the antagonistic resistance and rebellion characteristic of the “non-state”.

**Liminality in Anthropology**

Liminality is a condition, spatiotemporal in nature; not just a historical consequence of events, but agentively produced and performed within a plurality of arenas. Liminality, from van Gennep’s *Rites*

¹² As Mitchell writes in reference to the divisions between state and society: “the essence of modern politics is not policies formed on one side of this division being applied to or shaped by the other, but the producing and reproducing of these lines of difference” (2006:185).
de Passage, referred to the transitional middle phase of ritual, between separation and incorporation (1960:23)\textsuperscript{13}, where initiants passed from one social status to another usually higher one. Victor Turner’s processual approach to Ndembu ritual elaborated on liminality in three essays – *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (1967), *Liminality and Communitas* (2011), and *Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology* (1982) – laying out the attributes and ambiguous nature of the liminal condition. Turner writes:

“liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” (2011:95)

Neophytes in Ndembu initiation rites are temporarily and physically detached from society and its norms during the liminal period, their indeterminacy expressed and performed through symbolic acts, their status weakened yet outside the law. Here, the liminal phase is interstructural, possessing a structural simplicity yet cultural complexity (1967:102); through homilies, humiliation, and physical separation, the liminal entities are rendered submissive and silent, anonymous, often dangerous and polluting (2011). Turner describes an anti-structural *communitas* within this liminal position – a solidarity, egalitarianism, and comradeship amongst members, with a generative potentiality (2011:127), and often associated with inferiority and marginality. The anti-structure is a liberation from normative constraints imposed by social status (1982:44). Only after the liminal period are they reintegrated into society with a new social status. Turner also hints at the possible permanence of this liminality (107) amongst groups such as monks, Christians (lifelong pilgrims),

\textsuperscript{13} See Thomassen (2009, 2016) for an account of the historical development of liminality in anthropology, from van Gennep’s importance and debates with Durkheim, to Turner and his engagement with Dilthey. Thomassen brings liminality to bear on periods of political revolution, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, bungee jumping, and gambling (2016), pushing the limits of its applicability and the extension to Turner’s later notion of the liminoid. Most interestingly he discusses parallels with other inherently contradictory or ambiguous concepts – Tarde’s imitation (1962), Bateson’s schismogenesis (1958), and the anthropological type of the trickster.

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and hippies (those who “opt-out” of the social order). He later develops the notion of the “liminoid” in the context of performance, turning to the positive and active qualities of liminality, where ritual symbols are either effacing or ambiguous, inverting or merging distinctions (1982:26), creating room for cultural creativity and “ludic” play.

Offering a tripartite and processual solution to binary oppositions, interest in the theoretical deployment of liminality has recently revived, with a series of texts deploying it as a device with which to think in sociology (Szakolczai 2000, 2017), international politics (Malksoo 2012; Rumelili 2012; Sakwa 2015; Wydra 2001)14, political anthropology (Bryant 2014; Einstadt 1978; Thomassen 2012), geography (Andrews and Roberts 2012) and across the social sciences more broadly (Horvath, Thomassen & Wydra 2015). Bjorn Thomassen, for instance, calls attention to the transitional nature, contingency, creativity, and possibility embedded within the concept, listing a variety of places, subjects, periods, and experiences that might be described as liminal (2016). Liminality has expanded both spatially and temporally in what he calls the “implosion of liminality in modernity” (Thomassen 2016:11-4), where trade and warfare create more in-between areas or “non-places” (Auge 1995), and where liminal periods have often been extended indefinitely (Thomassen 2016:89-92).

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14 In the field of International Relations, Higgott and Nossal have used liminality to describe the geostrategic situation of Australia (1997). Malksoo argues for the utility of liminality in IR theory, given its ability to challenge or circumvent presumed binaries between society and state, international and domestic, and political and social (2012:482). Liminality affords a sense of creativity and process, a future orientation, “a potential platform for renewing the societal make-up” (2012:481). She also cautions against the overuse of the term that might render it meaningless (2012:487), but then proceeds to apply it to warfare more broadly: “all wars are essentially liminal experiences, moments of radical contingency and uncertainty” (2012:490).
Szakolcai also extends the temporarily transitional nature of Turner’s concept into the possibility of a “permanent liminality” (2000:211), where “if everything is constantly changing, then things always remain the same” (2000:226). He identifies three forms of this, corresponding to being “frozen” in each of the three stages of van Gennep’s rites – monasticism as a liminality of perpetual separation, court society or sect membership as a perpetual game and performance, and Bolshevism as a suspension in the stage of post-war re-aggregation (2000:212-5). For him, America is the prime and absurd example of “permanent liminality”, between the “great passage” from Europe and arrival on the east coast, to the westward expansion of the frontier’s manifest destiny.

**Wa Region as Liminal Polity**

Rebecca Bryant has used liminality to describe a “compromised sovereignty” in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), one of many “de facto states” in the world: “entities that look like states and act like states but lack international legal recognition” (2014:125). For her, these de facto states “may be described as permanently liminal, stuck between the political form they once were, and the recognized body politic they wish to become” (126), “locked in” by isolation. Her analysis finds an “indefinite” liminality in the TRNC where property claims, trade and investment, development, transient governments, and citizenship are subject to uncertainty and disorientation (133); for its people, the “new, imagined order has yet to be established” (139). Bryant suggests ultimately that our preconceived notions of sovereignty are inept for the globalized world.

I deploy liminality for at least six of its associated qualities, to describe Wa Region’s suspension between autonomy and incorporation. First, it helps us to escape the trends in the borderlands literature to think around spatial metaphors or zones and boundaries, or to transgress them through flows or hybridities of culture. Liminality is a spatiotemporal concept, shaped by history,
event, narrative, the ecological and material environment, and by agents, not confined to a specific geographical area or zone. Its boundaries are processual and produced by narrative (Paasi 1998) and practice, neither exclusive nor impermeable.

Second, it eschews determinations of “state-ness” or “non-stateness”, (which also sets the Myanmar state up in oppositional manner to the UWSA), resisting definitional categorization, suspended through political practice. Unlike Bryant, I hesitate to describe Wa Region as a *de facto* “state”, even though it has been described as such by observers. Rather than fitting into state/non-state dichotomies, liminality allows us to comprehend a polity whose status is in-between, indeterminate, presenting itself differently to different actors. This perhaps enables us to shake off some of the baggage and connotations of state or non-state labels, to avoid, even if only for conceptual purposes, the trappings of Westphalian thought.

Third, as a condition and quality it makes no implicit teleological assumptions about progression towards statehood or conflict resolution. Szakolczai’s notion of “permanent liminality” (2000, 2017) rids the concept of a fixed temporal frame, leaving open possibility and contingency. Despite the sense of transition in van Gennep’s liminality, an expanded use of the concept sees no necessarily prescribed outcomes – not peace, not federal incorporation into a union, not military victory or defeat. It is not a teleological process of inscription, rather, an intermittence and oscillation that has, at least till the present, suspended Wa Region in between integration and full autonomy. Stalemate is productive.

Fourth, it also avoids the need to uncover an underlying intentionality or grand strategy, seeing instead liminality as a condition produced by history, practice, and circumstance. Nor do I seek any explanatory model of political systems (cf Leach 1954; Friedman 1998), that accounts for the state of affairs. This allows for different forms of agency, co-opted, permitted, facilitated, or manipulated
with no definitively coherent motive, endgame, or intentionality, a project that is maintained through contingent political practice and improvisation. This is especially so with the broad range of actors and geopolitical considerations involved.

Fifth, there emerges amidst liminality a sense of precarity and danger in breakdown, and as Thomassen has pointed out, “dangerous, troubling, anxiety-generating aspects” requiring “balancing acts of destruction and redress” (2016:83), aspects that he argues have generally been ignored by those picking up Turner’s usage in the 1980s. This is obvious in Wa Region, with the threat of armed conflict looming over the hills, and poverty within.

Finally, I motion towards the creative potential of liminality, the recombinations of symbols and meanings reiterate the open-endedness and agency of the political imaginations of Wa people and elites, for the liminal is

“where the bizarre becomes the normal, and where through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes, the novices are induced to think, and think hard, about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted.” (Turner 1982:42)

Over the next six chapters I show how political practice and events, flux and flows, movement and agency of elites and people alike, have conspired to produce liminality and maintain the autonomy of Wa Region. The ambiguity, intermittence, stalemate and instability, creativity, and even satire that manifests across the social, political, and economic domains of Wa Region.
Pang Kham: City in the Hills

A twelve-hour drive from the nearest Burmese domestic airport in Lashio, up and away through winding dirt roads, gorges, and plateaus, is the built-up “capital” of Wa Region – Pang Kham\(^5\), a town of 10,000 or so, sitting in a small basin adjacent to the border with China. Pang Kham is the conduit for political and economic ties to the neighboring Burmese and Chinese areas, the seat of the Wa government, the melting pot of external investment in rubber plantations and tin mining, and the main crossing point for visitors from China. It is also the place where all government and external relations and meetings with Chinese, Burmese, and other EAGs’ representatives are held, and the base of operations for international development organizations working in Wa Region – linked yet estranged in myriad ways to the surrounding regions. It is one of many extraordinary nodes on the border where the political economy and social histories of a “special region” are focused in a single town – where powerful military commanders pass aspiring merchants on the streets, where understated dealers of illicit goods sit in noodle shops and ordinary farmers walk miles to the market to sell produce.

Early morning, mists and low-lying cloud shroud the hills that overlook Pang Kham – to the south, a formidable cliff that belongs to China with mobile signal masts and relay stations mounted, and perhaps some observation posts, peers down into the town. Dominated by this cliff is the Peace Tower, standing on a lower hill, but still overlooking the football stadium of Pang Kham, a monument to the watershed event of opium eradication in Wa Region in 2005. To the Northeast

\(^{15}\) Panghsang, the original name, was changed in 1994 to “Bangkang” by the UWSA supposedly because “sang” bore phonic semblance to the Chinese word for “funeral” (Milsom 2005:67). I use the Burmese spelling of the name – Pang Kham, whereas other writers like Chin Ko-Lin use Bangkang.
stand the dark green stepped slopes of rubber plantations across the river in Chinese territory. Pang Kham sits partly on a finger of land that protrudes into China, bounded by the 180-degree meander of the Namkha river. New visitors often have trouble making out which hills in the distance belong to China, and which to Wa. A long ridge line encircles the town, and the newly-paved roads snake up the spur lines into the mountains, one eventually heading to Dangyan in the Burmese areas, and the other to Mengmao and beyond, the cultural heart of the Wa highlands. The sun sets over these hills in the evening, its pleasant glow of red and orange a welcome change from the searing heat of the afternoon.

![Pang Kham town, left and rear of the picture is Chinese territory, May 2015](image)

There's a strong smell of rubber in the mornings, when the processing plants across the border in China are in full swing. The sickly stench fills the air, fueling residents’ complaints that the air in
Pang Kham is insalubrious and full of dust that gathers in the basin amidst the hills. Electronic tones of an annoyingly popular Chinese dance number (“You are My Small Small Small Apple”) blare every morning from the indefatigable garbage truck, occasionally staffed by men with disconcerting leg shackles. The roads aren't particularly bustling, just the average person heading to the market to buy produce. Tens of men wait outside the main casino entrance, eating steaming hot buns, with a wary eye watching for the pickups and trucks which arrive to recruit labor for the day. As the morning wears on, the casino staff change their shift; a huge assembly of around 200 uniformed men and women in their early 20s is dismissed to descend upon the shops and market, or retire to their housing. The casino forms the centerpiece of town, a large compound with central hall, peripheral gaming rooms, karaoke lounge, dormitories, and an adjoining hotel. In the main gambling hall are middle-aged Chinese women seated around card tables clutching leather handbags, staring intently at the young dolled-up dealers; businessmen perch on their stools puffing away on cigarettes; in the adjacent rooms, disheveled men in dirty military fatigues throw Chinese Yuan onto squares with pictures of animals on them. A Great Wheel of Animals – lined with pictures of animals, for the illiterate – is spun by the casino girl; Rabbit wins. The winners have their money doubled, while the rest of the grubby 1 and 5 yuan bills on the counter are literally swept into a trough by broom-wielding attendants.

The town is filled with gaudy flashing lights and Chinese scripted signboards, around the casino there are hotels constantly renovated and new shops opening, almost all run by Chinese storekeepers and traders. Others are owned by Wa leaders and officials. The currency here is the Chinese Yuan (CNY), and well-lit electronic shops sell the latest mobile phones operating on three of China’s main mobile networks. Road renovation is under way, with the aim of completing the upgrade of all roads in Pang Kham by 2019, the 30$^{th}$ anniversary of the creation of Wa state. Construction is unceasing, several cranes dot the skyline, and a throng of hardware shops selling
pipes, metal rods, cement, and assorted building material sit on the outskirts of town. For now, dust mars the glass shopfronts and disappearing pavements, reprieve arriving only in the rainy season. Jade and jewelry shops, restaurants and small eateries, clothes stores, nightclubs, and a large number of convenience shops form the bulk of Pang Kham’s offerings for the consumer. Large department stores stock Chinese household products and fruit and vegetables. Visitors might be forgiven for mistakenly thinking that they were in a small town in China, but the sheer number of hotels and cheaper guesthouses (around 85 in 2015) hints at a more transitory community.

![Figure 5: Pang Kham, market day, October 2015](image)

In the evenings of the hotter season various crowds of women gather at locations around town – the square at the peace pagoda, the covered stage at the football stadium, the space outside the central meeting hall – dancing choreographed to the blaring sound of popular Chinese electronic
tunes from portable speakers. This rhythmic dancing continues until the sun goes down, providing a spectacle for others walking rounds the football field at the People's Square. Dusk falls, and they return to their cars, pickups, and scooters, heading home for dinner. Nightfall is a scattering of glows – young people shouting drunkenly under the dancing neon lights of the handful of nightclubs, others absorbed in the LED screens of their mobile phones; the tired but warm pink glow of massage parlors and brothels, under which gaggles of young women play cards on armchairs, veiled by thick make up and long dyed hair; the headlights of pickups that illuminate gaudy hotel signboards and entrances; the casino bathed in the bright orange spotlights of fortune.

Market day, once every five days, sees a gathering of villagers from neighboring townships, climbing aboard the public buses that wind down the hills to Pang Kham to sell fresh produce to the town inhabitants. The designated streets are lined with a flurry of tents and makeshift stalls, pedestrianized, though audacious motorcyclists still wriggle their way through. Mobile stalls fixed onto bicycles are the choice of some Burmese of Indian origin, with a frontage festooned with sachets of beauty and facial products, mirrors provided. Temporary food stalls with seating take prime position at the junction of the two roads, hawking Dai rice noodles, deep fried snacks, and glutinous rice wrapped in leaves. Drains offer a convenient disposal system for the tissues, food waste, and chopstick wrappers, and splatters of stray noodles, chili bits and loose spring onion, swept in with relish. Further up the street are single mats or cardboard sheets laid out on the road – bananas, chilis, eggs, green vegetables, turnips on one, dried fish, peanuts, and cauliflowers, tomatoes, string beans, on another. Various sorry-looking fowl are incarcerated in rattan baskets or wire mesh cages, with other even less fortunate ducks suffering the indignity of being toyed with by bored hawkers. A Burmese man in a Spain football jersey and longyi touts knotted strings of garlics and onions. People greet one another in a medley of Wa, Shan, Burmese, Yunnanese, and Mandarin, exchanging pleasantries and invitations “where are you going?” or “come by to eat”.
Several beggars propped up on wooden dollys drag themselves through the market, waving tin cups up at passersby.

Pang Kham’s present population of around 10,000 fluctuates greatly depending on how well businesses and investment opportunities are seen to be doing. Chin Kolin, a Rutgers criminologist, conducted research on the opium trade; his extensive interviews painting a picture of the rapid development of Pang Kham from 1996, with periodic fluctuations of residents. He also cites Wa authorities’ figures in 2004 of 18,000 residents in Pang Kham, with 58,000 migrant workers and mobile residents\(^{16}\) (2009:27).

Pang Kham’s is a story of boundaries, of shifting scales and frames that intermittently connect and isolate these highland places over time. Its social history reflects political boundaries made and remade by enemies and alliances, warfare and stalemate; of travelers and traders, different economic projects and commodities that draw in villages and towns in networks of exchange. It is also a story of the state making projects of leaders and powerholders, the powers that come and go with their fractured sovereignties. These are tales of movement, of people and things, and the intricate webs of social relations and political and economic ties, glossed over by external narratives produced by visitors and authorities alike, and formed as people eke out livelihoods and social spaces under imposing regional forces. It is also a story about the economic disparities across borders, creating business opportunities for the entrepreneurial, networks of patronage for the powerful, and relations of exploitation for the poor. To be sure, Pang Kham is but one of many small towns which form nodes in the border political economy of the highland Burma-China border,

\[^{16}\text{This figure seems very high, and possibly includes tourists, migrant workers, and traders from China, some of which might travel out into the surrounding townships of Wa Region.}\]
particular but not entirely exceptional, etched into the enduring hills by the porosity of movement and capital flows in these borderlands.

Structure of Chapters

The dissertation contextualizes, describes, analyzes the production of Wa Region as a liminal space across six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the history of region-making in the Wa hills by examining three challenges to study of the borderlands – narratives, movement, and rumor. It begins by unpicking two main narratives of Wa Region constructed from the outside – its backwardness and isolation, and a sense of lawlessness and illegitimacy – that produce it as a liminal space at the margins of two nation-states. Using the notion of imbrication, I trace how movement, migration, rupture, and uncertainty have been normalized over the past six decades. In a setting with constant movements of people, political boundaries, and allegiances, what is seen as strange or exotic to an external observer does not trigger the same absurdity for locals. Through the life history of a borderland individual, I show how the arrival of foreign armies in the Wa Hills and wider borderlands – the Kuomintang (KMT) invasion and the rise and fall of the CPB, created opportunities and spaces across boundaries that were navigated and exploited by borderlanders as they sought out security and livelihoods. I also examine the role of rumor – how rehashed speculation about political intentions, military hardware, leaders’ personas, and the drug economy have created uncertainties and partial knowledges, shaping the subjectivities of present-day Wa elites and inhabitants.

Chapter 2 examines the navigation of liminality through autonomy, an autonomy I take both as a value that orients particular forms of political authority and practices, and as an aspect of historical and contemporary Wa Region. I review the literature in political science that tends to simplistically
characterize polities like Wa Region as a non-state actor, arguing that this entraps it within the registers of the state, interpreting it either as an antagonistic threat to the integrity of the Myanmar state, or exhibiting a pathological condition of lack.

Instead, I attempt to trace autonomy not as a political status, but as a historical value underlying political rationality and practice. I draw on the ethos of autonomy in historical Wa society, looking at past forms of egalitarian political organization, and towards the formation of the UWSA, the delimitation of the Sino-Burmese border, and the creation of the boundaries of Wa Special Region 2. The value of autonomy, shaping and shaped by this contingent and particular historical trajectory, unfolding political relations with the Chinese and Burmese states, has produced a political subjectivity that sets the context for political practice in Wa Region. Liminality then, is the expression of this value of autonomy, a careful and contingent balancing act between incorporation and autonomy, as it unfolds in the course of the history of Wa Region.

In Chapter 3 I deal with the manner in which Wa Region becomes inscribed and incorporated into the Myanmar nation-state through the intermittence of political practice. This is a tandem-like process between the two polities, marked by footdragging, bargaining, rupture, sabotage, and compromise. Having been subsumed into a nation-state after Burmese independence, Wa Region now navigates the liminality of its political reality, and negotiates its inscription into and autonomy from the Burmese nation-state. I argue here that the production and maintenance of liminality in Wa Region is the status quo, and not the resolution of conflict. This liminality is in itself generative, allowing for the flourishing of a shadow economy and political agency.

The chapter looks ethnographically at political practice between the UWSA, China, Myanmar, and other armed groups. Here, I engage with the state literature that focuses on practices and state effects rather than the fetishization of the state entity (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 2006), problematizing
the notion of a unified UWSA master strategy, or motives and intentions. The UWSA attempts to build connections and maintain relationships across boundaries; it protects its territorial sovereignty whilst allowing the limited circulation of people and goods for economic development, and participates in peace talks and diplomatic gestures that buttress its legitimacy. It seeks to build solidarity with other ethnic armed groups against the incursions of the Myanmar military, it participates occasionally in peace talks and hosts Myanmar leaders and generals when they visit Shan State. At the same time, ruptures are created by actions such as the Wa withdrawal from peace talks, the Myanmar government refusals to issue identity cards to inhabitants of Wa Region, checkpoints and impediments to travel, military standoffs, and support for other opposition groups. In addition, China also plays a significant role in shaping the geopolitical reality that the UWSA navigates.

Chapter 4 continues the theme of political practice, turning to the “problematics of government” (Rose and Miller 2010), taking us beyond state/non-state dichotomies to examine how practices of governance in Wa Region produce political authority. I argue that governance and authority in Wa Region involves a complex set of forces and assemblages, that has the effect of creating both autonomy from and integration into the Myanmar state, rendering it an arena within which Wa Region’s liminal position is negotiated. While governance accrues political legitimacy for the UWSA, allowing it to exert its autonomy, the technologies and practice of governance simultaneously inscribe it further into the Myanmar nation-state.

The chapter depicts the governing practices of the UWSA, its structure and administration of its territory to provide for its people. It describes the attempts by inhabitants of various ethnicities to secure documents for movement and migration across boundaries, to seek livelihoods and commercial opportunities in local and other markets, and their engagement with public services
such as healthcare and education. It looks at the effects of extensive infrastructural projects such as road construction, and the comparative neglect of education and healthcare services. In addition, the unreliability and contingency of these integrative attempts contributes to the uncertainty of life in Wa Region. Roads are repaired but collapse, checkpoints impede movement periodically, guards refuse travel permits, schools open and close, market prices fluctuate to the detriment of local businesses, and security situations and military operations make trade and travel impossible.

The chapter also examines the “good governance” critiques by development workers and foreign journalists who are critical of the authoritarian rule of the UWSA and economic inequality, drawing parallels between these and the narratives of primitiveness and backwardness expounded by the British and Chinese travelers of the colonial era. Good governance discourses measure the UWSA by a Weberian rational-legal bureaucratic metric, finding them lacking in a myriad of ways, much as historical narratives by neighboring states found the Wa States to be “uncivilized” and marginal. Yet these fail to acknowledge the particular political and “state effects” that the governing practices produce.

Political practices in chapters 3 and 4 unfold within a set of locally ordered norms and expectations, a political culture anchored in performances of power and patronage, and a political economy built on trust, connections, vigilance, and deception. These are the scope of Chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5 I turn to an examination of political culture, analyzing the foundations of authority in Wa Region – what makes leaders powerful? And what makes a “good” leader? Amidst the flux of the borderlands are shared understandings of the foundations of authority and an embodied sensibility of power that plays out through patronage, contest, spectacle, relationships, and hospitality. Here, power is constantly performed through patronage, protection, and the demonstration of status and wealth, negotiated through competitions amongst leaders in local arenas and events. I explore
people’s mental maps of authority figures and patrons, showing how authority is not merely a network of important connections (guanxi) and relationships, but a careful mastery and cultural competence of practices of hospitality and presence, commensality, deference, reciprocity, and respect.

Using the notion of intimacy, I question moralistic framings of authoritarianism in Wa Region that paint elites as “hopelessly corrupt” (Lintner and Black 2009:111) and ordinary people as powerless and oppressed, overlooking the complex norms and reciprocal obligations that unfold between them and elites. Intimacy is characterized by patronage and protection for followers and people, a respect and reverence paid in return, and operates as a socially acceptable conduit for forms of dissent and grievance.

Chapter 6 examines political economy of Wa Region, where the economic domain is another arena through which Wa Region is intermittently incorporated into the Myanmar state through political practices of trade, movement, and economic concessions. I deploy the notion of the frontier, where the “economy of appearances” takes hold (Tsing 2005), as a space of expansion for capital, opportunity, and profit, and for the extraction value across different legal regimes. I trace the role of power and connections in business dealings, as ventures such as mining and timber form lodes of extraction that integrate Wa Region into local, regional, and global political and economic networks, rendering it susceptible to the precarities of external market forces. I then examine the changing value of commodities such as cows and cars as they move across boundaries, profits sought by navigating the disparities between legal and economic regimes on either side. Ordinary people seek out value and livelihoods through trade across social and geographical networks implicating themselves in regional fields of regulatory authority.
The chapter narrates two events marred by uncertainty and confusion, but whose significance emerged and placed Wa Region on the global news map many months after I left the field. These were the scaling up of tin mining that affected global tin prices, and the development of a large Chinese Ponzi scheme that defrauded Chinese citizens of billions of dollars. I conclude the chapter by exploring a frontier sensibility of vigilance and toughness amidst scams and tricksters, a performed disposition of masculine ruthlessness, telling the story of the rise and fall of this large Ponzi scheme from China that operated within the shadows and specters of the borderland frontier, materializing in the Wa hills for a brief period before retreating back into the circuits of global capital.

**Key Terminology and Usage of Terms**

When used in political commentaries or in the Myanmar news, “the Wa” often refers to the leadership echelons of the UWSA, or some agentive geopolitical mind of Wa Region. My use of “Wa Region” refers to the entire polity and *de facto* territorial boundaries of Wa Special Region 2 demarcated after the 1989 ceasefire. Wa Region is referred to in Chinese as *wabang*, in Wa as “Meung Vax”, and in Burmese as “Wa byinei”. The Wa term “Meung” has similar meanings to its Shan equivalent, referring to a region, town, area or place. The Chinese word *bang* however, can refer generally to “state”, “country”, or “land”, hence I do not translate it into “Wa State” as many others do (and even the UWSA themselves, for convenience, and for political reasons), since that confusingly elevates it to the political level of Shan State, to which it is subordinate under the 2008

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17 Wa Special Region 2 has been replaced by the Wa Self-Administered Division (SAD) in the Myanmar Constitution of 2008, the boundaries of Wa SAD are contested and not the same as the *de facto* area controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) (see chapter 2 for elaboration).
Constitution (see chapter 2). By using “region” instead of “State”, I insist on its ambiguous and liminal status, more an polity and place, than a pre-determined legal entity. Similarly, people of Wa State are called “wabangren” – a term which encompasses the ethnic Wa inhabitants, and other ethnic groups (including Chinese) who have settled for long periods or acquired Wa “citizenship” and registration. For this I use “inhabitants of Wa Region”.

Unlike Tom Kramer, I make little distinction between the UWSA and the United Wa State Party (UWSP) – in my reading, this distinction is cosmetic, since the authority administration and the military overlap in myriad ways, with no meaningful separation of powers. “Wa Government” (wabangzhengfu) refers to the authorities and officials which govern Wa Region, its departments, bureaus, district and township authorities, and offices, and is widely used by locals. United Nations and NGOs operating in Wa region have often referred to the Wa government and UWSA leadership as the “Wa authority” in order to avoid suggestions of legitimation, but I will use the terms synonymously. The “Central Committee” (zhongyang) refers to the Politburo (zhongyang zhengzhiju) and Central Committee (zhongyang zhengzhiju weiyuanhui), modeled after the Chinese Communist system. This group is seen as the chief decision-making group. I also use the widely-used and everyday term of “Wa leaders” (wabanglingbao) to refer to government officials and ranking leaders regardless of ethnicity. The UWSA and UWSP are less referenced in everyday speech, and the term “military” (budui) is used for anything related to the army. These differences are often hard to describe in a scholarly work, but have meaningful differences in understanding the political imaginaries and local worlds of power, a political culture I describe in chapter 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Usage</th>
<th>My Usage</th>
<th>Refers to</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wabang</td>
<td>Wa Region</td>
<td>Areas on the Chinese and Thai borders <em>de facto</em> controlled by the UWSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Wa States</td>
<td>British term referring to the Wa polities amongst the Federated Shan States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wabangren</td>
<td>Inhabitants of</td>
<td>Ethnic Wa inhabitants, long-term migrants, those with Wa registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>佤邦人</td>
<td>Wa Region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wabangzhengfu</td>
<td>Wa Govt, Wa</td>
<td>Governing bodies and authority of Wa Region, including officials and leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>佤邦政府</td>
<td>authorities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wabanglingdao</td>
<td>Wa leaders</td>
<td>High and Middle ranking leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>佤邦领导</td>
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<tr>
<td>zhongyang</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Politburo and Central Committee of UWSA</td>
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<tr>
<td>中央</td>
<td>Committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>budui</td>
<td>UWSA</td>
<td>United Wa State Army (UWSA), military</td>
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<tr>
<td>wabanglianhejun</td>
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<td>佤邦联合军</td>
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<tr>
<td>wabanglianhedang</td>
<td>UWSP</td>
<td>United Wa State Party; political wing or party of the UWSA</td>
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<td>佤邦联合党</td>
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</table>

Political and moral debates about the use of “*Burma*” and “*Myanmar*” are thankfully over (e.g. Dittmer 2008) – I use them somewhat interchangeably; with a tendency to use “Burma/Burmese” for cultural, linguistic, and ethnic references, and “Myanmar” to refer to the nation-state post-1990s. I naturally use “Burma” when describing the colonial period and up to the 1990s, following the 1988 establishment of the military junta’s State Law and Order Restoration Council\(^{18}\) (SLORC) when its name was officially changed to “Myanmar”.

**Positionality**

In May 2014, I joined the United Nations’ World Food Programme (WFP) as a Programme Officer in charge of the Pang Kham sub-office. My overall task hinged around building relations with the

Wa authorities, ensuring access to project sites, distribution points, and warehouses, crafting reports and proposals to donors, partners, and our own country office in Yangon. WFP in Wa Region operates simple school feeding programmes, distributing 10kg of rice or daily biscuit rations to schoolchildren, as well as small asset creation projects like water systems and schools. Being with the UN offered guarantees of hospitality, access, and protection, as well as a practical reason for being present in Wa Region – working towards some form of “development” and food security.

WFP had been present in Wa Region since 2004, and was the only remaining UN agency. The UWSA’s External Relations Department was directly responsible for our operations and safety, and their generosity and interest made our project possible. Having a team of 24 staff including field monitors and drivers was a huge resource in terms of understanding the field. Most were Wa from Myanmar areas, whose parents had left Wa Region during the CPB period. They spoke a host of local languages, and I communicated with them in Chinese or Yunnanese. Some had worked for the UNODC and then WFP for more than 10 years, and understood well the objectives, organizational culture, and registers of the development enterprise.

Age was a central factor – I lacked the grizzled look of a field-hardened senior official, nor was I endowed with the potbelly of wealth and success, a signifier of power in Wa Region. I had brought no wife nor demonstrated mastery of a household. Thankfully, my predecessor, a stately older Thai national with ties to various EAG leaders and a wealth of experience working along the border areas of Myanmar, took a liking to me, and brought his wife and I on trips around the region in my first few weeks, introducing me to a variety of central, district, and township officials, those he deemed critical to the success of our operations. His poise, experience and no-nonsense approach was indispensable, as was his keen understanding of the social maps of power – whose favor was
important, and whose less so. This was the very “vouching for” so imperative to the building of
connections.

From the perspective of the Wa leaders, it was as if a rookie had come to replace the experienced
old guard. My predecessor introduced me through kinship terms, a son who should be “taken care”
of. From there on I had to build and maintain my own ties, not particularly easy since I was clearly
inexperienced and new to the political setting. Educational qualifications meant little or nothing to
the Wa leaders in terms of my capacities, and I most definitely made several faux pas in the
beginning. Since my work involved much liaising with a view to maintaining access to warehouses
and village, I travelled extensively across the region each month, reaching 23 of the 24 Wa
townships by the end of my stay, visiting with all township leaders present each time I passed
through. I attended many festivals and public events as a guest, and visited with dozens of minsters
and deputies from various departments, coming to recognize most of the central leaders over time.
My access then, was skewed towards politics and the leadership, and especially around governance
and the political terrain of the UWSA vis-à-vis the peace process, given how central the security
situation was to our development work.

I was treated almost as a worker in the Wa government, except that I was a foreigner. I had a work
unit (danwei), an office and responsibilities. I was hosted at dinners and drinking parties, visited
leaders in their homes in the evenings, with no necessary agendas to discuss or questions to ask.
But it felt like having a reason to be there, not simply as an inquisitor or voyeur. This, like any other
form of positioning, had its advantages, drawbacks, and complications. I learnt to behave, perceive,
and engage others as a moral person in Wa Region. A key aspect of this personhood was bodily
presence, a sense of “being with” rather than simply “being there” (Geertz 1988) – the sitting with,
eating, drinking, joking, deference to elders, the gift-giving and the receiving.
Moral personhood in Wa Region was also about respect and a sense of appropriateness – what topics should and shouldn’t be discussed, and when, and what questions should or shouldn’t be asked. My curiosity and anthropological sensibilities often had to take a backseat to issues that were sensitive – wealth, military and security issues, the drug trade, and other kinds of rumor. At the same time, issues that I once thought were sensitive, were dismissed as common knowledge, or “small matters”. Rather than deciding whether I wanted to know about a particular issue, I would have to decide whether I wanted to become the type of person who would ask about such an issue. A person given in to inquiring quickly and widely about political and security situations was viewed as weak and untrustworthy, one who “did not know how things were done”, one who was easily thrilled by having access to “intrigue”. More often than not in public settings, silence, rather than boisterous engagement and questioning, was golden.

**Representation**

In writing about Wa region, I often fretted about how to present this far-flung and understudied place and its people. I was interested in drawing attention to the political marginality, isolation, and yet connectedness of Wa Region, so that policymakers, government officials, and members of the international community might begin to see it as an opportunity to address issues central to the peace process and national development. I was also interested in soliciting developmental aid and assistance for the Wa people. Whenever in Yangon, I tried to meet with NGOs, embassy representatives, peace groups, and others in the development community to tell them about the supposedly secretive space, hoping that they might have some interest in learning more or taking action. Concurrently, I was aware of the Wa leaders’ interests in carefully guarding their sovereignty and survival, and the levels of secrecy essential to their autonomy. There were at least two pitfalls to navigate in my representations.
First, with Wa Region often described as a rebel or separatist area run by the strongest ethnic armed group in Myanmar, it also became imperative not to exaggerate the isolation of Wa Region and the difficulty of access, and to overstate the exceptionalism of Wa Region, despite its highly anomalous characteristics. This was only too common amongst journalists who produced sensationalist reports about the lawlessness and bloodshed of the drug lords in the hills, self-congratulatory in calling attention to their own supposed expeditionary courage and initiative whilst simultaneously painting the Wa as dangerous and belligerent. Their condemnatory work also pandered to the moral narratives of the DEA and the U.S.-led war on drugs, which Bertil Lintner describes as “one of Washington’s more imaginative governmental bodies” (2011:348). It was clear that moral economies of the illicit, cultural hybridities in the borderlands, authoritarian governance and violence, armed groups and insurgent armies, were not uncommon across Myanmar, let alone Asia. I have tried hard in the dissertation to remind readers that many everyday inhabitants regarded such a state of affairs as normal and unremarkable, without losing sight of the extraordinary nature of the phenomena itself.

The second pitfall lay in estimating the intentionality and political imagination of the UWSA – either viewing them as backward and unsophisticated, or Machiavellian and scheming, with associated implications of moral culpability. I did not want to sound like an apologist for what outsiders might see as an authoritarian insurgent group running a highly unequal highland region, backed up by a large army and advanced weapons, deeply mired in the drug trade – an accusation Lintner and Black, in their no-holds-barred investigative book about the methamphetamine trade from Wa Region, have perhaps too harshly leveled at previous UNODC staff in Wa Region (2009:101, but see Renard 2013b for a response). It was important to depict the moral context within which people (including researchers) negotiated relationships, made decisions, struggled for livelihoods, accumulated wealth, and inhabited inequalities. The UWSA leadership needed to be depicted with
some sympathy, yet not absolving them from involvement in the drug trade and the dismal social indicators present under their governance.

UWSA leaders are neither as ignorant and politically unsophisticated as Marshall and Davis might describe (2002), nor are they malevolent and intentionally keeping their subjects in poverty. Yet it was also difficult to suggest that they did not know what they were doing with regards to governance. I personally drafted reports on the state of education in Wa Region for top leaders in the Politburo, hoping they might seek technical assistance or provide funding for the departments. I address the relationship between people and elites in chapter 5, framing it through the notion of intimacy and respect rather than through oppression and potential rebellion. “Intimacy” might seem a flippant concept with which to describe poverty and suffering, and does little to address problems of poverty, educational, and healthcare indicators. Yet understanding the moral context of leadership and power is perhaps the first step in a long and difficult task to situate the political projects of the UWSA leadership, which are often not articulated in our analytical registers of secession, good governance, or federalism.

Where Lintner and Black write that “engaging [the UWSA] may be the only way forward”, and criticize approaches that only seek to work through the Myanmar government or buttress its counterinsurgency efforts (2009:144), it is also clear through the tone of their book that they are not going to be the ones to do this. They also seem to struggle with the larger question of culpability, blaming all parties involved in the drug trade equally: “there are no angels or devils in the Golden Triangle; they are often one and the same” (2009:143). There is of course, a need for all different roles in engagement, from criticism to political negotiations to development interventions, and there is much room at the table.
Chapter 1   Imbrication

“How did a once isolated hill tribe grow so powerful, so quickly, transforming itself into an international crime syndicate to rival Colombia’s drug cartels? The man we hoped might answer this question is the UWSA’s commander, Bao Youxiang. Little is known about ‘Chairman Bao,’ as he prefers to be called, and few Westerners have ever met him. But his reputation, fueled by rumor, is gaudy, befitting the lord of a narco-fiefdom. Bao is reputedly so rich that he would need two trucks to carry around all his money. He is rumored to have once had four of his own men pistol-whipped to death for conspiring against him. Also, he likes bowling.”


“Faced with a state-run news media in Burma and in the absence of reliable information and documentary collateral, the knowledge gaps are usually filled by rumor and gossip. This tends to be the daily fare of diplomats, academics, journalists and others in Burma, who are obliged to try and winnow the few grains of truth from the mass of misleading chaff constantly floating around Rangoon and other population centers.” (Selth 2010:43)

The Salween river originates deep in the Himalayas north of Tibet, crosses from China into Myanmar near the Kokang hills, and cuts a deep gorge through North and Eastern Shan State. It forms the Western boundary of Wa Region, a territorial stalemate attained at the signing of the ceasefire in 1989. The formidable Wa hills rise to the east of the Salween, and to the west, the large plateau of government-controlled Shan state. The Salween is a symbolic marker of separation, news of tatmadaw forces operating close by triggers military tensions. Today, the crossing points to Wa Region are at Tar Gaw Et and Kunlone bridges19; both bridges are militarily strategic, and have seen fierce fighting in the past. The Tar Gaw Et bridge is 2 hours’ drive east from the military garrison town of Dangyan in Northern Shan State, and fords the Salween at the base of an extremely steep

19 Both bridges are Myanmar-controlled, and from Kunlone there still is some way to travel through Hopang and then Panglong before reaching Wa Region proper.
gorge. It takes nearly an hour to simply negotiate the winding road down to the river on either side. Tar Gaw Et bridge was built in 1996, to afford secure supply routes to the tatmadaw units outposted on sliver of land around the road controlled by the Myanmar government on the Wa side of the river. An hour’s drive up this road, sees travelers pass through the final Myanmar checkpoints before arriving at the UWSA checkpoints, a route negotiated by people and vehicles passing from Wa areas to the Myanmar areas of Dangyan or Lashio.

For ordinary people and traders however, the Salween is merely a physical obstacle to movement, a logistical problem for commodities. Several unofficial crossing points materialize at points where the gorge tempers into gentler slopes, made possible with bamboo rafts and barges fording the river. Trade caravans, sojourners, and soldiers, have crisscrossed trails in the hills and plateaus for centuries, moving back and forth across the Salween (Chang 2009; Forbes 1988; Hill 1998). The hills of the Wa heartlands reach altitudes of nearly 2,500m at their highest points, temperatures can descend to just above freezing in some parts during winter. Hillsides once used for the growing of opium are now covered with swathes of rubber plantation and upland rice plots, patches of maize, tea, coffee, and pine grown by smallholders and government work units. Little primary forest remains, empty land lies fallow and overgrown with the spreading Crofton weed\(^{20}\), commonly used as a makeshift medical dressing during the military campaigns of the CPB.

It’s hard to spend an extended period in the hills without noting the consequentiality of the material – the air, rain, soil, sun, and slopes. Little wonder then that theories which link ecological factors

\(^{20}\) *Ageratina adenophora*, or *eupatorium adenophora*, known colloquially in Yunnan as *jiefang cao* (lit. liberation grass). Originally from Mexico, the weed was accidentally introduced into Yunnan from Burma around the 1940s, where it became a rapidly spreading invasive species causing great economic losses for agriculture (Yang et al. 2017).
to social differentiation have frequently originated in highland-valley comparisons, most famously with Edmund Leach, who studied the Kachin community (1954) about 150km to the northwest of Wa. The materiality of the environment adds its own erosive force to troubled connections, altering relations of production and movement. In Wa Region, the rainy season sees around 1300 mm of rainfall over 5 months between May and September, blue skies a rarity across the hills throughout this period. The interminable rain makes dirt roads through hills nearly impassable, only four-wheel drive Landcruisers and Pajeros attempt the journey during those weeks. Smaller dirt tracks become narrow, only passable by motorbikes as water runoff and landslides isolate the more remote villages. Hilltops are often covered in mist, their blanket of white reflecting car headlights down into the ground at night, making progress slow and treacherous. Prior to the development of surfaced roads in Wa Region, travelers would often cross into China, travel along Chinese bus routes or roads, and then cross back into Wa Region, saving travel time to Northern townships such as Kunma or Nam Tit.

The “friction of terrain” – elevation, vegetation, weather, roads, and features like swamps or rivers, is central in the “constriction of state space” (Scott 2009:43-7), making standard maps misleading in gauging social and political relations. Even during the dry season, the winding roads and corners that weave through the hills require a full day’s travel to overcome. It takes 12 hours to travel from Pang Kham to Lashio, the nearest large city with an airport in Shan State. Within Wa region, roads are being upgraded constantly, but the furthest flung townships are still nearly 8 hours away by vehicle. The vast expanse of the hills also furnishes illegible pockets and crevices, uncertainties tucked away in different corners. This is most apparent from the doubts about the UWSA’s opium ban in 2005; cynical observers were never satisfied – “how do you know it does not grow anymore? You cannot believe what they say,” they laughed dismissively. The UWSA had the impossible task of continually proving absence.
This is the very geography and ecology that creates a sense of impregnability – Wa soldiers peer down from atop the hills; tanks will not easily operate on steep vegetated relief, artillery and heavy weapons a sheer encumbrance to one’s own advance, and supply lines easily threatened. The slopes of hills offer cover from air attack and the possibility of fortifications and tunnels. There must be tactical pauses for the rainy season. In the 1960-70s, the CPB used this to their advantage, and the UWSA’s veteran military strategists retain this experience of hill warfare. The three Wa hills of Loi Mu or Kongmingshan in Mengmao district are featured on the flag of Wa State, the crossed sword and spear emblazoned above this proud stronghold symbol. They afford the element of surprise – hiding places for alleged military equipment of all kinds. They wait in the hills, rugged and silent.

*Figure 6: Lian Haw Township, Central Wa Region, October 2015*
Imbrication

Nestled on the China-Burma border, Wa Region offers the prospect of studying various phenomena associated with border studies. It exhibits the conundrums of overlapping forms of contested sovereignty, competing legal and economic regimes, and carefully improvising peoples who cross back and forth in search of lives and livelihoods. It seemed an “all of the above” space – a frontier to be exploited, extracted, and for the projection of geopolitical and cultural influence; a periphery, a zone at the edges of the state’s fragile reach (Scott 2009); a margin, where an ethnic minority people was excluded (and excluded itself) from participation in the state, manipulating state processes where possible (Tsing 1993). While the vast literature in border studies has tended towards examining spatial metaphors of sovereignty, flows and networks across boundaries, and cultural hybridities, what was striking about the Wa borderlands was the convoluted nature of knowledge and knowledge production. The uncertainty of this knowledge kept Wa Region obfuscated, a semi-legible and liminal border place to outsiders, and even partially to locals.

In this chapter I describe the history of region-making in Wa Region through three challenges to study: narratives, movement, and rumor. I use imbrication to describe the conflicting narratives, crisscrossed movement and sovereignties, overlapping rumors and gossip, and the transient nature of networks that construct and morph the border world. The borderland shifts beneath its own feet, a patchworked locality layered through word and deed – the musings of colonial travelers, routes of migrants, bravado and sensationalism of journalists, pontifications of political analysts, rumors fomented amongst traders, and the intrigue or gossip that revolves amongst circles of transitory inhabitants. History and event sedimented a local context central to understanding the practices and social action that unfolded. Imbrication, in this sense, unfolds not as not the studiously
patterned shingles of roof, nor as Piscean scales, but as disorderly and haphazard overlap, contingent on the vicissitudes of agency and event.

Hugh Raffles writes of “local theory” – studying a locality as “a set of relations, an ongoing politics, a density, in which places are discursively and imaginatively materialized and enacted through the practices of variously positioned people and political economies” (1999:324). Raffles studies how patron-client relations and the mobility of inhabitants in a place in rural Amazon can be read through the local politics and a discourse of nature, building on notions of translocality (Massey 1994) and the overlapping social landscapes of “multilocality” (Rodman 1992) to emphasize the tension between “fragmentation and proliferation” inherent in any form of place-making (1999:329). For him, the production of locality is both shared and contested, a multiplicity of narrations and practices by different people that possesses both immediacy and open-endedness.

And so it is that these ongoing relations of imbrication are accentuated in the borderlands, where transient populations cross boundaries, languages and social worlds are diverse, narratives convoluted and conflicting at the edges of legibility of the record-keeping state. Imbrication points towards the overlap of narratives. It brings across a sense of contested authority, a confusion as to who to believe, a difficulty in evaluating sources where they provide conflicting information21. Other narratives reinforce one another, drawn from similar situations, events, or sources. As I parsed various snippets from my fieldnotes and records, the partiality of these accounts became increasingly apparent to me – how friends and informants could not recall details accurately, how they declined to speak in specifics, or were deliberately vague or inconsistent about certain “facts”

21 Here one recalls resonances from the anthropological cannon notions of “partial truths” (Clifford and Marcus 1986), “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988), and the “epistemic murk” of violence (Taussig 1987).
over several conversations. Older informants often exaggerated tales of conspiracy or conflict, or gave dates seemingly incompatible with the published accounts of Bertil Lintner or Magnus Fiskesjo (see below). Mine too is an imbricated account, a smattering of tales and details, of anecdotes and yarns which sets the context in which state-making, diplomacy, and autonomy unfolds within Wa Region and the UWSA.

Imbricated knowledges are crucial to texturing an imaginary of these social worlds, depicting shared subjectivities of inhabitants, examining social practices and local moral worlds (Kleinman 1999). It paints a picture of the constant flux and movement within which the seemingly absurd is familiarized – notions of power, patronage, and (dis)loyalty, conflict and violence. It avoids romanticization and exceptionalism, taking local perspectives seriously. It hints at the strategies and motivations behind footdragging and stalemate in dealings with the Burmese state. It provides the moral context for actions and policies of the present, both those of governments and of individual people. Read with an empathetic imagination, it sheds light on why current phenomena such as child soldiering, the narcotics trade, inequality and “authoritarianism” might be consistent with borderland moral worlds.

I begin this chapter by examining two main historical narratives of Wa Region promulgated by visitors to the hills, showing how these were fashioned within particular circumstances and self-interest, and how they laid down the historic basis for the production of Wa Region as a liminal space. The third and fourth sections explore the histories of movement and migration in the borderlands, and the prevalence and circulation of gossip and rumor respectively. These weave the patchwork of knowledge and movement that forms the context for studying Wa Region. I conclude the chapter with some brief reflection on the implications of imbrication for conducting fieldwork in border regions, for uncovering (or not) certain types of information and making sense of them.
Producing Wa Region

Travelers’ Narratives of Isolation and Backwardness

Parsed away in the landlocked tail end of the Himalayas, Wa country was largely beyond the reach of state centers and governance, with trade routes skirting their edges. The beginnings of attempts to incorporate the Wa Hills in colonial territorial delimitation projects took place in the late 1890s when the British sent expeditions to mark the expanse of their territory following their annexation of the remainder of Burma in 1885 (E.G. 1957; Fiskesjo 2000: 33-34, FN17). James G. Scott, Assistant Commissioner of the Shan States and intrepid explorer of the Burmese peripheries, travelled to the Wa States beginning in 1893 as part of these missions, where he was implored by a Wa chief to leave them alone:

“We beg that you will not come into our states. Please return by the route you came. Ours is a wild country and the people devour rats and squirrels raw. Our people and yours have nothing in common and we are not your enemies... Our country is not under one ruler, for each village has its own chief... we are in great dread of you. So please do not come. You say you are coming in peace, but shots have been fired...” (quoted in Harvey 1932:15, 39).

Movement into the Wa hills was impeded by the unforgiving terrain and geography, but also by the fearsome reputation of the Wa as headhunters. Stories of this reputation can be found in Chinese records – including the Chinese traveler Zhang Chengyu who visited in 1890 along with a British expedition and noted the existence of “skull avenues” where heads of enemies were placed (Fiskesjo 2002:84). James G. Scott himself noted that prior to his visit in 1893, rumors of Wa cannibalism were rife, calmly reassuring readers that: “the Wa are not cannibals, at least not habitual cannibals” (Scott and Hardiman 1900:497). Other British accounts wrote that:
“the escort [of 60 rifles] was in a state of nerves, the men sleeping in their boots, for terror of the Panghung Wa (& these are not wild Wa, but comparatively tame).” (Harvey 1932, cited in Fiskesjo 2010a:249)

Over the centuries, various explanations as to the motivations and conduct of headhunting were produced by Chinese and British sources, mostly interpreting them as a primitive ritual meant to boost crop fertility\(^\text{22}\), lending itself to the discursive construction of barbarians at the edges of civilization. Fiskesjo argues instead that headhunting in the Wa hills was a form of warfare and response to changing historical developments of instability and displacement (2000: Ch5). Its practice was deeply embedded in Wa notions of sacrifice and the co-opting of malevolent forces (through the taking of heads) against the pestilences and enemies that plagued them, channeling the lifeforces of their enemies as deterrents against other enemies. As he saw it, were responses to historical conditions of migration and competition, rather than a primitive and superstitious practice that the Wa were mindlessly wedded to\(^\text{23}\).

Beyond the boundary flag-planting expeditions, prospecting explorations for gold, silver, lead, tin and other minerals, fueled by Shan and Burmese legends about gold tracts in the Wa Hills (Fiskesjo 2000:143), were organized by the British, including James G. Scott himself (Scott and Hardiman 1900:278). The missionary Harold Young, who lived amongst the Wa and Lahu in the areas of

\(^{22}\) Chin Kolin gives three versions of accounts of the origins of headhunting (2009:39), in which the people recounting stories tend to associate its origins with other groups, or make claims that their ancestral areas did not participate. Other authors record different local explanations of headhunting – including crop fertility and protection against evil spirits (Scott and Hardiman 1900:498-503; Lintner 2011:339). Origin myths of the Wa are discussed by Fiskesjo in his dissertation (2000: Ch2), variously involve emergence from a hole, where the Wa were the firstborn and hence take on the responsibility of sacrifice to the spirits (Scott and Hardiman 1900:496; Young 2014:2).

\(^{23}\) Rather than simply recording the narratives told, Fiskesjo deconstructs the contexts for the creation of these narratives. One Chinese version has Zhugeliang tricking the Wa into practicing headhunting (2000:346-9), which appears to displace blame from the Wa onto the Chinese, or alternatively, celebrates the superior Chinese cunning.
present-day Pangyang, recalled being asked by the British in 1947 to submit samples of mineral ore, ultimately turning in 60 different types (Young 2014:13). Traces of riches enlivened the mystery and intrigue of the hills, yet British records also suggested a strong ambivalence to governing the Wa hills. The Wa States were left almost completely unadministered – between Scott’s visits in the early 1900s and the revival of such attempts (and mineral surveys) in the 1930s – “a sleeping dog that is best left to lie”, in the words of AF Morley, then the Private Secretary to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Feb 1933, cited in Maule 1992:25). Alongside other colonial reports (Harvey 1932; Barton 1933), and missionary writings (see Fiskesjo 2000), James G. Scott’s subsequent Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States (Scott and Hardiman 1900) has formed the basis of much of our historical understanding of the Wa and other ethnic minority areas in Burma, with methodically curated ethnological, ecological, and social accounts of the region.

Yet long before the British expeditions were the Chinese miners, soldiers, and traders in the 1650s. Magnus Fiskesjo collates these accounts in his discussion of Chinese state-agents’ imaginaries of the barbarian borderlands as backwards and uncivilized places (“Wild Wa”), comparing these with the less politically-interested engagements of miners and traders, who would refer to the local Wa with more respectful terms (“Big Wa”) (2010a, also Wang 2010). The Wa realms were divided into “raw” and “cooked” or “tame” and “wild” by surrounding civilizations, distinguished by the degree of subjection and integration into these “civilizing centers” (Fiskesjo 1999, 2002) – typologies which came to play integral roles in the self-legitimation discourses of these powerful centers.

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24 Fiskesjo notes how Wa primitiveness has always been accentuated by neighboring polities, refusing to acknowledge their political tactics or technological know-how (e.g. mining and metalworking), yet simultaneously fearful of their predatory prowess (1999 and 2010a). See also Blum (2000), Harrell (1995) for Chinese discourses minorities at the peripheries.
With these rare visits came animated narratives of the Wa people, fashioned by lowland travelers and visitors from the late 1800s through to the present day. Though comparatively few in number, they inevitably reiterated and solidified notions of the isolation of the hills and the primitiveness and their inhabitants. Indeed, in Shan areas, the Wa were used as the proverbial bogeyman by mothers sending their children to bed. In particular, they suggested a backward isolation and primitiveness, simplicity, and rudimentary social and political structures.

One strong moralizing undertone purveyed by their “civilized” neighbors was poverty and poor hygiene, embellished with accounts of the Was’ insalubrious and basic living conditions. With a patronizing magnanimity, James G. Scott wrote that the Wa “are an exceedingly well-behaved, industrious, and estimable race, were it not for the one foible of cutting strangers’ heads off and neglecting to ever wash themselves” (1900:509).

The relative isolation of the Wa hills ends abruptly in the 1950s, a period Fiskesjo posits as the end of Wa autonomy (Fiskesjo 2010a), when military forces from the outside entered the hills in earnest. The British journalist Alan Winnington, traveling to the Chinese side of Wa hills in 1957, offered a glimpse into this initial period of intrusion by the Han Chinese, briefly describing encounters between the Wa and Kuomintang (KMT) raiders between 1948 and 1949 (2008). He charted the early stages of Chinese Communist (CCP) engagement with the Wa as they brought food, tools, clothes, and enlisted them to fight off KMT remnants. He paints a painfully caricatured but sympathetic picture of Wa simplicity – “half-starved and living on the jungle for the best part of the year” (130), “to get into any Wa village you must fight or be invited” (133), “among the Wa it is traditional that you cannot settle anything without a drink and you cannot settle anything when you are drunk” (134), “hygiene is unknown, washing done by nobody” (140) – and a whole series of other lofty and reductive observations. While mildly amusing, Winnington’s orientalist
descriptions of Wa living conditions around Ximeng buttressed impressions of the Wa as poor, uneducated, and fierce, yet innocently egalitarian as a result of their sheer deprivation and supposed inability to properly count, fitting in with the “noble savage” writings of the period.

By the 1960s-1980s, the demarcation of the Sino-Burma border was leading the Wa hills along two completely different trajectories. On the Chinese side were the development and anti-tradition campaigns of the Cultural Revolution and Communist Party endeavors, while on the Burmese side, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) fortified Wa Region as a stronghold for its military campaigns into lower Burma (see chapter 2). During this period, almost no reports emerged from Wa Region, save for Bertil Lintner’s, the veteran journalist and observer of ethnic armed groups in Burma, who travelled through CPB-controlled from 1985-1987. Lintner walked from India, through the Naga Hills and into Northeastern Burma, across Kachin State, then down towards Kokang and Wa Region, exiting into China after more than 15 months. His sympathetic account offered a glimpse of the suffering and poverty of everyday people in the hilly conflict areas of Shan and Kachin states (2011). His work also contains the bulk of the records on politics and the battles of the CPB until their demise, respectful of the struggles of both the Burmese and the minorities (1990; 1994).

In 1995, the Japanese traveler Hideyuki Takano spent 8 remarkable months living in a Wa village outside Pang Kham with the approval of the Wa leadership, growing opium and becoming an addicted to opium himself. Takano’s story is a frank and impressionistic account of local peoples’ stories (2002), naturally replete with factual errors, yet reflecting the raw uncertainty of rumor and knowledge in the borderlands. His sympathy for the people he met comes across in the candid writing. More recently, a sensationalized travel account by Andrew Marshall depicted the Wa hills as a dangerous “criminal empire” run by Wa drug lords, despite his own assertion that the Wa were “the most-misunderstood and seldom-met tribe in all Burma” (2003:227). Marshall’s self-
congratulatory account of having successfully entered the Wa hills from China in 1998, claiming to be the second white man to visit the exotic “blue lake” (Nawng Hkio in present-day Longtan Township; the first supposedly being James G. Scott himself), added a sense of romanticized isolation to the hills. Describing Pang Kham as a “lawless” militarized base, carelessly regurgitating gossip about the brutality of the UWSA and its leaders, and exaggerating the dangers posed by Wa soldiers, his anecdotal stories compounded the very misunderstandings he claimed to alleviate.

The 2000s and the war on drugs saw a proliferation of speculative dross by “security analysts” commenting on the intransigence and military might of Wa “warlords”. Such was the degree of wild impressions that in 2014, Bertil Lintner saw fit to publish in the Irrawaddy a useful commentary entitled “Who are the Wa?” explaining the history of the KMT and CPB in the region, and their present-day relationship with China. Lintner suggested that neither military campaigns nor political machinations of “divide and rule” were likely to bring victory for the Myanmar military, but nonetheless ended it ominously:

“But before the end of the year, some action is bound to take place in the Wa Hills. And whatever shape it takes, it will be a much more serious challenge than any of the other ethnic conflicts that have been plaguing Myanmar for decades. It will involve an area never before controlled by any Myanmar government – and China.” (Lintner 2014)

When media groups were first officially allowed into Wa Region in 2015 to cover the first Ethnic Armed Groups’ summit, the Irrawaddy, a reputable Burmese news agency, returned with sensationalized headlines – “The Wa Region Really Looks Like its Own Country”, “Secret Garden in Wa Special Region Leaves Much to the Imagination”, and “Wonders of the Wa: the Vibrant Culture of Burma’s Mysterious Mountain Dwellers”. Previously, coverage from a distance surrounded the

25 This prediction never happened, and the ceasefire has held.
geostrategic maneuverings surrounding the Wa - “Wa Rebels Caught Up in Regional Chess Match” and “Despite Denials, UWSA owns Helicopters: Military, Business Sources”. As late as 2016, the next posse of journalists from the BBC and Reuters returned with similar headlines accompanied with exotic photographs of Wa women in traditional costumes twirling their long black hair, marching soldiers, and checkpoint inspections (see below and Chapter 6).

The UWSA’s supposed isolation and elusiveness, as well as their refusal to engage in governance, conveyed the impression that they lacked the requisite political sophistication. Observers saw the UWSA as isolationist, non-ideological, and only keen on maintaining their business interests in Myanmar. Half-hearted denials or explanations for charges of child soldier use, narcotics, and weapons purchases were met with disbelief and skepticism from visiting journalists and writers alike. Yet by 2015, with the UWSA taking the leadership role amongst the other ethnic armed groups in organizing EAG summits, and lending their military might to opposition coalitions (see chapter 3), the narratives of reclusion and backwardness were slowly being reconsidered. There was a marked change of tune amongst political commentators from other ethnic armed groups, to an admiration for the manner in which they had managed to maintain their autonomy.

**Narratives of Lawlessness and Disorder**

It seemed difficult for most journalistic accounts of the borderlands to avoid the thralls of Conradian “darkness” narratives – the courageous visitor deeply shocked by the moral depravity and naiveté of the natives, lording over their hapless fellow peasants, peddling toxic and destructive substances in the ruthless pursuit of profit. Drugs were the new headhunting, the primary evil which overwhelmingly dominated reportage and scholarship on Wa Region throughout the 2000s (Chin 2009; Jelsma et al 2005; Lone 2008; Kramer 2007; Lintner and Black 2009). Up to 50% of the
world’s opium and 75% of heroin production was said to be from Myanmar in the 1990s (Chin 2009:8, citing SEA Information Network 1998). Statistics varied widely. UNODC reported that opium production in Myanmar was an estimated 312 tons in 2005, with 40% from Wa Region 2005 (UNODC 2005:3), but US estimates, placed Wa Region at 55-65% of Myanmar’s opium production in 2004 – a figure Chin finds exaggerated (2009:55).

This was also tied to the remoteness of the highlands and difficult ecological conditions which made few commodities worth producing: “opium... is the only thing produced which will pay for transport to a market where it can be sold”. During the KMT’s insurgency in Shan State and Thailand, General Duan of the 5th Army declared: “We have to continue to fight the evil of communism and to fight you must have an army, and an army must have guns, and to buy guns you must have money. In these mountains, the only money is opium” (cited in Lintner 2000). Images of soldiers and militia invariably fronted any reporting on the drug economy, forming the cover photographs of Lintner’s (1994), Lintner and Black’s (2009) and Chin’s (2009) books. The international community, under the leadership of the US and its Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), had been working against the production of narcotics in Burma since the 1970s (Chouvy 2010; cf McCoy 1991).

On June 26, 2005, the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, the UWSA declared its area fully “opium-free”, though methamphetamine production continued widely (Chin 2009).

The violence of authoritarianism, poverty, and inequality was another related theme, as profit was concentrated in the hands of middlemen and bosses rather than the smallholding farmers themselves. The TIME magazine article “Soldiers of Fortune” of 2002, juxtaposing a narrative of a

wealthy and callous Chairman Bao and Wa leaders, against groups of “half-naked”, malnourished children and tired, disgruntled villagers pouring out their hearts to the questing journalist, raised the “drug lord” profile of the UWSA. Tied into the sense of lawlessness in the hills was a moral discourse that construed heartless drug traffickers, amoral and post-communist, no longer guided by political ideology but a ruthless calculating instrumentality. 15 years on, the BBC’s most self-absorbed Myanmar journalist Jonah Fisher, lazily echoed the same reductionism in an article headlined “Drugs, money and wildlife in Myanmar’s most secret state” (Fisher 2016), describing casinos, prostitution, and narcotics production in Wa Region, proclaiming of the UWSA: “detached from both national and international laws, they do exactly as they please. And they do not want to change.”

While many news reports are not always factually incorrect, the “intrepid adventurer” persona that takes hold of foreign journalists triggers orientalist interpretations and exaggerated self-congratulatory representations. Little wonder then, that the Wa authorities are rarely willing to meet with or speak to journalists, which then further perpetuates the stereotypes of isolation and reclusiveness. Wa leaders I spoke to were aware of the negative press they had received in foreign media, yet were often tempted to invite journalists to witness political summits or to certify the veracity of their drug-eradication claims. Engagement with the outside was important, but perilous.

A second focal point was the animals. The wildlife trade in the borderlands, yielding shocking visuals of rare animal carcasses splayed out on tarps in markets, triggered great outrage and intrigue amongst visiting media and their Western audiences (see chapter 6). Photojournalists’ essays portrayed the innocence of nature ravaged by the ignorant desperation of impoverished hunters and the greed of traders who capitalized on the supposedly irrational beliefs of Traditional Chinese Medicine to profit off the medicinal value of animal parts. Agents from the New York Times, BBC,
and TIME made their way out to Shan State to catalogue the “debauched” states of disorder in neighboring Monglar. Leopard and pangolin skins were emblematic of lawlessness and depravity in the borders, and reports laced with consternation at the foolish inhabitants’ inability to value their natural heritage. Such outrage was the contemporary version of moralizing narratives of poor hygiene.

Another resource seen as poorly managed and exploited was mineral wealth. Reuters’ visit to Wa Region in September 2016 yielded a report on the burgeoning tin mining industry, highlighting the links between Wa tin mines and tech-giant Apple through Yunnanese tin trading companies (Lee and Schectman 2016). The journalists sought to link famous Western corporations to “conflict resources”, putting due diligence obligations under the spotlight. While sanctions have been eased on Myanmar, several of the top Wa leaders remain on a US blacklist for “Drug Kingpins”, and some were named as owners of the Wa companies exporting tin to China.

Elsewhere, research institutes and think tanks listed the fortunes and assets of top Wa leaders and their businesses, seen as fronts for money laundering (Meehan 2011). Wa leaders, like other political leaders in Myanmar, owned swatches of land and property, airlines, plantations, mines, hotels, and precious stone businesses in Yangon and Yunnan province of China. Many were legitimate businesses that built upon illicit wealth accrued in the 1990s, others were shady extractive concessions and partnerships with the Myanmar military (See Felbab-Brown 2015; MacLean 2008; Woods 2011). The stains of cronyism marred all wealth throughout the country, and Wa Region was no exception, yet its foreignness made it appear more distant, the devil unknown.

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The two set of narratives – isolation and backwardness on the one hand, and lawlessness and disorder on the other – have clear political effects. First, they produce and reproduce marginality (Tsing 1993), an act of Othering that furnishes a sense of the danger of the unknown and unpredictable, hindering the possibilities of engagement with a supposedly secretive adversary. They also undermine the legitimacy of UWSA governance, depicted as a band of ruthless drug lords driven by opportunistic profit and unscrupulously darkened by crime – a usurper, unsophisticated and authoritarian, opportunistic and extractive, or at best negligent. This exacerbates the UWSA’s marginality from mainstream politics and political discourse of the Burman-majority lowlands, as I show in chapter 3.

Second, and in line with the imbrication of knowledge in the borderlands, they promulgate a prejudice that shapes and skews gossip and rumor. The narratives are structurally similar, only differing in content – headhunting, dirtiness, drugs, wildlife. Doubts are created about the political capacity or intentions of the UWSA – for prior to 2015, it had no prominent voice in the Nationwide Peace Process and ethnic conflict, preferring rather to operate behind the scenes and through direct personal channels between leaders. The Wa leadership is poorly understood, and its leaders reluctant to attempt to change this, suspicious of media portrayals of their positions. The narratives inevitably reinforce and shape the politics of knowledge, forming the starting position from which Wa political practice begins, and the corresponding engagement by lowland Myanmar leaders, political observers, representatives of the international community, UN agencies and NGOs.

**Magnus Fiskesjo: Contesting Historical Narratives of the Wa**

Cornell anthropologist Magnus Fiskesjo has thus far been largely responsible for contesting and historicizing the narratives of isolation and primitiveness of the Wa, through his studies of Chinese
and British archives, along with fieldwork on the Chinese side of the Wa hills in the 1990s (2010a; 2013). Fiskesjo emphasizes the agency of the Wa, describing the Wa states prior to the 1950s as fiercely autonomous and egalitarian, a “predatory periphery” actively engaging the Burmese and Chinese centers, yet not developing an internal political hierarchy (2000; 2010a). He studies the pretenders to Wa kingship in two Wa realms of Banhong (1900s) and Mangleng (1800s), showing how their attempts to control mining resources involved a careful manipulation of the British, Chinese, and the Burmese states and their agents (2010a). They ultimately avoided a Wa version of Shan-style princely kingdoms., with egalitarian values that prevented their realms from being represented by a prince long who might be co-opted into the surrounding civilizations. Fiskesjo, dismissing as insufficient Leach’s suggestion that highland political entities could simply choose from Indian or Chinese models of kingship, instead cites Friedman’s arguments about state formation at the margins of empire (1998), where a combination of environmental, societal, and external factors such as trade could either preclude state-formation or give rise to political devolution. The highland ecology also meant that peasants were not easily coerced into state-making projects. The differing nature of resources was another factor, with cash crops like opium offering egalitarian impetuses rather than centralized site-based resources like tin, silver and other minerals.

In earlier work, Fiskesjo contests simplistic constructions of the Wa reputation for headhunting. First, that which outsiders might imagine as a “custom’ that is followed blindly without any reasoning”, was actually an integral manifestation of Wa notions of sacrifice and propitiation to the powers-that-be, as well as the form of warfare that existed in the hills (Fiskesjo 2000:2-3). That it should be understood as a form of warfare makes good sense: in my fieldwork, informants suggested that headhunting in the Wa hills on the Burmese side of the border continued even up to the 1970s, as part of raids and skirmishes between Wa groups on opposing alliances. Second, as Fiskesjo argues,
headhunting was itself not a distinguishing trait of barbarism in Chinese history, and beheading widely practiced, but within “the 20th century reformulations of the Chinese economy of signs, ‘headhunting’ took on a new significance, as one sign of the primitiveness of the Wa” (2000:5). In other words, the imbrication of peripheries and centers produced the need for discourses of barbarism, which coalesced around practices of headhunting, used as a trait to distinguish barbarians from the civilized. Implicit (and later explicit) in these theories was the sense that the civilizing missions of the Chinese and British were to bring much-needed enlightenment and advancement to the peripheries (Fiskesjo 1999).

Fiskesjo’s ultimate conclusion is to make a call for attention to the historical agency and strategy of the Wa in *refusing to be marginal*, and their curious tendency to egalitarianism in the past. He rejects Scott’s notion of “refuge” and resistance (2009) with respect to the central Wa states, who demonstrated their own forms of violent aggrandizement, not mere evasion. Fiskesjo hints towards parallels with the present-day UWSA: “it can be argued that the historical pattern of mutual manipulation known from Banhong and elsewhere have reappeared in new form, with Wa State hosts/owners entertaining Chinese clients/entrepreneurs eyeing Chinese and global markets for licit or illicit goods” (2010a:254).

**Histories of Movement and Rupture**

In Southeast Asia, much of borderlands literature elucidates the forms of agency and strategizing of everyday life at the margins of the state. Border peoples resist marginality, co-opt it for their own forms of project-making, demonstrating the richness of social action and cultural forms in Kalimantan (Tsing 1993) and Northern Thailand (Sturgeon 2005), crisscross the hills and seas together enmeshed in flows of capital (Chang 2009; Giersch 2006, 2010; Hill 1998; Horstmann and
Wadley 2006; Hughes 2011; Lindquist 2009), and navigate practices of business and bribery with agents of the state to make livelihoods on the Vietnam-China border (Endres 2014), Thai-Laos border (Molland 2010; Walker 1999), and across the South China Sea (Long 2011; Tagliacozzo 2005).

The Sino-Burma borderland around Wa Region is no different – a story of movement and rupture, travel of people and things, the unevenness of sovereignties, shifting political allegiances, and fractured insurgencies of the last six decades. From the 1950s to the 1990s: Communist China battles the defeated Chinese nationalists (KMT) to assert control of its Yunnan border; the Burmese government undergoes military coups as it forces the Communist Party of Burma into the Shan hills, culminating in years of military campaigns and stalemate; the Burmese government creates local militia groups called the Ka Kwe Ye (KKY) through which it governs territory indirectly; the opium trade gives rise to armed groups and drug lords who intermittently battle or collaborate amongst themselves in the peripheries27. Stories and subjectivities unfold in the background of a convoluted repertoire of actors, proliferating or enclosed, emerging and reforming.

This is similar to what Sarah Green has observed at the Greek-Albanian border (2005), where movement and change was so much part of people’s experience of the world that disintegrative phenomena apparent to her, such as soil erosion and crumbling roads, were unremarkable to locals. She writes, “if you start with coming and going, if you assume that movement is simply a part of many things, in different ways and different times, then the axiomatic link between movement in itself and change or displacement is broken” (2005:26). Movement in itself was not significant, it was the quality of this movement that was important, how it “was always involved in a network of

27 For accounts of the politics of modern Burmese history since independence, refer to Charney (2009), Smith (1999), South (2008), Steinberg (2001), and Taylor (2009).
relationships with, as well as separation from, other things, places, people, and events, and how that seamlessly combine the way things seem with the way things are. (Green 2005:29).

**Chen Long: Merchant of All, Subject of None**

“He does everything and has traded in everything; the only thing he doesn’t sell is women.”
– a friend, describing Chen

“When I retire I will go back to China, I’m tired of bowing my head all the time.” – Chen

The Toyota Landcruiser pulls up near the entrance to my office, and its driver shouts to me, “Xiao Wang, come join me for tea tomorrow, right down by the river where the factory is. I will tell you everything and you can write about this.” This is Chen Long, a 55 year-old Han Chinese businessman who holds an appointment in one of the ministries of the Wa government. His hair is close-cropped, greying at the sides, his teeth protruding and crow’s feet spreading from the sides of his eyes. He wears shorts and a gaudy polo t-shirt, and a baseball cap to shield him from the sun.

His laughter is cynical, a disarming mix of genuine humor, disappointment, smugness, and a tad of anger, as he talks candidly about the state of affairs surrounding Wa State.

Chen is a longstanding borderland inhabitant, having moved all over the Burma-China borderlands during his lifetime. He tells me a host of stories, from politics to history, from gossip about famous characters to the state of the economy. Throughout our conversations, his accounts are laced with a sense of the absurd: events and places he repeatedly describes as “fun” (haowan), fun, or literally “fun to play”, meaning ridiculous, beyond belief, or entertaining. The going-ons in Wa region and the tales he tells me, are, he says, are simply too amusing, unbelievable even (taihaoxiao), they

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28 For work on the quality of movement and mobility, see Clifford (1997), and Chu’s (2010) work which looks as mobility as a qualisign manifest in different forms of travel.
make a mockery of the gravity of the situation. The stories range from gossip about different personalities in the region, political blunders, to history and conspiracy theories, to observations about all governing parties. There are stories of shadowy trade, of betrayals and crimes, of unexpected collaborations and alliances. Chen is familiar with this absurdity – “the man who shouts the loudest is the guiltiest”, he notes wryly. His various businesses profit from the gaps in legal enforcement or authority, making use of permissiveness and networks to find opportunities for investments and ventures. “I am a fool if I cannot succeed in this place,” he laughs.

At present, Chen owns a large rubber plantation, a copper mine and ore processing plant, various farmland, a furniture and wood products factory, and residential properties in Pang Kham (Wa Region), Kunming (China), Hopang and Mandalay (Myanmar). He is clearly one of the wealthier (though not anywhere close to top-tier) in Wa Region: one of his daughters has a Master’s degree from Australia, and his son studied in the UK for several years. His eldest daughter is now married and lives in Mandalay, while his son helps him with his businesses in Wa Region. His position as a mid-level official in the Wa administration gives him access to top-ranking leaders, a series of cross-border networks for the mining and export of copper and tin ore, and forms of protection and authority in dealings with outsiders. We drink tea often, seated in the pavilion of his house overlooking a river.

**KMT and Han Chinese in the Hills**

Chen was born in 1959, the third of four children, to a Han Chinese family settled in Hopang, a Myanmar government-controlled but ethnically mixed town just on the Northern edge of Wa Region in Northern Shan State. To the north and east lay the hilly Kokang region, and beyond that, China. To the south, Wa Region, and to the west, the Kunlone bridge and the Shan and Burmese
towns of Hsweni and Lashio. It was a town at the crossroads of control, a condition familiar to many of the towns close to the China-Burma border.

Chen’s father left his hometown of Baoshan in neighboring Yunnan Province of China for Burma in the early 1950s, when the chaos of a newly independent People’s Republic of China was taking hold. The defeated Chinese Nationalists (KMT) were re-organizing themselves in eastern Burma and launched several unsuccessful counter-attacks into Yunnan between 1950 and 1952 (Lintner 1994; Steinberg and Fan 2012; Sai Aung Tun 2009). Chang Wen-Chin cites Taiwan Ministry of Defense records listing 14,000 KMT soldiers in Burma at the end of 1951 (2001:1089). For years after, soldiers stayed in smaller bands in the highland regions of the Burma border, settling or making livelihoods where they could, heavily involved in the jade and opium trades, and other contraband (Chang 2002, 2009). The 1950s conflict with the KMT saw the Burmese government modernizing its military in an effort to reassert its territorial sovereignty (Callahan 2003), bringing the issue before the United Nations in 1953, much to the chagrin of the US who had continually supported the anti-communist KMT (Clymer 2014; Kaufman 2001). Under international pressure, the KMT moved down towards the Thai border by 1961, and many into Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s²⁹ (Chang 2001).

²⁹ The KMT retreated to Northern Thailand by the 1960s, where they were supported by the US and tolerated by the Thai government as a screen against the spread of Communism. Known as the orphan army (gujun), they numbered about 3,200 (Chang 2002:130) and were split between two groups, the 3rd Army of Gen. Li Wen-huan ultimately settling in Tam Ngob in Chiang Mai province, and the 5th Army of Gen. Duan Shi-wen in Mae Salong in Chiang Rai province (Chang 2001, 2002; Ying 2008; Lintner and Black 2009). They were heavily implicated in the drug trade, struggling with Khun Sa in the 1960s for control of trading routes. Two withdrawals to Taiwan took place in 1954 and 1961, and those left behind assisted the Thai government in the fight against Thai Communists in the 1970s and 1980s, and were disbanded in the late 1980s, with many rewarded with Thai citizenship after (Chang 2002). Along with other Yunnanese Chinese refugees and followers, they resettled in Northern Thailand in about 35 villages, numbering 40-50,000 (Chang 2002:131).
KMT stragglers weren’t the only mass movements of ethnic Chinese, for up until December 1958, an estimated 114,000 Yunnanese had fled China and the Great Leap Forward, with 80% of these heading to Burma (Fan and Steinberg 2012:53). These included refugees from China displaced along with the KMT (Chang 2001:1088; Sai Aung Tun 2009:312), who sought protection from the KMT forces. With the China-Burma border only fully demarcated in 1960 (Fiskesjo 2002:85), there were plenty of areas in the Northeastern Shan States where these Chinese and other ethnic minorities in the borders moved freely and settled beneath the gaze of the Burmese state.

Nor were Chinese inhabitants in the Burmese peripheries anything new. The routes and networks of the 1950s had been carved into the hills centuries before, building on communities and kin of earlier migrations. Chang details the caravan trade run by the Yunnanese from the Ming period, more than 400 years ago, tracing their networks and culture of migration into a “transnational popular realm” of the 1950s-1970s (2002; 2009). Ann Hill too, writes about the complex ethnic identities and “dynamics of ethnic change” (1998:107; also Mote 1967) amongst Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand, amalgamating through a long history of trade, migration, and military engagements, running from Tibet and Sichuan down towards Northern Thailand, long before states and their boundaries were established. Amongst this group are disparate types of Chinese identities.

30 Several ethnic Chinese friends I met in Pang Kham traced their lineage to these who had come over during the KMT times, but were deliberately vague (or uneven uncertain themselves) as to whether their parents had been active KMT soldiers, refugees, or simply family and relatives moving along with the soldiers. They spoke of their parents moving southward from Hopang and gradually nearing the Thai border, some through Wa Region and some west of the Salween (See also Ying 2008).

31 In Wa areas, Wang Ningsheng details carefully the processual shifts in ethnic identity as tens of thousands of Han Chinese miners moving into the Wa hills from the 1700s gradually adopted Wa names and identified themselves as Wa over generations of assimilation (2010).
– Yunnanese Muslims (Hui), Han Chinese migrants from 1950s, traders, and the families and followes of KMT soldiers.

Amidst the chaos of military movement, Chen’s father began work for the famous Olive Yang in the 1950s, a powerful woman from the ruling Yang family in the Kokang region and its de facto leader in the 1950s to early 1960s. Olive Yang’s famous brigand of soldiers were enlisted by the Burmese government to drive out the KMT from Kokang by 1953, yet after having done so, they continued to collaborate with the KMT in the 1950s to run opium routes down to Thailand\(^{32}\). She was rumored to be tough, tomboyish, and ruthless (Lintner 2011:313). Soon after, Chen’s father married his third wife (Chen’s mother), left the service of Olive Yang\(^{33}\), and settled down in Hopang, opening a provision store. Chen told me how Olive Yang had later sent some assassins to kill his father in Hopang, unhappy about his leaving. He wasn’t home at the time, and only his opium stocks were looted. Decades later, his father met Olive Yang at a temple in Hopang during the New Year, and they chatted briefly, his father declaring that luck was with him, otherwise he would long be dead. She retorted with a smile, telling him not to bear grudges about the distant past. Amidst the bizarre moral worlds of the borderlands, such stories of loyalty and disloyalty, magnanimity and betrayal were commonplace, eroding a sense of what was peculiar or absurd.

\(^{32}\) Yang Li describes Kokang politics in the post-independence era in “House of Yang” (1997), detailing the various flirtations and shifting loyalties of Kokang leaders, including Olive Yang, with the KMT and Burmese militaries. Capricious relations were routine in the borderlands, where political enemies could easily collaborate over commercial interests.

\(^{33}\) A key figure to leave the service of Olive Yang was Lo Hsing Han, who later led the Kokang KKY and fought for the tatmadaw against the CPB in the 1970s. The KKYs received permits to smuggle opium and Lo prospered, soon dubbed the “King of the Golden Triangle” (Lintner and Black 2009:25-7). After the government ordered KKYs to disband in 1972, he went underground with other Shan rebel armies, arrested in 1973 and released in 1980. It was common for lackeys to strike out on their own after having made sufficient or social connections whilst in the service of a leader.
The CPB and its Demise

In the 1950s, Wa chieftains began mobilizing their disparate armed brigands to fight off KMT soldiers and local militias from other ethnic groups\(^{34}\). The Wa hills were replete with different Wa

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\(^{34}\) I heard conflicting accounts of the presence of the KMT in the Wa hills, whether there had only been fleeting raids or a garrisoned presence. Many informants spoke of Chinese soldiers and civilians arriving, but passing through the areas of Northern Wa (near Mengmao and Man Tun) on the way to Dangyan and Lashio West of the Salween. Yawnghwe’s (2010) maps of KMT presence mark the operating areas in

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realms and chieftains, “heavily armed, yet only loosely associated and fiercely egalitarian polities – which the British colonial representatives called “the Wa states” only because they had no word for such stateless sovereignty” (Fiskesjo 2010b:112; also Fiskesjo 2000). Magnus Fiskesjo points to the 1950s as the watershed period within which the Wa states can be said to have lost their fiercely-guarded autonomy (see Chapter 2), partly incorporated into the Chinese state with the drawing of the border, and partly due to the chaos of foreign armies moving into Wa country on the Burmese side (2010b). There was no unified political consciousness of a Wa state, and feuds and headhunting continued between villages from opposing hilltops and realms up till the 1970s.

The Burmese government entered into a series of treaties and pacts with the Chinese Communists in the 1960s to address the KMT problem, the chaos in the borderlands being one of the key reasons for Ne Win’s coup and the beginning of military dictatorship under the Burma Socialist Programme Party in 1962 (Smith 1999; Taylor 2009; Charney 2009). This shift to military government after failed experiments with democracy since independence saw a search for stability in the border areas, as

the Yin Phan (Vingngun) areas, and Winnington writes of KMT raids on Wa villages beginning in 1948, and the Wa counterattacks on KMT remnants (2008:129). The bulk of KMT forces had left by 1953, with scattered bases and strongholds remaining until 1973 when the CPB gained full control of Wa Region.

35 There always seemed to be an unease when speaking of the past of headhunting with outsiders, as if local Wa had internalized the shame and disdain that outsiders had attached to it. Stories of headhunting I heard in the hills almost always shifted responsibility onto another area – “there was no headhunting here, but on the opposite hill top, or in such and such a township, they used to chop heads there”.

36 The outbreak of insurgencies across the country after independence, threat to territorial sovereignty from the KMT, and the CPB’s fleeting but widespread military victories across lower Burma in the mid-1950s undermined the authority of the democratic government. The first Prime Minster U Nu, facing also revolt from within his own party, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), asked General Ne Win in September 1958 to take over as a caretaker government. U Nu resumed as PM in April 1960 after his faction of the AFPFL won the 1960 elections. Two years later in March 1962, Ne Win’s military coup dissolved parliament and took over the reins of government, placing U Nu under “protective custody” (See Charney 2009; Smith 1999). Both U Nu and Ne Win, along with the legendary Aung San (ASSK’s father) were members of the Dohbama Asiayone (We Burmans Association), who began the
the Burmese generals struggled to find loyal local leaders and strongmen. They began incorporating pro-government militias under the Ka Kwe Ye (KKY, lit. “defense”), or “home guard” system beginning in 1963 (Lintner 1994:187). In return for their support, a variety of guerrilla groups received “travel permits” or opium smuggling rights and became self-supporting. Due to the lack of written records, plethora of informal agreements, and liberal vernacular use of the term “KKY”, it was hard to tell which groups or militias where actual parts of the KKY system and which were not. This led to a whole mosaic of groups of different sizes, with floating allegiances, political goals, and varied weaponry, vying for control of people, trade, and territory in the hills. Adrian Cowell, a journalist traveling with Shan militias through these regions, notes the similarities between the “chameleon-like” and “anarchic guerrilla situation” in the 1960s and 1970s, and the “remarkably fluid mosaic of petty princedoms” once encountered by the British (2005:3). This, he argues, meant the flourishing of a decentralized opium trade, a multitude of actors with plausible deniability and finger-pointing as to who was really “in charge” of the drug trade, allowing the survival of the various Shan groups (See also Jelsma et al 2005; Yawnghwe 2010:56-7).

The CPB entered the Wa Hills in 1969, convincing groups of influential Wa leaders to join their ranks and fight intruders (just not them) and the Burmese government. Others were outgunned and beaten into submission. The Wa chieftains were separated into various villages and realms, struggles for independence against the British. They were also all part of the Thirty Comrades who formed the Burma Independence Army (forerunner to the tatmadaw), trained by the Japanese to fight the British during WWII (See Lintner 1990; Taylor 2015b).

37 See Buchanan (2016) for a breakdown of the messy definitions and distinctions between the KKY, pyithuset (“People’s War”), and Ta Ka Sa Pha (anti-insurgent groups) of the 1960s, and the Border Guard Forces and People’s Militia Forces (created by the tatmadaw in 2009), and other local militia and armed groups.

38 One township leader gave the figure of 14 different chieftains including Zhao Nyi Lai and Bao Youxiang in the 1970s. Lone’s interview with UWSA Deputy Commander-in-Chief Bu Laikang in 2008 suggested
reportedly embattled by Lahu groups, pressured by the tatmadaw to disarm (Smith 1999:350), and threatened by KMT raids. Here, the beginnings of the present day Wa leadership were formed, as separate Wa guerrilla bands led by Bao Youxiang (Kunma), Zhao Nyi Lai (Ban Wai), Ai Keng and Ai Kelong (Aicheng), and Lu Xing Guo (Hushuang/ Mengding) joined forces with the CPB39, in return for arms with which to protect themselves. The CPB and its allied Wa militias battled small Burmese government garrisons and Wa KKYs in Mengmao and Ban Wai (Sao Pha) from December 1969 (Lintner 1994:217). Other Wa guerrillas simultaneously battled with KMT and KMT-affiliated groups, capturing Yin Phan (Vingngun) by April 1971. The Burmese government was driven out on Mengmao on May Day 1971 (Lintner 1994:217-9). The areas of present day Wein Kao and Mong Pawk districts were captured between 1971 and 1973, establishing more or less the territorial boundaries maintained by the UWSA today40.

10 “clans” (2008:29). According to an ex-CPB informant, when the CPB entered Wa region in the 1960s, there were 34 Wa groups, 27 allied with the CPB, and 4 (from Dangyan, Hopang, Man Xiang, and Panglong areas) allied with the government. The remaining 3 sided with the KMT remnants and were gradually forced out of the area (including Mahasang of Yin Phan’s group, who had joined the tatmadaw’s KKY programme in 1969 after first resisting the tatmadaw’s orders to disarm [Smith 1999:350]). China’s direct support for the CPB in the Wa hills began in 1968 but was reduced after 1972. It is difficult to trace direct lines between these militia groups and descendant villages of the traditional Wa realms.

39 These names, dates, and groups are taken from a Wa government report – Ting Xiao’s “A Report on the Support and Assistance to Myanmar’s Special Region No.2 (Wa State) for the Development of its Drug Eradication Program” (2001) – often cited by writers such as Chin (2009:21) and Milsom (2005:66).

40 The CPB’s attention initially turned westward to Kunlone and the strategic bridge across the Salween river, but defeat there meant that it focused instead on driving southwards through the Wa hills, down to Pang Kham and into the flatter lands of Mong Pawk. Military monuments to the battles fought during from 1969-1973 during the military campaign for the Wa hills now stand in Pang Kham, Ai Cheng, Mong Pawk, and Mengmao.
The insecurity of the 1960s and 1970s led to departures of many Wa into China and Burmese areas to escape instability, especially after the CPB offensives beginning in 1968. Many moved West to Shan state, settling in the few thousands in Dangyan, Hsweni, Kunlone, Hopang, and Panglong. Many of these Wa were family and relatives of Wa KKY leaders, who had battled on the Burmese government side, only to flee when the CPB emerged victorious. Passing through these towns on my way from Lashio to Pang Kham, my drivers would often point out Wa villages along the way, inhabitants now all fluent in Burmese, interspersed amongst other Shan, Lahu, or Palaung villages.

\[4\] Lintner compares CPB population statistics taken in 1979 and 1986, finding that around than 40,000 people left the Wa hills during the CPB takeover (Lintner 1990: Appendix 2). This was especially so from the Northern areas of Wa Region, where the frontlines at Kunlone, Hopang, and Nam Tit were particularly precarious (See also Lintner 1990:330).
They returned often to Wa Region to see relatives, and during the 1970-1990s the disparity between living standards were painfully obvious as infrastructure and markets in the Wa hills remained underdeveloped.42

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In 1976, at the age of 17, Chen completed his high school studies in Lashio, a relatively stable Burmese government controlled town in Northern Shan State, and returned to Hopang. He quickly travelled to the famous jade mines in Hpakant, Kachin State, where he spent two years working in shafts, portering canned food and supplies, learning the tricks of trade, and was once buried in a cave in with four others, an accident which killed a co-worker. One of these mining bosses he worked for was the cousin of the famous Shan “drug lord” Khun Sa, who was also a relative of Chen’s later mother-in-law. From this early period, Chen had been exposed to the business dealings and networks of Shan militia and entrepreneurs. Mines were relatively small at the time, but numbered in the thousands, employing largely Han Chinese workers and some locals. Conditions were tough, with journeys of two days from the main road. Workers stayed in the mining areas for months at a time, and accidents were common, with the constant danger of broken bones and cave-ins.

Chen returned to Hopang in 1979, started a shop of his own, and began bringing cow hides, beans, chilies and other household products from Burma across the border to nearby market towns in Yunnan. Starting off with 2 mules and travelling on foot, over the years he hired helpers, bullock carts for the journey to these Chinese markets, where the end of the Cultural Revolution had seen

42 In fact, almost all of my staff at the World Food Programme were the children of these Wa migrants to Burmese areas, born in Hopang and Lashio. Because they were formally educated in Burma, they had the basic English and mathematics skills required to gain employment with the UN, whereas almost no Wa born in Wa Region were suitably qualified for the task due to the dismal education system.
some relative stability return. For many years, there was little competition since not many others dared to travel through the CPB-held areas into China. Chen brought all kinds of items, from radios and chilies to mosquito nets and watches, seeking out new markets in neighboring Chinese towns of Mengding, Cangyuan, and Yunxian. Amongst the goods moving into China was opium, fully banned there by the 1950s. Yet while opium was also banned in Shan State by British decree in 1923, areas east of the Salween (including Kokang and Wa areas) remained exempt due to the impossibility of enforcement (Maule 1992:15). By 1986, when Chen finally married and gave up trading to China, he had 15 mules and 3 bullock carts. He retained the shop in Hopang but no longer embarked on the month-long trading journeys. He once told me that his father warned him against involvement in two things: ideology and drugs. “I only followed his advice to avoid one of them,” he chuckled.

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In 1989, the CPB fell apart in dramatic fashion, creating a series of armed groups in the border areas. Chin’s interviews reveal a series of reasons for the mutiny against the CPB leaders – Wa troops were said to do the fighting and dying disproportionately\(^43\), alienated from the Burman leadership who were more interested in ideological agendas and class struggle with little respect for the ethnic minorities (2009:21-23). Morale was low after a series of defeats, years of constant battles with little discernible strategic gains, as well as resentment against the CPB’s opium tax on villagers (Lintner 1990). My interlocutors noted that the CPB was full of disparate groups and intentions to begin with – Burmese Communists, ethnic Chinese dissidents fleeing lowland Burma, various local Wa and

\(^{43}\) Up to 12,000 Wa troops fought in the CPB army at any one time, and the Wa National Organization (WNO) later estimated that 30,000 had died (Smith 1999:351).
Kokang strongmen, and advisors and supporters from China – all of different ideological or political persuasions. The UWSA, along with other Northern armed groups, agreed to bilateral ceasefire agreements with the *tatmadaw* in 1989, with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) following suit in 1994, leaving the ethnic minorities coalition, the National Democratic Front (NDF).

With this somewhat stabilizing political climate, Chen Long decided to try his luck down in lowland Burma. In 1989, he bought a pickup and started bringing goods from Mandalay to Hopang, where his wife now ran the provision shop. He made purchases as a shareholder of a frozen shrimp company in Yangon, which supplied a Hong Kong company. Between 1994-5, he started bringing cars from Yangon to Simao in China, driving them up in groups of 3-4. When the Chinese government shut down this cross-border trade, he then turned to the car repair business, bringing skilled mechanics from Burmese areas into China to run workshops.

In 1992, however, Chen was arrested in Lashio and jailed for 2 weeks by the Burmese police for having illegally brought two visitors from China to purchase cars there. The visitors lacked the appropriate permits for travel and the Burmese police were fishing for a bribe. Chen was later released because a friend of his was close to one of the top leaders of the then newly-formed UWSA. Through the UWSA liaison office in Lashio, this leader made requests to the Burmese police to release him, and a goodwill agreement was reached. The liaison officer for the UWSA in Lashio, who negotiated Chen's release, was later promoted to head a Wa government Ministry. When Chen moved to Pang Kham in 1998, he was recruited by this Minister to join the department.

Like others traversing the Shan hills, Chen possessed the attitude of entrepreneurial daring that Chang Wen-Chin describes, citing the Yunnanese saying “you may die but you cannot be poor” (*side qiong bude*) (2009:564). Chang also notes the frequent mockery of those perceived as too timid to embark on these trade journeys. Chen Long’s story gives us an empirical insight into the overlapping sovereignties and jurisdiction in the borderlands, and the creativity with which entrepreneurs and locals navigate nodes and networks of power. It also shows how political instability becomes accepted as a way of life, with livelihoods and aspirations responding the continual opening and closing of commercial opportunities created by regional political events. It
hints at the importance of connections and networks, of patronage and having strongmen vouch for individuals – so essential to movement, security, and commerce in the hills. These and myriad other stories depict the lived experience of chaos and opportunity, the ingenious agency among the bleakness of protracted conflict. It also shows how movement tempers accounts of history, each narrative a partial, situated type of knowledge colored by place and time. I return to his stories in chapter 6, where I narrate his more recent ventures into the extractive economy.

**Uncertainty, Rumor, and the Absurd**

“Also, there is an official culture of secrecy and obfuscation in Burma, exacerbated by low bureaucratic standards and widespread corruption... This situation is exacerbated by the opaqueness of the military government itself. Despite occasional claims by informants to ‘inside knowledge’, the inner workings of the regime are largely unknown to outsiders and even to many inside official circles.” (Selth 2010:429)

In contexts of political instability, secrecy, and shadow economies, rumor abounded, and a whole series of competing narratives emerged. Andrew Selth describes a “knowledge gap” in Burma studies, finding it often filled with rumor and gossip (2010). There are large gaps and hearsay circulating in the recollections and accounts of history, places, and people. Multiple story lines play out at once, many not fully cognizant of the others. There is no single dominant narrative, only accounts that bleed one into another, mutually contradicting or reinforcing. This obfuscation was especially true for the drug trade in the Golden Triangle (Milsom 2005:62), where understandings of licit and illicit, legal and illegal, intertwined rendering mutable local moral economies. Similarly, intrigue about the UWSA leadership, intentions, and military capabilities were peddled in and out of Wa Region.

Annemarie Samuels neatly characterizes the literature on rumor into two groups (2014:230): work that demonstrates the mobilizing effect of rumor, often in situations of violence (Das 2007; Spyer
2006), and work that examines rumor as a reflection of an underlying sociopolitical context (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1996; Masquelier 2000; Kirsch 2002). In her work on rumors of child trafficking in post-tsunami Aceh, Samuels seeks to examine the power of these rumors amidst uncertainty, arguing that they have force through the affectivity of the possible – in her case the possibility that one’s child might be alive (232).

Rumor in Wa Region, as I detail below and in later chapters, revolves around this latent potentiality – the absurd could be normal. Much might not be true, but is certainly plausible – people might have several unexpected mistresses, or a rich person was in the drug business (“how else would he afford that house?”), or the Burmese government would be untrustworthy. In the context of such absurdity, little was beyond credulity. In later chapters I describe the security situation and negotiations with the Myanmar government and other armed groups (chapter 3), UWSA personalities, “men of prowess” (Wolters 1999), and their internal politics (chapter 5), shadow economies and illicit accumulation (chapter 6), and here, conspiracy theories. These undoubtedly reveal local anxieties over (1) the uncertainty and vicissitudes of the political climate and conflict, (2) the preoccupation of inhabitants with the centrality of power and wealth to everyday life, including the dubious and morally contested foundations upon which they rest, and (3) the susceptibility of Wa Region to external fluctuations in the political situation and economic markets.

Two issues arise. First, how does an ethnographer make sense of rumor and gossip, giving insight as to their plausibility or even veracity, or depicting what it is that these rumors reveal? And second, how might ethnography convey objectively absurd occurrences, resisting sensationalizing these events, situating them instead within local people’s understandings of how remarkable or mundane an event really was?
Misinformation and Transgression

Misinformation about Wa Region is particularly rife, with even simple facts often wrong. Scholars (including myself) recycle from the same pool of statistics or information, given the short durations spent in Wa Region, or the unavailability of interviews with the adequate types of informants. Frequently reused are excerpts from the British administrator James G. Scott’s reports in the early 1900s, the British Frontier Areas Commission Report (1947), and data from Bertil Lintner’s book on the CPB from his travels in the 1980s (Lintner 1990; 1994; 2011).

Dates are also difficult to verify. Histories are often hard to pin down in part because of the constant movement of peoples, whose knowledge of places and events are ruptured by this mobility, a fragmentary recollection observed also by other scholars of SEA (e.g. Wadley 2004; Carsten 1995). People and place names are complicated by the variety of languages, dialects, and translations or transliterations. Often, the same name might refer to two or more places. Despite having travelled extensively across Wa region, I sometimes struggled to reliably locate certain place names I had read in accounts by James G. Scott or the missionary Harold Young describing mining areas (2014). The place-names in different languages, compounded by the different language mediums through which information was channeled (Burmese, Chinese, English), created much confusion in reports and legibility projects, not least the various Boundary Commissions attempting to demarcate the border (Yang 1997:32).

45 For example, the second largest town in the north, Mengmao, had a name that meant “new place” in Shan (mongmau), both a translation (xindifang) and transliteration (mengmao) in Chinese, transliteration in Burmese (minemaw), and in Wa, mengmai. It was even harder to locate more obscure place names.
Nyiri’s work on “spaces of exception” along the Thailand-Laos-China-Burma border areas (2012) is a case in point. Published in the prestigious *Comparative Studies of Society and History* journal, he cites a Chinese website 51nb.com to make claims about many of the Wa leadership being ethnically Chinese (2012:548). He claims ludicrously that Chairman Bao Youxiang is Chinese from Sichuan, based on a Chinese website which presumably seeks to claim Chinese origins of leadership and authority in the borders. He also erroneously lists the different administrative boundaries in Wa Region. This might not be a difficult mistake to make, given the paucity of factual information on the region, but it shows how information garnered from either side of the border (Nyiri being a China scholar and reading Chinese websites) comes with its particular sets of biases and errors. In this case, his work ends up perpetuating the narrative that the Wa and UWSA are more closely linked or loyal to China than they actually are, a key issue that irks the Myanmar military.

Reports which cite histories of leaders, historical timelines, explanations for events, and “root causes” should be read with caution, even as the quality of think-tank produced research is improving. Their very production in print or online lends them a veneer of factuality which is difficult to come by in the borderlands. Knowledge furnished is always partial, especially that solicited by outsiders. Claims about the wealth and assets of top Golden Triangle personalities are partially guesswork, given that any informant willing to provide such information to an outsider or journalist is himself or herself not likely to be someone located within the wider circles (let alone

46 I have often heard different claims about the ethnicity of key leaders in the Politburo, by journalists who insist that they are correct, despite my personal knowledge of the individual. Journalism and reportage in Myanmar often comes with a “big man” culture of its own, a one-upmanship contest for the most elusive “drug lord” interviewed or remote or least accessible place visited.
inner circles) of the subjects in question. I, for one, had never asked a minister to his face which hotels or businesses he owned.

It was also in accounts of violence that distinctions between absurdity and normalcy quickly broke down and rumor thrived. A military commander was said to have shot the ear off a driver who cut into his path on the winding roads. He was also supposed to have arrested unwitting villagers who laughed at him for relieving himself along the road. Such pettiness surely was unbecoming of a powerful leader, yet not beyond the arrogance and hubris of the powerful. It perpetuated the sense of the unfettered power of the leaders against the helplessness of ordinary folk. Nor was it easy to know for sure if such gossip was true.

And there were stories of feuds or revenge attacks on others. Various people and even leaders were said to have bizarrely feigned incapacity or exiled themselves, in order to escape being harmed by other leaders. Only when that leader finally passed on could they return to their activities and businesses. Others fled to the houses of high-ranking leaders to seek protection for weeks, even months. A young man, the nephew of a military commander, once worked in the casino in Pang Kham, and threatened a rude patron with a handgun. An exchange of gunfire broke out and he ran out to his uncle’s house to seek protection from the patron. These were more posturing than actual harm, since the death penalty was enforced for murder, making killings and gunfights extremely rare despite the circulation of weapons. The wife of a leader once had her soldiers cut off the ear of her husband’s mistress, having repeatedly warned her to stay away. Such spectacles of violence were said to have originated with the arrival of secret societies and triads in the 1990s, when the ceasefires

47 The death penalty for murder or armed robbery involved the spectacle of being paraded around town on the back of a pickup, before execution in the hills, allegedly buried in a grave the convict had him or herself dug the night before.
were signed and business in Wa Region was growing through the opium trade. These stories exacerbated both the narratives of primitiveness and lawlessness, yet overall inhabitants of Wa Region always spoke of its relative safety, due to the fact that crime was harshly punished.

**Security, Conspiracy, and Haunting**

“With Chinese assistance, the UWSA has also managed to build up an army that is both stronger and better equipped than the CPB ever was. Its arsenal includes Man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), a wide range of mortars and rocket launchers, and even light tanks and a few helicopters.

Recently, a helipad has been constructed at the UWSA’s Panghsang headquarters, with a sign outside saying, in Chinese, *feijichang*, or airport. Even more worrying, on Oct. 30 of last year, the local Myanmar intelligence office in the garrison town of Tang-yan sent a message to the regional command headquarters in Lashio saying that the UWSA was constructing a “radar and missile base” in its area.”

Bertil Lintner, “Who are the Wa?” The Irrawaddy, 2 June 2014

To complicate the secrecy of the margins, there were constantly rumors of new weapon acquisitions by the UWSA. Such rumors could never be proven, nor convincingly denied, since the vast and hilly terrain offered cover for all kinds of weaponry and military bases, and fertile ground for the fears and imagination of their foes. But what it did do was perpetuate a fear and loathing of the other, an enemy bent on opposition, wily and untrustworthy, proffering material for the construction of antagonistic rhetoric by some Burmese agitators. The bogeyman, illegible and unknown, lay in wait in shadows of the hills.

Jane’s reported in 2013 that the Wa had acquired new helicopters to add to their anti-aircraft missile capability (Saw Yan Naing 2013). Other rumors also alleged that the Wa had obtained rockets capable of striking Burmese controlled territory, and according to Jane’s, tank destroyers, and portable anti-aircraft missiles (Lintner 2015). Part of the problem, however, was that local sources
were having trouble with translations between Chinese, Shan, Burmese, and English. A friend told me of having read in a Burmese tabloid that the Wa had purchased new submarines, a ridiculous allegation for a landlocked armed group. He suggested that it must have been a mistranslation or misunderstanding of the Chinese term for amphibious vehicle, which uses a word for “submerged” (qian). The open and hangar-less helipad in Pang Kham, labelled an “airport” in Mandarin, was anything but, standing in full view of any bystander. We parked our cars there on many occasions. It was hence astonishing that the presence of this “airport” would lend any credence to the claims of the Wa owning helicopters.

The Wa leadership taunted these allegations by playing to the narratives of being poorly educated and backward where advantageous. When challenged about their supposed acquisition of anti-aircraft weapons, the Wa spokesperson was quick to mockingly deny it: “But, if we bought it, where do we use it and for what? It is very surprising to hear the report from foreign media, but I have nothing to say. We have heard about aircraft, which fly in the sky, but we have not considered how to use them and get them to fly” (Mya Kha and Lawi Weng 2014). Yet, in 2014 more allegations emerged that the Wa had sent pilots to China for “training” (Saw Yan Naing 2014).

So too it was, that representatives from embassies or international organizations frequently asked me about the drug economy, whether opium was still being grown, or if the methamphetamine industry was alive and well, despite the official UWSA pronouncements of drug eradication. Even

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48 Another possible source of the rumor of helicopters and submarines could be the open-air museum on the road to Mong Pawk, where the carcasses of a boat, propeller plane, and helicopter lie, for the viewing of the general public. *The Irrawaddy* reported this as a “‘Secret Garden’ that ‘Leaves Much to the Imagination’” (Lawi Weng 2015a).
when told that I had never seen any of the poppy fields, outsiders were never placated. They dismissed the claims of poppy eradication campaigns based on simple reasoning that, left to their own devices and without external supervision, the UWSA would never change its ways. Local informers would make quick dollars providing misinformation to narcotics officials who had no means of cross-checking it or understanding the feasibility of local geographies (Lintner 2011:304). It was impossible of course, to prove the absence of something – the odds were always stacked against the UWSA in dispelling their reputation as drug producers and traffickers. The double-edged sword of remoteness and secrecy – operating in the grey areas of verification also meant the inability to convince others of the legitimacy of their reform efforts.

Or take conspiracy theories. Inspired by a long-standing mistrust of foreign entities such as Burma, the US, and even China, the actions of any particular armed group were subject to a wide range of speculated motives. A single example suffices – the “10/5 Mekong River Massacre” of 2011, where 13 Chinese sailors were killed and their bodies dumped into the Mekong at the Thai-Myanmar border, and the barges recovered with large stashes of methamphetamines found on board. The case was ultimately resolved with the Chinese government’s execution of Nawd Kham, an infamous Shan drug dealer and former officer in Khun Sa’s Mong Tai Army (MTA, see chapter 2). But the area was

\[\text{\textsuperscript{49}}\text{Lintner too, writes of the ease with which local informants supplied misinformation about the drugs trade in exchange for dollars in the 1980s. Satellite imagery did not reflect the quality of poppy fields on the ground, and the actual production (2011:304, 348).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{50}}\text{As a fine example of this, one of Chin’s informants suggested to him in 2008 that opium was “prohibited only in the areas along the main roads; opium is still cultivated in places far away from roads and from the view of outsiders” (2009:242). That Chin chose to end his book with this quote suggests that such suspicions would always be taken more seriously than UWSA statements, and that he himself had serious doubts about the UWSA’s sincerity to fully enforce the ban. I for one, having travelled almost all main roads through 23 out of 24 townships from 2014-5, saw no poppies being grown. Of course, the eradication of opium growing did not mean that heroin or methamphetamines were no longer being produced, a distinction that often undermined the effectiveness of the opium ban in building legitimacy.}\]
proximal to South Wa, and various rumors placed the blame on a drug deal gone wrong with the UWSA.

Many locals and conspiracy theorists did not believe that Nawd Kham was the perpetrator. The motives behind the killing were attributed to a host of different groups, drug-running insurgents, local businessmen, the Thai government, and even suggestions of orchestration by the CIA. Writer Jeff Howe’s investigative piece reveals the discordant accounts that circulated close to Tachilek on the Thai-Myanmar border, where his interviews pointed towards a lack of motive for Nawd Kham, collusion from rogue Thai commando units, and the possible involvement of a rich Chinese casino mogul (Howe 2013). Some described Nawd Kham as a Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor; others claimed that he was not executed by the Chinese, but that someone else took his place, and that he now lives in hiding. A Wa official told me in earnest that the massacre was perpetrated by the Thais, at the behest of America’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), seeking to pin the blame on the UWSA units in South Wa and hence drive a wedge between Wa and China. This was said to be the CIA’s revenge for the UWSA’s killing of a few American advisors to the Thai military during the February 2001 Myanmar-Thailand border clashes, in which the UWSA assisted the Myanmar military\(^5\).

Was a CIA revenge plot farfetched? Yes. But impossible? No.

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\(^5\) The accounts of that event themselves were contested by both the Thai and Myanmar militaries: the Thais claiming that Burmese troops entered Thailand in pursuit of Shan rebels, while the Burmese claimed they had been shelled by Thai troops assisting the Shans. The UWSA’s involvement was not reported by the larger news agencies. See Aglionby, John. 2001. “War of Blame after Thai-Burmese border clashes.” The Guardian, 12 Feb 2001; BBC, “Fresh fighting on Thai-Burma border.” 21 Feb 2001.
Unraveling Imbrication: “This is Not Strange”

Making sense of the imbricated knowledges of the borderlands involved two threads: evaluating sources and contextualizing social action. The anthropological sensitivity to positionality (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991 etc.) was especially useful in this regard, both to the ethnographer and informant. It seemed to me that rumor in Wa Region was often not a quest for the truth (Kapferer 1990), nor a means of producing experience (Das 2007), but a means of metapragmatically accruing authority for individuals. Friends I discussed rumors with would disparage them, “that is nonsense”, or “the guy who told you this doesn't know anything”, proffering their version as authoritative, backed up by the credibility of their sources – “I know this from friend of mine who works in the military”. Their sources called attention to their knowledge and social capital, being “in the know” and privy to intrigue, or a chance to reveal (however vaguely) their associations with powerful or well-positioned people. It was a stage for one-upmanship, an opportunity to discredit another’s knowledge.

Intimacy worked both ways – an informant with whom trust and rapport was established might be more open, but would rarely admit a lack of knowledge or understanding to a query posed, unless deliberately concealing information. This led to their accounts building on conjecture and often less reliable than they appeared. On the other hand, superficial informants arranged through acquaintances would either be reticent or exaggerate in order to demonstrate their knowledge. I perpetually gauged information by asking: how would someone know this, and why would he tell me? Fieldwork under these conditions was also the embodiment of local sensibilities, becoming a moral person within the community. I learnt, against the anthropological habit of inquiry, not to ask certain questions about persons or politics or security, simply inappropriate within the social setting, or with the status that I had.
Second, contextualizing information and knowledge in Wa Region was crucial, de-romanticizing and making familiar local practices such as militarization, the drug economy, threats of violence, and poverty and instability. It was essential to uncover peoples’ stakes in happenings. Inhabitants’ views of accumulation and wealth, for instance, was colored by deep cynicism stemming from discourses of corrupt officials, governmental abuses of power and kleptocracy from Chinese and Burmese channels. It was unsurprising to locals that inequalities and certain luxury lifestyles found their way into the hills. Narratives of disorder or layers of mistrust and past histories between people and organizations underlay present-day interactions, whether peace negotiations, business deals, marriage alliances, or other conflicts, outcomes were predictable or unremarkable to local interlocutors. And in worlds of illicit trade and shifting moralities, the fears of scams and counterfeits placed inhabitants on a perpetual footing of wariness (see chapter 6).

Phrases I frequently heard in Wa Region from friends and companions included “this is not strange” (bu qiguai de) and “this is normal” (hen zhengchang), or “this is a small matter” (xiaoshi). These were often proffered in response to my expressions of surprise of bewilderment – such as when seeing young teenagers in military fatigues, stark inequalities between leaders and people, lavish expenditure on gifts, cars, and property, philandering men and their mistresses, stories of violence, or of the ignorance and arrogance of individuals, and observing peoples’ unwavering deference to leaders. These were extraordinary when one first arrives, but gradually lost their salience or shock-value as time wore on. An outsider slowly adopts and embodies a sensibility for hierarchy and position, and a numbness towards seemingly illicit practices of consumption and interaction (see chapter 5). This became increasingly noticeable as I became a broker myself – dismissing the strangeness of certain social phenomenon to foreign visitors who were constantly shocked by militarization of local society and remarked on the presence of young children in military fatigues.
Ultimately, conducting research in communities poorly understood by the outside required care and sensitivity for security and political information, to create representations which were not compromising to informants and communities, especially given their lack of full understanding of the circulation of these texts. There was always a temptation to be seen as an “expert” or to perpetually be “in the know” about the latest political intrigue, in thrall to reportage, one that required caution in studying “unstable places” (Greenhouse et al 2002), and a type of humility often at odds with the academic endeavor of enquiry and dissemination.
Chapter 2  Autonomy

“Until the end of Wa autonomy in the 1950s, in the central Wa country every man, and generally also every woman, was regarded as independent and autonomous in themselves, according to an ethos that strongly emphasized equality and that was bolstered by codes of honor and moral norms. Of course, these also regulated such institutions as marriage, which persons could only establish through patrilineages other than their own. Such collectivities did have certain prerogatives, and people would also unite to defend villages and, in larger conflicts, the genealogically connected networks known as jaig’ qee (‘realms’), or even, when necessary, Wa country in general. But personal and local autonomy was retained and exercised as far as possible...” (Fiskesjo 2010a:244)

“Beyond the basic demand of a Wa State, the UWSP has not developed a clear vision for the future of such a state, or how it should interact with the rest of the country. Nor has the organization developed a comprehensive strategy to achieve such a state. Furthermore, the UWSP is a very hierarchical organization, with a top-down leadership style and little room for participation in decisionmaking for local communities.” (Kramer 2007:3)

On the evening of April 16, 1989, mutineers from the Wa ranks, led by Zhao Nyi Lai and Bao Youxiang, took over the CPB headquarters in Pang Kham, expelling the Burman leaders across the border into China (Lintner 1994:296). The 12th Brigade of mainly Wa troops seized the armory, radio station, and headquarters, destroying portraits of Marx, Stalin, Lenin, and Mao as they went. The Burman leaders of the CPB swam across the river into China, where they were given asylum. The specter of Marxism expunged from the hills.

The mutineers declared on 28th of April in a radio broadcast:

“We, the people of Wa region, never kowtow before an aggressor army, be it local or foreign. Although we are very poor and backward in terms of culture and literature, we are very strong in our determination... It was a hard life for the people. The burden on the people became heavier with more taxes being levied. We faced great hardships. Can the people avoid staging an uprising under such a condition?” (quoted in Lintner 1990:46)

The grievances against the CPB leadership were many, and had been simmering for over a decade – military defeats and high casualties, an aloof Burman leadership, opium control and high taxes,
the weakening of their forces following withdrawal of Chinese support, a crumbling civil administration, their leadership’s failure to capitalize on the popular uprisings across Burma in 1988 and gain momentum against the military junta, and pressure from China to reconsider its strategies (Kramer 2007; Lintner 1990, 1994). Indeed, Wa troops made up two-thirds of the fighting forces of the CPB, with the remainder largely being other ethnic minorities; but almost the entire political leadership was Burman. An earlier radio broadcast by the mutineers had denounced the “narrow racial policies of the Communist Party of Burma” (Lintner 1994:296).

The Wa population had been ravaged by war casualties – based on CPB records from 1986, the population was 263,029 with 18,231 more women than men, a male-female ratio of 1:1.15 (See Lintner 1990:35-36). At the same time, the dwindling of the CPB army from 23,000 to 10,000 between 1976 and 1986 (Lintner 1990:37) had ended four decades of foreign domination first by the KMT strongholds in the 1950s to the 1970s, then with the establishment of CPB rule from 1973 to 1989. Autonomy, it seemed, had returned to Wa Region, but the political future was far from clear.

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In this chapter I describe the navigation of liminality in Wa Region since the 1950s, and the attempts to maintain autonomy amidst the gradual incorporation of Wa Region into the geopolitical ambits of the Burmese and Chinese states. Whereas studies in political science tend to reproduce narrow discourses of state weakness or failure, I argue that by avoiding enclosure within the registers of the state that focus on determinations of statehood or its lack, we might instead pay attention to the manner in which Wa political history has been actively shaped by autonomy as a value, putting aside the classificatory imperative to define Wa region as a particular form or type of state. By examining how this value manifests in political practice (as I later do in chapter 3), we can trace historical continuities in Wa political society. And we can then better understand the careful
negotiation of liminality by the UWSA following the demise of the CPB, without imposing categorization of “stateness” or “non-stateness” on Wa Region.

In this chapter ask, how has this value of autonomy shaped the political history of Wa Region since its loss in the 1950s? What are the forms and history of boundary making in Wa Region, and how have they been contested? What is the role of autonomy in the liminality of Wa Region, and the implications for the contemporary peace process? I first review the literature in political science that examines different forms of statehood, and show how these constrain our analyses within the registers of the state. I turn to Judith Scheele’s (and Fiskejo’s) use of autonomy as a value in order to think outside these registers, and elaborate on an different understandings of autonomy.

I trace the history of boundary making in Wa Region, the delimitation of the Sino-Burmese border, the consolidation and fall of the CPB, and the governance of Wa Special Region 2 by the UWSA including the territorial expansion to South Wa, showing how encroachments on autonomy have led to the beginnings of liminality in Wa Region. I examine how adaptation to the realities of the modern geopolitical context has seen the development of hierarchical social structures within the UWSA, and the loss of what Magnus Fiskesjo describes as a “fiercely egalitarian” ethos (2010a). Finally, I illustrate in part of the political subjectivity of the present day UWSA, and show how the intermittence of engagement with the Myanmar state has produced and maintained the liminal position of Wa Region, setting the stage for an analysis of political practice in chapter 3.

**The Straitjacket of the State: Non-state, Quasi-State, and Anti-State**

A host of analytical terms in political science (and anthropology) are deployed to qualify marginal or autonomous polities in relation to the “state”, generally with reference to what they lack, as if diagnosing a sort of political pathology. This list includes: “non-state” (See Clapham 2009), “quasi-

Carolyn Nordstrom, for instance, calls for a study of the shadows, using the term “extra-state” rather than “non-state” to “underscore the fact that while these networks are not comprised by state themselves, neither are they entirely distinct from, or opposite to, states – they work both through and around formal state representatives and institutions” (2000:36). For her, a series of social and political logics operate within these “shadows”, norms not as amorphous as they might seem. In this sense, Wa Region is surely a shadow network situated within a geopolitical, legal, and economic context that both allows for creativity and agency, yet simultaneously constrains social action through social hierarchies, cultural logics, and political interests. But Nordstrom’s notion of the extra-state, while going beyond the contrastive dichotomy of state/non-state, still remains tethered to the state as the “gold standard” of political organization.

The political science literature on non-state armed actors can be said to have emerged in the first instance to address new forms of warfare and governance that no longer involved regular standing armies but rather insurgent, mercenary, or guerrilla forces in small-scale skirmishes – the “new wars” of the 1990s (Kaldor 1999; Duffield 2001). The ostensibly ethnic lines upon which crises in Rwanda
and the Balkans unfolded meant that scholars embarked on a search for root causes, motivations, and modus operandi. This led to a whole slew of work on civil conflict through the greed and grievance debates of the late 1990s and early 2000s, where violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups was seen as either furthering ethnonationalist hatreds or other political agendas (grievance) or a means of capitalizing on uncertainty and chaos to loot, plunder, and accumulate (greed) (Berdal and Malone 2000; Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Keen 1998; Ross 2006). The paradigms often tended towards either dismissing grievance for greed, lamenting the loss of a “true revolutionary spirit” from earlier times, and highlighting the ruthless apolitical accumulation of avaricious warlords, or suggesting that it was a complex combination of all.

A second catalyst was the perceptions of weakening states in the age of globalization (Agnew 2018; Sassen 1996; Strange 1996; Krasner 1999; Jackson 1999). This work bandied about discourses of “failed” (Rotberg 2004; cf Kosmatoupoulos 2011) and “weak” states (Migdal 1988), and focused on the loss of sovereignty to a broad range of “non-state” actors, from transnational corporations to international NGOs, giving rise to new political configurations and “states-within-states” 52 (Kingston and Spears 2004). A more particular strand of this attempted to create typologies of non-state actors, differentiating armed groups and rebel armies and listing criteria for their classification (Krause and Milliken 2009; Lawrence and Chenoweth 2010).

In his widely read The Art of Not Being Governed, James Scott argues that prior to WWII, hill areas across Southeast Asia were “zones of refuge”, “shatter zones” inhabited by peoples fleeing from the conscription, taxation, and governance of lowland states (2009). These peoples made deliberate

52 For Spears, states-within-states are contrasted with quasi-states since the former exhibit a series of attributes such as administration, force, territory, revenue generation, political objectives, while the latter have attained international legal recognition (2004).
political choices through their mobility, lack of written history, “pliable ethnic identities”, cropping practices, and social structures, to resist incorporation by states, or the emergence of states amongst them. Scott writes against ecological and cultural determinism of social structures and forms (2009:xi), against notions of consent to being dominated by the Hobbesian social contract (2009:7), and finds instead that social phenomena in highland zomian societies were political choices, stemming from political resistance and cultural refusal, and an evasion of state-making projects in the plains (2009:22).

The significance of his self-declared “provocation” cannot be understated, inspired by to a large degree by work on ethnic minorities in Burma during the colonial era. It falls perfectly in line with his earlier work on state optics and resistance amongst peasants and “the weak”. Yet in his admirable attempt to craft grand theory, generalizing across regions and contexts, Scott necessarily couches his perspective in the state-society framework – of people evading or resisting the state, of the state relentlessly projecting its power across time and space. He highlights nonstate spaces, “locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority” (2009:13), as places where innovation and strategizing occurs.

Registers of the state then, produce two potential effects in analyzing Wa Region’s relationship to the Myanmar state53. First, it frames the “non-state” as an antithetical threat to the state, resisting,

53 Kosmatopoulos, too, looks at discursive effects of political analyses, in his case a discourse of “state failure” amongst peace expertise in Lebanon, produced by discursive practices in the scholarly and policy realms, which in turn produces an atmosphere of constant crisis, threat and risk, and particular ways of apportioning moral responsibility or reinforcing power relations (2011:133-4). He describes isolation, pathologization, sectarianism, and alienation as four types of discursive practices amongst policy and peace “experts”, practices that lead to the predominance of rhetorics of the “failed” and “weak” state in Lebanon (2011).
yet gradually contained and consolidated by, the Myanmar government and military, with a zero-sum antagonism between the two. Patrick Meehan does well to challenge this assumption of zero-sum competition (2015). He contests political science theoretical frameworks that see flourishing drug economies as signs of a weak state, suggesting that Myanmar’s military has utilized the drug economy as a means of “state consolidation” – strengthening its hold over peripheral parts of the country, including Shan State. He builds on Nordstrom’s work, arguing that goods and actors can navigate through state and extra-state networks simultaneously (2015:256-7).

Yet in arguing that the “normative tendency in the liberal peace-building paradigm to view these shaky Weberian foundations as indicative of state dysfunction and fragility has obstructed understanding of the diversity of (often deeply illiberal) processes through which states seek to consolidate their power” (2015:260), Meehan keeps his analysis around conceptions of state-building, state formation, and state consolidation from the perspective of the Myanmar state. He utilizes Callahan’s “spectrum of emerging political complexes” (2007), placing the different EAGs and their territories on a scale from “least state control” to “most state control” (see Meehan 2011:390). The UWSA is ranked under “least”, and such diagrammatic characterizations, while having their own obvious utility, situate EAGs within this linear paradigm, precluding the possibilities of framing Wa Region as a polity of its own type.

Second, state registers frame Wa Region as a “non-state actor”, exhibiting a pathological lack of “stateness” – political legitimacy, authority, or other often Weberian criteria – seen as a fundamentally anomalous condition. The few observers of Wa Region have struggled to label the political entity, variously described as a non-state actor, an autonomous region, a mini-state, insurgent group, and narco-army. They evaluate the UWSA’s governing capacity or the nature of
its state functions (Kramer 2007; Renard 2013a), holding it to external criteria less relevant to the facts of everyday political and social life in the China-Burma borderlands (see chapter 4).

It should now be clear that by the “straitjacket of the state” I mean two things: that analysis is focused on the basic Weberian state form, and that all deviance is seen as aberrations, pathologies, or lack from the standard unit of measure. It offers no room for accommodating other types of polities. Second, that analyses that represent mainly the views from the center, with a bias towards concern with the integrity of the nation-state. But if agency is important as Scott remarks, it must not be framed solely as resistance or escape from states, but analyzed as a particular agentive project-making in its own right54, through the values the Wa have historically exhibited – primarily a value of autonomy.

I argue that a discourse which frames polities like Wa Region through the state/non-state registers is often inhibiting, constraining our imagination and analysis, presupposing the type of the political entity being studied. Yet despite a wealth of critiques of the universalizing Weberian state, most famously Clastres’ criticisms of the coercive state model (1989), it remains difficult to avoid the registers of the state entirely. I suggest then, that thinking through autonomy as a value and not as an anomalous political status outside of the state, offers an alternative lens to studying Wa Region. I now turn to the history of realms and chiefs in Wa Region, and the manner in which autonomy was expressed and maintained up till the 1950s, elaborating my understanding of autonomy.

54 This parallels Abu Lughod’s (1990), Saba Mahmood’s (2005), and Sherry Ortner’s (1995) critiques of the notion of resistance, that where agency is reduced to disruption of power, it becomes limited to a narrower realm of politics and misses out on readings as other forms of project-making.
The Historical Landscape of Autonomous Realms (pre-1950s)

“I am mainly referring to the central Wa area (autonomous until the mid-twentieth century), which was no secondary-state formation but rather the opposite of state formation. It was quite unlike the Wa areas subjugated and dominated by others (such as the Shan and Chinese) as in the classic ‘peripheral situation’. It also contrasted with the incipient Shan-styled Wa ‘kingship’ twice arising on the outskirts of Wa country in the era before modern nation-states, in the mine-rich Wa areas of Banhong (the so-called ‘Hulu kings’) and Mangleng.” (Fiskesjo 2010a:245)

In historical Wa society, autonomy was both a value and political reality up to the 1950s, with a strong ethos of egalitarianism, aversion to hierarchy and a refusal to allow single kings or chiefs to rule over Wa Country. The social landscape of autonomy in the Wa hills was described by Fiskesjo as one of a “near-permanent state of war” (2000:207). Without a Shan-style overlord or king, the landscape was dotted with “village stockades” and “farmer fortresses”, defensive fortifications built in the absence of state sovereignty. Bertil Lintner, visiting during the CPB period in 1986, observed that “a tradition of resistance to outside authority was well ingrained even before the arrival of the communists” (2011:340).

In the early 1900s, the colonial administrator James G. Scott noted two powerful chieftains in Wa areas: “they are said to rule over a large number of villages, but the tie seems to be rather that of a federation than of a Government” (Scott and Hardiman 1900:508). Regarding one such chief, Scott observed that he had not the type of hierarchical authority of the Shan chiefs over their people:

“I am inclined to doubt Sung Ramang’s absolute authority over his thirty villages. That he is recognized as the most powerful chief in the neighborhood is certain, but it is as a chief of a confederation rather than as the sole lord... The Was really form a series of village communities, independent of one another, but with agreement for the respect of heads, and for collation against a common enemy”

James G. Scott (1893:14-6), cited in Fiskesjo (2000: 21-2)
It was this chief of Sung Ramang that Fiskesjo asserts the British never found to co-opt as a proxy ruler. The Wa realm (*jaig’ qee*), or circle, which comprised an ancestor village and host of descendant villages, did indeed appear to have a symbolic chief, the *o lang*, albeit a chieftainship that was devolving from powerful to one “less influential yet still highly revered in his basic capacity of chief” (Fiskesjo 2000:233). However, “his authority rested on being recognized by his fellow villagers and members of the same circle” (Fiskesjo 2000:238). For Fiskesjo, this was another manifestation of the peripheral situation of Wa country, realms constantly open to the possibility of fighting one another. This was a constant process of maintaining such autonomy: “the continued autonomy of these de-facto autonomous villages in the central Wa country was grounded in their foundational structure, which was transformed by outside forces, but maintained, revived, and reasserted by those that inhabited it” (Fiskesjo 2000:242).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-1950s</th>
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<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Hierarchical and authoritarian</td>
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<td>Prevention of self-aggrandizement</td>
<td>Accumulation and wealth inequalities</td>
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<td>“Opposite of state-formation”</td>
<td>Emergence of administrative Structures</td>
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<td>Autonomy</td>
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In a tremendously rich article, Fiskesjo evaluates two models for explaining the non-hierarchical form of Wa autonomy (2010a): first, Scott’s model of agency amongst peoples who adopted “pretend-chiefs” with no real authority (Scott 2009:113) to avoid being incorporated by the state-making projects of lowland states through proxy rule. Though agreeing Scott’s appreciation of Wa political agency, Fiskesjo politely declines this model, finding resistance and escape ill-fitting for Wa society, since its predatory nature – extracting tribute, war, headhunting – hardly resonated with the actions of a zone of refuge (2010a:263). Not evasion, but active engagement. Fiskesjo hints at this too in the epilogue to his dissertation, where he speaks to the inadequacy of framing Wa history as resistance to civilizational projects of the centers (2000:408). For him, the Wa realms
were a “predatory periphery”, preying on the surrounding states and peoples according to its own desires (2000:13).

Fiskesjo looks second at Jonathan Friedman’s theory of political devolution amongst the Wa (and Naga), part of Friedman’s larger work on state formation (1998). Devolution was triggered by population increase without territorial expansion, leading to increased population density, and a concomitant environmental degradation that limited productivity and surplus (Friedman 1998:272; Fiskesjo 2010a:261). Without the possibility of reliable accumulation, hierarchical institutions could not be maintained, and attempts at chieftainship collapsed quickly. Fiskesjo finds Friedman’s work powerful because it offers reasons for particular historical trajectories (2010a:262), but suggests that Friedman neglects the agency and wealth of the Wa, portraying them instead as vulnerable to their ecological conditions.

Rather, Fiskesjo argues persuasively for historical agency, using the examples of failed attempts at “kingship” or chieftainship in the Wa areas of Banhong and Manglun, and showing how the Wa deliberately undermined hierarchizing tendencies:

“The Wa placed curbs on internal competitive trends, calibrating the rotation of duties in ritual community feasting, thus restricting the aggrandizement of individuals, who might otherwise, if permitted to rise in political stature, become vulnerable targets of co-option by threatening external powers.” (2010a:262)

Wa autonomy, then, was prior to the 1950s inextricably tied into the egalitarian tendencies of their political structure. This autonomy was not simply a form of resistance or refuge, but was expressed

55 Fiskesjo finds Friedman’s theorizing more useful than Leach, who does not provide reasons to explain why the gumsa/gumlao “oscillations” might occur in Political Systems of Highland Burma (1954; Fiskesjo 2010a:262).
through their agency – both the regulation of internal hierarchies and acts of predation and tribute extraction from the surrounding polities. But beyond an agency, it was also a value that guided historical action and shaped contemporary political subjectivities.

*Figure 10: Rainy season over Wa village, Man Xiang township, July 2015*

**Autonomy as Value**

“People in the egalitarian Wa area continued to seize on subterranean riches to enrich themselves and to defend their autonomy, while consciously seeking to solidify existing non-hierarchical social structures and prevent the emergence of new hierarchies or the building of a Wa state” (Fiskesjo 2010a:259)
Autonomy carries with it much theoretical baggage from philosophy and the social sciences, and I have thus far used it in the context of both Fiskesjö’s sense of Wa society prior to the 1950s – unmolested by foreign invaders and from being subjected to the indirect rule of neighboring empires and polities – and also in the sense of the political autonomy it enjoys from the Myanmar state in self-governance and administration. One might discern several levels at which autonomy might operate, or be defined in opposition to.

Within the political domain we might tend to deploy autonomy as (1) a specific political status, to indicate a state of self-governance or self-determination, or a freedom from interference by higher forms of political authority. As a political status, autonomy could be the right to self-determination as a polity, leading to secession or independence. Alternatively, it could mean a devolution of powers within a federal union, the creation of a state like that of Shan State, or Special Administrative Region like Hong Kong. Autonomy in governance was denoted by specific legal and political designations in the Myanmar political system (“Special Region No. 2” or dier tequ), or as in China across the border, with the “Wa Self-Governing Counties” (wazu zizhixian) of Ximeng and Cangyuan.

Or we might think of autonomy as (2) a capacity to exercise sovereignty, the ability to self-govern and protect one’s territory from incursion, to ensure the political survival of the collective, and undertake political decisions and practices with freedom. A third and closely related sense could

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56 I have not the philosophical background nor room here to engage adequately with the philosophical debates on individual autonomy, save to delineate four types of approaches that Natalie Stoljar has laid out: 1) procedural theories of autonomy which require individual independence within the physical and social context; 2) Neo-Kantian theories that require capacity to identify moral norms; 3) internal psychological approaches that require certain attitudes to oneself such as self-worth; and 4) approaches requiring individuals to have morally adequate structural conditions (Stoljar 2015).
be: (3) an empirical fact as Fiskesjo does historically, simply to note that the polity has not been invaded or coerced into submission, and remains unconquered and insubordinate to foreign entities. This could also be a structural freedom of self-reliance against external forces, such as an economic self-sufficiency, but in many ways it relies also on structural conditions around it. The distinction between (2) and (3) are in my mind, internal and external – Wa region might have the capacity to mine tin in copious amounts, but lack access to external markets in which to sell it.

Judith Scheele’s innovative approach to studying anarchy, however, offers us a fourth possibility of thinking about autonomy as (4) a value that orients political practice in Wa Region. Scheele’s study of the Tubu in Northern Chad (2014) notes how conceptions of their supposed “anarchy” or “anarchic” state in the scholarly literature is of limited value, often hinging upon a negative notion of statelessness, a lack of political institutions, and extreme individualism (2014:33). Instead, she attempts to study this purported anarchy from an “internal point of view”, through a focus on disorder and autonomy as values in Tubu society, tracing these through widespread practices and tropes such as theft, child misbehavior, and the valorization of local figures such as rebel leaders and smugglers. Using Graeber’s theory of value (2001, 2005), she examines how meaning and practice in Tubu society shed light on the concepts of disorder and autonomy as central to their social and political relations, as values negotiated and enacted through everyday practice. Autonomy as a true value in Tubu society is expressed through ideals around marriage57, dispersed houses without need for protective collectives, avoiding obligations to others, and a desire to distribute gifts anonymously without reciprocity. Autonomy then, prized as the absence of

57 For instance, while norms and bride-wealth practices are known to all, the ideal and “best” forms of marriage are a “marriage-by-capture” which destroys reciprocal gifting between families of the bride and groom; and bride-prices accrued individually without relying on relatives (2014:41-2)
reciprocity, and disorder through transgression and instability, textures the sense and experience of “anarchy” better than a recognition of missing political institutions can.

Rather than examining the manner in which Wa state falls short of “statehood” as some political science approaches might, or evaluating how Wa Region possesses “autonomy” as an attribute or property, we could instead study the political practice of Wa Region and the UWSA through autonomy as a value of freedom and liberty, a desire for self-reliance, and even disengagement, towards which such practice is oriented. This is different from the senses I have outlined above, though with some overlap with the third meaning.

We might then locate ethnographically manifestations of this value at personal, social, and historical levels, as Fiskejo has indicated. Tracing the historical trajectory of the formation of Wa Region reveals how autonomy as a value has shaped events, as external powers and their agents transgressed the social boundaries of Wa society. And examining what elites and people say or do about political authority in the contemporary UWSA can give us a sense of how this value is expressed today. Much political conversation in Wa Region reiterates their fiercely guarded autonomy, a refusal to have terms dictated to them by the Myanmar government, and the freedom to decide their political future.

In the next sections I trace autonomy through histories of boundary formation and inclusion into the centers of established states, intrusion by foreign armies, mutiny and the formation of the UWSA, ceasefires, economic arrangements, and contemporary views on politics and the Burmese nation-state. In Chapters 5 and 6, I also describe implicitly how autonomy is enacted through contemporary political culture and economic practices in Wa Region.
Incorporation into the State?

Once, driving on small dirt roads in a remote corner of the Wa hills, I was surprised to see a small town on a distant hill, clusters of concrete buildings dominated by a gleaming white pagoda, a town seemingly too large and developed for this region of the hills. My friends and I thought long and hard about what this town could be, for it was clearly not part of Wa Region. We soon realized that it was Banlao, a town on the Chinese side of the border, part of a Wa autonomous county. One of my companions, whose village was nearby, recalled how a Wa official had lamented, glancing across the hills into China, that the Wa hills were divided without their consent, the Burmese government “giving” large parts of Wa-inhabited areas over to China. The ethnic Wa population Yunnan province is estimated at around 400,000 (Fiskesjo 2013:2), inhabiting the same mountainous area on the Chinese side of the border, with established political and kinship ties throughout. Decades later, now with their own leadership and political structure, it seemed incomprehensible to Wa leaders how a border was then drawn through their homelands without consultation, consent, or even any real understanding of its implications.

Forming Wa Political Boundaries

The shaping of the boundaries of Wa Region had its roots in the British colonial parceling out of Burmese territory from the turn of the 20th century. The chieftainships in Wa hills, which the British referred to as the “Wa States” (Harvey 1932), were divided in two ways – separated from the rest of lower Burma by internal colonial administrative boundaries, and from China through a series of border agreements. The process was long and staggered, punctuated by wars and political events. To the north, the road from Kunlone to China, along today’s Nam Tit river, formed the northern
boundary. To the west, the Salween river divided Wa and Shan areas, but in the South, the Wa State of Manglun bridged the Salween. The eastern boundary with China was the most problematic, since it ran in between the Wa hills. This was an imbrication of sovereignty, the geographical imprecision of a non-linear understanding of territory.

The separation of self-governing ethnic enclaves has an established history in Myanmar, with the British creating the Bamar-majority “Ministerial Burma” in the central lowlands, and the mainly ethnic minority-dominated “Frontier Areas” at the peripheries. As Callahan writes of this clear divide: “no other Asian colony suffered such a radical bifurcation in its population’s fate” (2009:34). In 1891, six years after the annexation of Upper Burma by the British, the Wa hills became part of the “Frontier Areas” claimed by the British, but with neither concrete administrative authority or taxation imposed, nor distinct boundaries established. The subsequent creation of the Federation of Shan States in 1922 for the indirect rule of Shan areas also left most of the Wa hills out of these administrative arrangements (See Report of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, FACE 1947).

In 1937, the Government of Burma Act created governance structures for the inclusion of the ethnic states into “Ministerial Burma”, allowing them to elect members into a new national parliament in Rangoon. The Second World War put a hold on such political developments, but a general trend

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58 The Appendix to the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry 1947 describes this as a motor road in 1941, serving the Northern Wa States, with a dirt road extending 7 miles into the States (FACE 1947 Part II, Appendix III, p 190), probably towards Panglong. This seems to be the extent of British infrastructural reach into the Wa States, though trade networks of mule tracks undoubtedly existed.

59 See Charney (2009); Smith (1999); Thant Myint-U (2001); Taylor (2009) for an account of British-Bamar relations in the colonial period from 1885 to the 1930s.

60 Included under the Federated Shan States here was the Wa State of Manglun, which is in present-day Pangyang in Wa Region. The unfederated Wa States were only brought “under administration” in 1935 (FACE 1947).
was evident – Bamar-led factions allied with the Japanese, and ethnic minorities in the Frontier Areas loyal to the British.

![Map of Wa States](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wa_States_IGI.jpg)

**Figure 11:** Wa States of the Early 20th Century, from the Imperial Gazetteer of India 1909, accessed at Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wa_States_-_IGI.jpg).

Simultaneously, the Sino-Burmese international boundary was being negotiated. The first boundary convention between the British and Chinese was signed in 1894 and later revised, but by 1904 there was still failure to reach agreement over the discrepancy between the Chinese “Liuchen line” and the British “Scott line”, the provisional 200-mile border around Wa State from present-day Nam Tit to Pang Kham64 (E.G. 1957; Burma Office Political Department 1937). Attempts to set

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61 The Chinese government’s proposal of the “Liuchen line”, west of the Scott Line, was regarded by the British as an inconvenient administrative frontier, and both sides considered the status quo in 1936 to be a poor outcome – one that divided the Wa, and denied Chinese access to the Salween, even as the British sought a buffer zone East of the Salween in the event of conflict with China (Burma Office
up boundary posts along the border started in 1898, but were abandoned for the stretch through Wa country (from present-day Nam Tit to near Kunma) when a British-Chinese joint expedition was attacked by local Wa (Young 2014:49-51). Attempts to demarcate were only resurrected in 1929, and the British did not enter the Wa hills between 1900 and 1934. In 1933, the British protested Chinese incursions across the Scott line, and sent their own survey party in 1934 (Christian Science Monitor 1937). A band of men, led by V. C. Pitchford, astoundingly mapped the border from 1935 to 1937 (Sunday Express 1937; Sino-British Joint Commission 1937) – a series of British correspondences and records over the commission and dissents are retained in the British library.

In a Burma Office Political Department minute paper from the “Burma-Yunnan Frontier Report of the Boundary Commission of Burma’s recommendations” (1937), British officials betrayed their misunderstanding of autonomy and sovereignty in the Wa hills (see Fiskesjö 2010b):

“The Wild Was should be retained, together with convenient routes into their country. Experience on the North-West Frontier indicates that it is best to have unpleasant people of this sort under one’s own sovereignty, rather than that they should be in a position to raid into our territory from a base in China. It is understood that there should not be much difficulty in bringing them under control and stopping their headhunting practices.” (1937:3)

The Iselin Commission arbitrated and produced a boundary in 1937, and a further set of notes in 1941 that confirmed its acceptance by both sides (though not ratification, see E.G. 1957:87). The Iselin line ran past today’s Nam Tit, Ban Wai, Kunma, and Longtan township, past Banlao on the Chinese side, the town with the gleaming white pagoda that once baffled me and my companions. The aforementioned Wa leader’s ire had been misdirected – it was the British, and not the Burmese, who had rent the Wa lands in two. The advent of the war saw little progress made on the status of

Political Department 1937; see other records and correspondences within bundle M/3/175 at the British library).
the international boundary, and attention turned to the pressing issues surrounding Burmese independence, which ultimately arrived in 1948. These post-war negotiations naturally saw worried ethnic leaders seeking assurances that their areas would not be simply subsumed into the Burmese nation-state without safeguards and space for negotiating political autonomy (Silverstein 1980). This resulted in the signing of the 1947 Panglong Agreement between Aung San, leader of the Burmans, and leaders of the Kachins, Chins, and Shans, guaranteeing them “full autonomy in internal administration” (See Walton 2008). It was an agreement by these minority leaders to work towards, but not commit to, a union with the soon-to-be-formed Burmese nation-state. But there were different arrangements and terms for each group, each negotiated bilaterally. The Panglong Agreement also did not involve smaller ethnic groups such as the Naga, Palaung, and Wa.

Following the Panglong Agreement, the British 1947 Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry consulted a series of ethnic minority leaders about their futures in the new Burmese state. Four Wa

62 Wa Region was largely untouched by the Japanese in World War II. The only places where I heard of Japanese activity were in Mengmao, Man Tun and Na Wi, mostly in the Northwest of Wa Region closer to the Salween. A Wa official claimed he had found the diary of a Japanese soldier in Na Wi, complaining of three scourges: the enemy, malaria, and steep hills. This official also claimed to have met the Wa widow of a Japanese soldier in Man Tun in 1971. Another official told of a Shan who brought the Japanese to Yong Noone village near Mengmao where they killed 21 Wa. The Japanese were called hawx rhawm (Chinese Water) in Wa, and had vastly superior weapons at the time. This official claimed he had been given an old rusty Japanese pistol and rifle that villagers found in a cave near Na Wi.

63 A concern shared by the British Director of the Frontier Areas, H. Stevenson. Many Burmese leaders in the AFPFL were suspicious of the British, seeing them as partial towards the ethnic minorities who remained loyal to them in WWII (Walton 2008:895). See Silverstein 1980 chapters 4 and 5 for details on the quest for unity between Bamars and the ethnic minorities post-WWII and in the lead up to independence.

64 For instance, the Shan and Chin agreements offered a clause for self-determination, whereas the Kachin agreement did not (Joliffe 2015). The Karens observed, but refused to participate, seeking instead an independent state.
representatives were interviewed, yielding the most-cited example of supposed Wa isolationism.\(^{65}\)

Asked about the future of the Wa in the newly formed Burmese state, Hkun Sai replied:

> “we do not want to join with anybody because in the past we have been very independent... we are very wild people and we do not appreciate these things [education, clothing, and hospitals]... we live entirely by ourselves” (FACE 1947 Part II, Appendix I, p 35).\(^{66}\)

This exchange, circulated and reproduced in several accounts of Wa Region (e.g. Kramer 2007:9; Lintner and Black 2009; Lintner 2014), has lent itself to the construction of a narrative that sees the Wa as politically naïve, disengaged, and disinterested (See also Fiskesjo 2010a). Other statements included: “Was are Was and Shans are Shans. We would not like to go into the Federated Shan States” (Saw Naw Hseng, cited in FACE Part II Appendix I, p36), and “we have not thought about that [political future] because we are wild people. We never thought of the administrative future. We only think about ourselves” (Sao Maha, cited in FACE Part II Appendix I, p36). FACE concluded:

> “We found it impracticable to procure witnesses from the Naga Hills and the Wa States, but we have no hesitation in recommending that representatives need not be sought from these areas for the Constituent Assembly on account of the primitive nature of their civilisation and the impossibility of their finding persons who will be able to assist in the drawing up of Burma’s future constitution.” (FACE 1947, Chapter III, Part II)

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\(^{65}\) These four were Naw Hkam U, Chief Minister from Manglun State (present-day Pangyang), who was himself a Shan; Sao Naw Hseng from Hsawnglong State, part of Vingngun (present-day Yin Phan) of the unfederated Wa States; Hkun Sai of Mongkong and Sao Maha of Mongmon in the North. These 4 areas are all in today’s Wa Region.

\(^{66}\) Fiskesjo notes that it was likely the attendees had little conception of the objectives of the meeting, and that the Shan or British translators’ inputs could have also added to a mischaracterization of the Wa position (2013:6). Saw Naw Hseng states: “I do not know much about politics. I cannot even speak good Shan. I was sent by the Chief of Ving Ngun to come here.” (FACE Part II Appendix p36) – resonating with the reluctance of Wa representation at negotiations with the Burmese authorities today. Hkun Sai, when asked about the objectives of the Committee, replied: “I do not know anything.” (ibid, p37). Sao Maha replied: “One Assistant Resident sent me. I do not know his name. I come from Mongmon.” (ibid, p38)
The central consequence of the pre-independence negotiations was that the sheer disparate range of political arrangements between Ministerial Burma and the different ethnic regions of the Frontier Areas had set a precedent for separately negotiated and unequal relationships between the different ethnic regions and the Burmese center (see Joliffe 2015). Uprisings broke out all over the country shortly after independence in 1948, as ethnic groups from the Arakans to the Karens to the Mons made demands for autonomous territories and specific political arrangements with the Burmese state. The FACE recommendations suggested that “the Shan States government rather than the federal authorities would be in the best position to supervise the administration of the Wa States” (FACE 1947: Part III 8(7)), hinting at the disconnect between the lowland Burma and conditions in the Wa hills.

**Aggressors in the Hills – 1950s to 1989**

It was in the 1950s that the Wa hills began to lose its autonomy from the surrounding states, after a period of near complete neglect by the British, and the distractions of WWII. Armed groups of the KMT began entering the Wa hills with the CCP in pursuit (see Chapter 1), establishing a KMT base in Pang Yang of around 4,000 troops (Sai Aung Tun 2009:308). The central Wa hills were comparatively spared as the KMT routes ran closer to the Salween and Nam Hka rivers on either side of them. Nonetheless, villages were ransacked for grain and livestock, locals enlisted as porters or soldiers, and livelihoods disrupted. By 1953 however, the large bulk of KMT forces had withdrawn, leaving scattered strongholds and bases in the Wa hills gathering intelligence and trafficking opium.

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67 Kim Joliffe’s Asia Foundation report (2015) offers a concise account of the history of different ethnic groups’ negotiations with the Burmese government in the build up to and after independence, ultimately resulting in the 2008 Constitution that created seven ethnic states and seven Bamar-majority divisions, as well as several “Special Autonomous Areas”.

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In 1957, serious incursions by Chinese forces into the Wa hills on the Burmese side of the border, ostensibly in pursuit of KMT forces, led to rising tensions with the Burmese government. It appeared to observers that the invasion of the Wa states by Chinese forces was part of a ploy to gain bargaining capital to exchange for territory in Kachin areas (E.G. 1957:90). In 1958, a crackdown by Chinese Communist authorities and their work teams on Wa social life on the Chinese side of the border commenced – weapons confiscated, arrests made, drum-houses and skull avenues destroyed, ritual sacrifices of cattle and water buffalo banned (Fiskesjo 2000:371).

Life in the Wa hills on the Burmese side was worse. Lintner’s noted how the CPB had not always been willingly received; rather, in many areas of the hills they pummeled the “Wild Wa” into submission with bazookas and automatic weapons (2011:345). The provision of modern weapons to fend off other intruders made them marginally more popular, even if Communist ideology did not find a hold amongst the Wa and other ethnic minorities. Yet under the CPB the Wa hills were relatively safe from Burmese attacks, although in 1979 the tatmadaw launched Operation Min Yan Aung I to attack Pang Kham, capturing the mountainous area of Maw Hpa in Matman township, and creating today’s Southwestern boundary of Wa Region (Lintner 1990:90). What the CPB period ultimately did was seed the beginnings of a consciousness of unity amongst disparate warring Wa realms.
Food insecurity was rife, and even Pang Kham, mainly a town of rice fields and dirt tracks, nestled into a basin and set apart from China by the Nam Kha river, had little beyond wooden houses with thatched roofs, a market for the contraband trade, and the CPB Headquarters. Chang Wen-Chin places Pang Kham on the map for as a stop for trading routes from Thailand to China through the
1970s, through the Kokang region and Kengtung\(^\text{68}\) (2009:559). Lintner visited in 1986, finding some restaurants, a video hall, a field hospital with operating theatre, and a small hydroelectric station nearby, supplied by the Chinese (1990:91). Most of today’s UWSA leaders only began to settle their houses here in the early 1990s, and development would only take hold in earnest around 1996 (Chin 2009:29). Dirt roads and mule tracks were being widened through the region, from Pang Kham to Mengmao, but beyond villagers and the mule convoys, there was little commercial trade. Villagers found it hard to avoid the opium trade, since it appeared the only possible cash crop in the hills. The CPB collected a 20% tax-in-kind on opium grown locally, which it then sold on to opium traders, and also imposed 10% taxes on locally traded opium in the market (Lintner 1990:40). It earned some revenue by taxing trade to and from China at the Panghsai crossing in Northern Shan State, but in 1980, the opening of other crossing points by China saw this revenue decrease. Tales of suffering and hunger during the 1970s and 1980s were recounted by older officials, including plagues of large rats that destroyed crops and attacked people\(^\text{69}\) – “strangely, they only bit the ones sleeping in the middle”, I was told. This historical consciousness of hardship, death, and oppression during the CPB era would shape the future of the UWSA.

So too would the memory of constant military campaigns. The 1980s saw the CPB and its predominantly Wa foot soldiers making annual dry season raids into the Western areas of Shan State and up to Taunggyi, returning by April before the rains began. The raids never amounted to serious territorial gains, and by the mid-1980s morale amongst soldiers was low. Key military

\(^{68}\) Other maps drawn by Yawnghwe (2010) and Sai Aung Tun (2009:306) show KMT troop and smuggling routes passing through and around Pang Kham. By this time, the border was fully demarcated.

\(^{69}\) Lintner corroborates a large rat invasion in 1976, which wiped out any CPB attempts at opium-substitution (1990:40).
commanders were remembered for their valor in battle, many later holding UWSA leadership positions due to their reputation as veteran soldiers or having played key roles in battle or the overthrow of the CPB. Leaders and officials came with personal reputations and histories, some commanding great respect over the military up till the present day; conversely, the lack of military experience was an impediment to the political careers of leaders – determinants of authority I discuss later in Chapter 5. Many farmers and civilians of the present day had spent years in the military, fighting all over the Shan hills.

Boundaries, as Paasi argues (1998) are a process through which governments, states, agents, and ordinary people territorialize the borderlands, creating meaningful boundaries of their own through symbolic and material means. The term “rebels”, then, makes little sense for the Wa, who have never been under the control or direct governance of any outside power – not the British, the Chinese, Shans, or the Burmese. Insurgents perhaps, but not rebels. The new nation-states of 1948 and 1949, the inclusion of the Wa Hills under Shan State and Burma, and the drawing of the border with China in 1960, were all an external imposition of the registers of the state onto a group that had no intention to participate, but had to make meaning and act within the structural and historical constraints they faced.
Re-establishing Autonomy

Creating the UWSA and Wa Special Region 2

In May 1989, following the April 17 mutiny, Wa leaders Bao Youxiang and Zhao Nyi Lai created the Burma National United Party/Army (BNUP/A), merging the armies of the ex-CPB Wa districts, along with Pang Kham. Zhao Nyi Lai became the general secretary and Bao Youxiang the Commander-in-Chief of the BNUA – they then agreed to a ceasefire (unwritten nonetheless) with the military junta’s party, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), freshly rebranded in 1988 after the disastrous “8888” popular uprising. The ceasefire, signed on 18 May 1989, was brokered by Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, then chief of the Directorate of Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI), with the further promise of development programs in the border areas – roads, hospitals, schools (Lintner 1994:298).

The original BNUP name was inclusive, and not initially exclusively Wa nationalist in nature. The Military Directorate in Pang Kham, where the original signage of the Wa army still stands, reads:

70 Renard gives this name as “United Myanmar National Democratic Army” (2013a:150), and Martin Smith as “Burma Democracy Solidarity Army” (1999:353), demonstrating the difficulties of translations between Chinese, Burmese, and English nomenclature.

71 In July and August of 1988, pro-democracy protests erupted in Rangoon, following months of standoffs between student demonstrators and the military and police. Attempts to quell protesters failed, and despite Ne Win’s resignation, protesters were discontent with his touted replacements. Gen Saw Maung finally took power in a bloodbath in September, replacing the BSPP with his SLORC (See Charney 2009; Taylor 2009; Smith 1999; Steinberg 2001). Deaths numbered in the thousands, military rule clinging to power by a thread.

72 The 1989 ceasefires with the former CPB groups were crucial to SLORC, ensuring they did not merge with the National Democratic Front (NDF), a grouping of other ethnic armies dominated by the Karens. It also freed up more troops for the control of lower Myanmar, still reeling from the 1988 uprising.
“thwe-si nyi-nyunt-re tat-ma-thaw sit-u-si-tha-na-kyout” – or the Headquarters of the Military Directorate of the United Army. “United”, and not the “Wa” army. Smith writes that it was previously called the “Burma Democracy Solidarity Army”, in typical Communist “anti-racial” style (Smith 1999:353), and that only after merging with a faction from the Wa National Council did it become the UWSA. I was told a variation: that it was Khin Nyunt, who during negotiations with the new group deliberately dubbed them the “Wa Solidarity” army, and then the “Wa State” Army, and the name quickly stuck73. By November 3, the UWSA name had crystallized), with the incorporation of the Wa National Council based on the Thai border74 (Lintner 1994:435). An informant suggested that consistent with the “divide and rule” strategy of the tatmadaw, this was an attempt to marginalize the Wa by reducing their political goals to narrower ethnonationalist ambitions. Or perhaps it was a natural shorthand, given the ethnic lines upon which organizations across the country were almost always based. Nevertheless, the names of the UWSA and UWSP took hold, conferring on the organization an ethnic nationalist undertone75.

73 Kramer claims that the UWSA promotes Wa ethnic nationalism as evidenced by its claims for a Wa State (2007:30). The reality, stands somewhere in between, a mix of convenience, other priorities, and genuine ethnonationalist sentiment. The case of Mongla (NDAA), supposedly representing the Aini ethnic minority, but whose leaders are ethnic Chinese, offers a case study for the instrumentalization of ethnic identity.

74 The organization was also referred to as the “Wa Dei Ta A Na Baing A Pwe A Si” in Burmese, literally, the Wa Organizational Authority (Milsom 2005:69). This is Milsom’s transliteration. A more accurate transliteration would read “wa-de-tha a-na-baing a-pwe-aseh”.

75 Lintner also records a merger with the Wa National Council on the Thai border (1994:298, 435); Smith records this as a faction of the WNC that returned north to join the new UWSA, leading to the fomenting of a greater Wa nationalist consciousness. Lintner also states that the 1986 arrival of a Wa officer from the Wa National Army (WNA), showed Wa troops in the CPB the possibilities of ethnic-based armed resistance (1990:43). The WNA was formed in 1976 from the pro-Burmese government Yin Phan KKY (Ka Kwe Ye), led by Mahasang, the son of the Yin Phan saopha (Smith 1999:350), who fled Wa Region when the CPB took over, and was based on the Thai border (Lintner 1994). It had narco-trade ties in the
In 1993, the UWSA, through Saw Lu, the Wa spokesman for international affairs, made a demand for autonomy and plea for international assistance in the eradication of opium (Lintner 1994:328), around the beginning of the National Convention to draft a new Burmese Constitution. The proposal noted how the Wa had been “pawns in the violent, destructive games of others”, and made an explicit political demand:

“Our political goal is to restore real democracy for all of Burma, a democracy in which the majority rules, but equally important, where minority rights are protected even if the minority is a minority of one person... We want the restoration of Wa State within Burma. We are not separatists, but we want some autonomy for our people. Under the British and until 1962 there was a Wa State in the northeastern corner of Burma. After Ne Win’s 1962 coup, his government redrew the map. Wa State just disappeared. It was swallowed up in Shan State. We have historic roots in and an historic claim to the area east of the Salween River from Ko Kang south to the Thai border. **We want to administer the area as part of a federal union in Burma**.76 (my italics)

Responses to these calls for an autonomous region within a federal union would take time. The ceasefires between the UWSA and the junta’s SLORC led to the Wa area being dubbed “Shan State Special Region No.2”, subordinate to the Shan State government. After inconclusive National Convention discussions on a new constitution for the country in 1992-577, it reverted to an indeterminate region that had little constitutional or legal basis. The frontlines of 1989 have been maintained as de facto boundaries up to the present day for the Wa Special Region 2 and Mongla Special Region 4 areas. The areas around Hopang and Panglong in the North, as well as a sliver of 1970s with the KMT forces there, and worked with Wei Xuegang, current member of the UWSA Politburo (see footnote 40).


77 Human Rights Watch, Chronology of Burma’s Constitutional Process (undated). Kim Joliffe (2015) provides a good list of the different ceasefires and negotiations of the Special Regions.
ridgeline on the East of the Salween near Tar Gaw Et, are still controlled by the Myanmar government, manned by frontline Burmese soldiers who know they are likely to be surrounded and cut off should fighting break out.

In the late 1990s, Khin Nyunt’s increasing influence as the Head of DDSI (Military Intelligence or MI) was a boon for Burmese-minority relations. Of Chinese descent, Khin Nyunt built a rapport with many of the armed groups’ leadership, especially the UWSA, mainly through economic ties and concessions. Beginning with his visit to Wa Region in 1998, plans for economic development and commercial pursuits across the divide were made\(^7\), and there appeared to be a general sense that the Burmese, through Khin Nyunt, were willing to build bridges. Observers from lower Myanmar however, blamed Khin Nyunt for the favorable terms and relations bestowed on the UWSA, suggesting that it was under his watch that the fledgling armed group was able to accrue wealth and consolidate its military might.

Friends in the Wa government reflected on the warmer ties between the Wa and the Myanmar military – telling stories of their interactions with Khin Nyunt’s feared and powerful MI agents, how they would be taken around the Burmese regions when they visited, and hosted at restaurants and karaoke joints. A Burmese friend in Yangon in 1998 recounted how cars would tear down streets at fearsome speed, granted immunity by bearing license plates that distinguished them as part of a

\(^7\) Khin Nyunt first visited Kokang Region in 1989, enlisting the help of former Kokang KKY leader and “druglord” Lo Hsing-han to convince ex-CPB leader Peng Jiasheng to sign a ceasefire and participate in development efforts (Lintner 1994:297). This was the same policy with the UWSA and the forbears of the NDAA (Monglar group). The UWSA controlled many other areas in Shan state up to 1992, areas inherited from the CPB, but withdrew them after negotiations with Khin Nyunt.
“peace group” from the border areas\textsuperscript{79}. These special privileges and elevation above the law granted to Wa businessmen and representatives were resented by the lowland populace. Wa autonomy in the 1990s was based on wealth and business, regardless of who the trading partners were. The fledgling UWSA government was intent on making its own money, ensuring survival through economic consolidation.

This period of economic development did not last long. Khin Nyunt was arrested and removed in 2004, just a year after having been made Prime Minister. It was the outcome of both struggles for power and jealousy over the business activities and profiteering of Khin Nyunt’s MI officers (Jagan 2006). Businessmen told me how their plans to do business in lower Burma, including the exporting of mineral ore down through Yangon, were abruptly shelved. China would remain the sole route for export, and other routes for contraband material through Thailand or Laos would have to be maintained carefully. The imperative for survival made the early 2000s chaotic and violent within Wa Region, with some links to criminal triads and Chinese secret societies across SEA and Hong Kong\textsuperscript{80} (Chin 2009:26). The roots of political culture and networks of political economy in Wa Region emerged out of this formative period of violence, as I describe in chapters 5 and 6.

\textsuperscript{79} John Buchanan’s report for the Asia Foundation describes briefly the designation of “peace groups” (Nyein Chan Yay A’pweh) as a part of the informal ceasefire agreements between the tatmadaw and the more powerful ethnic armed groups (2016:2).

\textsuperscript{80} The extent of these ties is often up for debate, with Lintner and Black arguing that these cannot be blamed for the trade in methamphetamines in Wa Region (2009). Other forms of money laundering, illicit trade, construction, and arms sales however, are likely.


New Territories, New Strategies

In 1996, the prominent “druglord” Khun Sa’s Mong Tai Army (MTA) of around 15,000 surrendered to the Burmese government after a protracted struggle. Contests over control of production and taxation of the drug trade between armed groups of all sizes had drawn international attention to Eastern Shan State in the 1990s, as the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) sought to stem the flow of narcotics from the Golden Triangle. The UWSA and affiliates were competitors with smaller Shan militias, splintered from the MTA following Khun Sa’s surrender, over these narcotics trading routes. The UWSA name was to become synonymous with the drugs trade in Myanmar, as many writers have detailed (Chin 2009; Chouvy 2010; Lintner and Black 2009; Lone 2008; Milsom 2005).

Because the UWSA had been involved in fighting the MTA from 1993, it consequently took control of a large swathe of non-contiguous territory down on the Thai border – dubbed “South Wa”. From

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81 Khun Sa’s infamous journey began as leader of the pro-government Loi Maw KKY near Dangyan in 1966, before being detained by the government in 1969, switching allegiances back and forth after his release in 1973, and forming and re-forming a handful of armed militia organizations. See Buchanan (2016:16) and Yawnghwe (2010:176-7) for a short biography. Like all larger-than-life personalities of the borderlands shadow economy, conspiracies theories abounded, spreading rumors of how he might be in cahoots with the Burmese, Thais, Wa, and Americans. His MTA, formed in the mid-1980s by alliances between his previous organization, the Shan United Army (SUA), and the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA), along with various other smaller Shan groups, operated largely in Southern Shan State towards the Thai border (Yawnghwe 2010; Kramer 2005:42), with a headquarters in Homong. See Lintner and Black 2009:61-4). Khun Sa died in 2007 in Yangon.

82 Disgruntled remnants of Khun Sa’s MTA continued to fight on as the Shan State Army-South/Restoration Council of Shan State (SSA-S/RCSS), led by former MTA Colonel Yawd Serk, and at least 7 other Shan militia groups (Lintner and Black 2009:85-7; Buchanan 2016:27). The RCSS today has a close relationship with the Myanmar military and is involved in skirmishes with other ethnic armed groups.

83 Claims that the UWSA “defeated” Khun Sa and his MTA are exaggerated, it was a confluence of different pressures from Thailand, Myanmar, and other armed groups that led to his surrender. The UWSA over the 1990s suffered more than 2,000 casualties fighting the various Shan groups, a figure frequently repeated by Wa officials.
1999, the UWSA relocated nearly 100,000 people from “North Wa” to “South Wa” (see chapter 4), consolidating their hold over the area, and relieving population pressure in the highlands. Occasional demands from the Burmese military that the land be returned (most recently in 2015) gives rise to tensions and military blockades – the UWSA refuses to return this territory without compensation for the investments in infrastructure they have made (“how can we return a land we have lost so many lives for, without any compensation?”), but this consideration is surely guided by other strategic concerns.

South Wa, key in ensuring a route to the Thai border, comes under the 171 Military Command led by Wei Xuegang, an extremely secretive ethnic Chinese member of the Politburo and said to be the economic brains of the UWSA. In 2000, Wei was added to the blacklist under the US Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act)\(^4\), and a USD 2,000,000 reward still stands for information leading to his capture. Later, in January 2005, the Eastern District of New York court indicted 8 top UWSA leaders for narcotics trafficking (Chouvy 2009:40). All these moves were disappointing to the UWSA leadership, given that they had been working towards their promise of an opium-free Wa Region, and banned production that same year. Chairman Bao and other leaders of the famous Wa-owned Hong Pang investment company joined the blacklist in 2008, and despite the eradication of poppy growing, it was clear that a large-scale shift to methamphetamines was underway (See TNI 2014; Lintner and Black 2009). During this period, drug production, rather than political negotiations, dominated all discourse pertaining to Wa Region\(^5\).


\(^{5}\) Milsom argues that much of the methamphetamines were produced by transnational crime syndicates across Asia, and not predominantly the UWSA (2005:76-7). The very common WY brand of tablet was said to stand for “Wa yaba”, to which a Wa representative replied: “if we were manufacturing
In 2009, frustrated by the lack of progress on political recognition, the UWSA officially declared the “autonomy” of Wa Special Region 2 based on its de facto territory, with 24 Wa townships (qu) forming 3 districts (xian) (Meng Mao, Meng Neng, and Mong Pawk) and 2 special townships (the “capital” Pang Kham and Nam Tit). These administrative boundaries were in contradistinction to the stuff, would we be so stupid as to put our name on it?” (Milsom 2005:77) This of course did little to quash the rumors.

86 Democratic Voice of Burma, “UWSA declares autonomous region”, 5 Jan 2009 (see UN Archive)
those laid out by the 2008 Myanmar Constitution, which created Wa Self-Administered Division (Wa SAD), one of six Self-Administered Areas (SAAs) aimed at granting more autonomy to certain ethnic groups in Myanmar\textsuperscript{87}. Each of the six has different mechanisms and governance structures, some led by ethnic minority leaders who are members of the military-backed USDP. Wa SAD consists of 6 townships, and is officially represented by the Wa Democratic Party (WDP), a party completely separate from the UWSA and which operates mainly in Hopang, a Myanmar-controlled sub-township at the Northern edge of Wa Region. Yet the UWSA holds de facto control over most of Wa SAD’s delimited areas, and parts of another 2 townships outside Wa SAD (Minepauk and Mineyan)\textsuperscript{88}.

Because of the indeterminate constitutional basis of the “Special Regions”, conflict over Wa Region’s status as subordinate to Shan State or directly to the Union of Myanmar became a central issue in the 2000s. In 2005, the Myanmar government objected to the UWSA seal on invitations which read “Myanmar Special Region No. 2”, when it should have read “Shan State Special Region 2”, thereby diminishing their status (Kramer 2007:49; also Chin 2009:246). In Kramer’s interviews in 2003-4, the UWSA insisted that it has always used the term “Wa byinei” or “Wa State” in Burmese in communications with the Myanmar government. In 2009, the Wa unilaterally changed their seal directly to “Wa State”. By 2012, as a careful compromise, the seal read “Myanmar Shan State Special

\textsuperscript{87} Joliffe compares the legal and political arrangements pertaining to each of the SAAs (2015:32). The other 5 SAAs are listed as Self-Administered Zones (SAZs) because of their small size of 2-3 townships (compared to the 6 of Wa SAD). See below for more details.

\textsuperscript{88} That the de facto UWSA territory differs territorially from the legally delimited area of WA SAD gives rise to much confusion. For example, the 2014 Census relies on the township boundaries of Wa SAD to gather data. Where government documents or policies describe wealth-sharing development activities in Wa SAD, they are merely referring to activities in the small portions of Hopang and Mankan (sub-township) areas, and not to the bulk of Wa Region, where they have neither access nor authority.
Region 2 (Wa State)”. Yet in 2016, just prior to the establishment of the FPNCC and the adoption of a more hard-line stance on their calls for a state of their own, seals had been changed to read “Myanmar Special Region 2”, unilaterally claiming direct subordination to the Myanmar state, in line with calls for a state on par with that of Shan State.

**Subjectivities of the Liminal**

*Emergent Ethnonationalism?*

Ideological goals have never been a driving force in Wa engagement with external polities. On one occasion, a township leader asserted that the civil war in Burma had been a Burman affair, and should not have involved the ethnic minorities, who were not committed to ideologies on either side. There was some truth to this. The founders of the CPB were from the very same group of “Thirty Comrades” who were trained by the Japanese to fight the British, and later started the Burma Independence Army (BIA), predecessor to the tatmadaw. From these Thirty Comrades came the heads of state Aung San, Ne Win, and U Nu, and the conflict between the tatmadaw and the CPB, the latter enlisting large numbers of ethnic minority soldiers in its cause. A friend in the Wa government reminded me on several occasions how the Burmese had forgotten how their venerated leader General Aung San was actually a turncoat, having betrayed the British and fighting for the

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89 Lone’s interviews echo a similar sentiment amongst the Wa, that the wars of the 1960s-1980s was amongst and between Burmans, and that minorities were unnecessarily caught up and made use of for these purposes (2008:33).
Japanese, only to return when the Japanese were losing the war. Such a statement would have been heresy in Lower Burma.\footnote{Though shared amongst ethnic minority peoples, who saw Aung San and the BIA as having roots in disloyal collaboration with the Japanese invaders (Yawnghwe 2010).}

Magnus Fiskesjö’s ethos of egalitarianism amongst the Wa (2010a:244), evaporated under the organizational culture of the CPB, ironically given its communist ideology. Today’s UWSA governance and control of Wa Region is clearly authoritarian, despite the top leaders of the Politburo hailing from the fiercely autonomous central Wa areas. This is a product of external political influences from the KMT and the CPB, the necessity and expedience of maintaining a militarized society given the impending threat of the Burmese military, little expectations of ordinary people for a government to provide for them, exacerbated by inequitable wealth accumulation through the drug trade and other businesses. Centralized decision making lies in the hands of the Politburo, who are elected by the central committee, although this process is hardly transparent and involves a mix of consensus and predetermined outcomes. I was told however, that decision making within the Politburo always relies on consensus, perhaps a vestige of the egalitarian ethos. At local levels, district, township, and village tract leaders make decisions for their people with little to no consultation (see chapter 4). Dissent is extremely rare, and ordinary people simply do as they are told, a mix of trust and deference to the power and status of their leaders, a political culture I describe further in Chapter 5.

Unlike many authoritarian regimes, the UWSA never explicitly based its identity on an Other to be combated, of enemies at the gates. It did not propagate a constant siege mentality; it was more important to be sufficient on its own. Many officials I spoke with constantly reminded me how
Wa were peace-loving and had never been willingly caught up in fighting anyone. While not entirely true, this narrative of reluctant fighters referred both to the CPB period and the current peace negotiations, whilst subtly referencing the reputation of the Wa as warriors. Successors of the CPB, the UWSA administrative and governance apparatus was shaped by communist models, yet without any strong commitment to the ideologies of revolution, class struggle, and liberation of lowland Burma. Such political language was carefully avoided to maintain the stance of non-aggression, a stance that bore resemblance to Chinese non-imperialist rhetoric. The promise throughout the rising tensions of post-Kokang Incident 2009 was that the UWSA would never go on the offense, but was always ready to respond.

While a narrower reading of the shift to authoritarianism could be as a product of ethnic nationalism in the context of wealth inequalities in an illicit narcotics economy, this is to miss the trees for the forest – to become enchanted by the symbolic forms of Wa nationalism, uniformed soldiers and military patches, the crisscrossed spears on the UWSA flag, Loi Mu mountain on the UWSP flag, the horned water buffalo head emblazoned on cars and buildings. This fits in to the registers of ethnic-based politics that plays out all over Myanmar, and does not necessarily signal a narrow ethnonationalist chauvinism. Recall instead how the UWSA started out not as an ethnic armed organization but as a “National Unity Army”, and how its ranks boast leaders from all ethnic groups, even if the present Bao family is Wa. Former General Secretary Li Zi Ru and former Finance

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91 Lintner notes that Communist literature was written in Burmese and unintelligible to the rank-and-file troops, only accepted for use in rolling cigarettes (1990:35). It was largely only the ethnic Chinese (some “volunteers” from China, some joining the CPB from Yangon or Mandalay), who were ideologically aligned with Communism. I discuss further influences on political organization and political culture in Chapter 5.
Minister and current member of the Politburo Wei Xuegang are ethnic Chinese, and have played central roles in the political leadership. Large segments of the population in the lower altitude areas including Mong Pawk and South Wa are Lahu, Akha, and Shan. The Wa ethnonationalism that Kramer speaks of (2007) is clearly a cultural pride, but equally a totemic vehicle for the expression of group solidarity under the political and strategic insecurities of the borderlands, not solely an aggrandizing nationalist agenda.

**Suspicion, Self-Reliance, and Survival**

During my first visit with a district leader, he furrowed his brows at me and asked, “is he Burmese?” When told that I was from Singapore and spoke Chinese, he half-smiled and extended the traditional offer of liquor, “good, this means we can communicate.” He wasn’t referring to language alone. A mistrust of outsiders in Wa Region was often palpable, even if disguised beneath niceties and offers of hospitality, but the mistrust of Burmese people was even greater – they were regarded untrustworthy and arrogant, looking down on other minorities. Another friend told me: “they have narrow hearts” (xin xiong xiazhai, gaibuliao), “they cannot change, they will always look down on the minorities.” He compares this to the Chinese government, whom he claims is “cruel and determined (heng), not perfect – but who else could manage so many people, accepting the minorities into the country, and retaining a sense of equality (pingdeng de ganjue)”. While equality in China is somewhat an overstatement, he meant was that a political structure there was set up to

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92 Wei Xuegang and his two brothers fled China into Yin Phan (Vingngun) in the Wa Hills when the Chinese communists took over, joining the saopha there, Mahasang. They worked for the KMT-CIA networks until 1971, when the CPB took over the Wa hills. Mahasang fled to the Thai border and formed the Wa National Army (WNA, see chapter 1), while Wei joined Khun Sa as his treasurer, but they fell out, and Wei re-joined Mahasang on the Thai border (See Lintner and Black 2009:61-2, 67-72). When the UWSA was formed in 1989, Wei linked up with them and helped them with business contacts – a classic wheeler and dealer of the borderland. He joined the UWSA central committee in 1996.
seek a pragmatic and productive co-existence, backed by force if necessary, but not a hatred or
discrimination that seeks the undermining of another ethnic group. Chin Kolin cites a Wa official’s
pithy words: “we think the Burmese authorities are like longyi [the Burmese dress for men]. You
can wear it any way you like and it is considered appropriate” (2009:37).

I was frequently reminded that there was no deep hatred for Burmese people. In recent decades,
the broken promises of the Burmese military had severely undermined trust and respect. A friend
explained it this way: the Wa had never been invaded by the Burmese, and despite having heard
horror stories of the tatmadaw’s wartime behavior, they had never experienced it like other
minorities such as the Shans and Karen had. In fact, ordinary Burmese workers lived in Pang Kham
in the thousands prior to the Kokang conflict in 2009, most of whom fled during the rising tensions
for fear of being the victims of revenge killings\(^3\). I was also told that the tatmadaw even retained a
company of soldiers in Pang Kham up to around 2008. Nevertheless, amongst the civilian
population in Wa Region, the tatmadaw retains a poor reputation for their record of sexual assault
and abuses against civilians, one well-documented by human rights organizations in other parts of
the country\(^4\). The older generations of CPB fighters, now top leaders in the Politburo, had a respect

\(^3\) This is almost certainly an unfounded fear, since the UWSA authorities have always made it clear to
Burmese and international organizations and their staff that they will be protected regardless of the
political outcomes. The Vice-Chairman assured the international groups during a rising period of
tension in 2015 that “we will escort you back down to Yangon if need be”. Nonetheless, many of the
Burmese teachers and doctors in Pang Kham feel nervous as whenever rumors of skirmishes in other
areas spread. In December 2011, 200 Burmese government staffers who had left Wa Region in September
2010 over BGF tensions, returned to their posts (Saw Yan Naing 2011).

\(^4\) The myriad human rights reports on the tatmadaw’s abuses – for example, Amnesty International,
2017. *All the Civilians Suffer*: Conflict, Displacement, and Abuse in Northern Myanmar,’ and Human
for the battles with the *tatmadaw* in the 1970s and 1980s, but the younger generation of leaders who had not themselves seen war, tended to be more belligerent, at least in word.

Suspicion of outsiders extended to any foreign visitors. Staff of the UN and INGOs often had difficulties implementing development programs because of a lack of trust from villagers. Even some of my own Wa staff, who were raised in Myanmar areas, told me stories of how upon their return to Wa Region years later, they were told that they were no longer real Wa: “you have been raised eating the rice of the Burmese”. They spoke Burmese and Wa, and had Burmese IDs. They suggested at times that there was a sense of betrayal that they had left Wa Region during the difficult times, and were now only returning when things had improved in the 2000s. In 2000, UNODC staff were arrested in Mong Pawk by local Wa military units due to a misunderstanding over a drug rehabilitation treatment camp, and only released after intervention from higher authorities (Renard 2013a:168). It took years to build trust. Visiting new villages where one had never worked was always challenging – population statistics were never forthcoming, agricultural techniques or their reception uncertain, and village heads reluctant to cooperate.

Self-reliance was a key aspect of autonomy for the Wa leadership. The UWSA was always careful to protect certain strategic interests, militarily if necessary. This occasionally placed autonomy at odds with the stated goals of non-aggression. In September 2016, the UWSA took over several military fortifications in Monglar Region, amidst rumors that the Monglar leadership was leaning too close for comfort to the Burmese military (Shan Herald 2016). The pocket of territory (South Wa) on the Thai border, as well as their allies NDAA (Monglar Region) were to be protected at all costs, since these were their indispensable supply routes to Thailand and Laos. Taking matters into their own hands was never off the table. A friend described a “bad habit” of the Wa leadership to me: “if the government rejects a request to trade or import a good, they will not argue, but simply find a way
to smuggle it through themselves”. The UWSA negotiated with China for support where it could, but always maintained those routes to Thailand and Laos, intermittent relationships I describe further in Chapter 3.

**Pride and Promises**

A strong sense of pride for the UWSA leadership stems from the fact that even after nearly 30 years, there have been no fissures and overt factionalism within its leadership. A Politburo member remarked in 2014, when asked about his views on the Karens, “which group are you speaking about? There are so many of them, we wouldn’t even know who to engage with were we to make overtures to the Karen!” There was a self-assuredness to having stayed together under the stable leadership of Zhao Nyi Lai and Bao Youxiang since 1989. Unlike the Karen or Kachin, they have never caved to Myanmar government pressure to sign ceasefires or withdraw. Another government official remarked, “We know that the Myanmar government will be delighted to see factionalism amongst us. We must stay united. There may be disagreements, but everyone tolerates one another, as long as none is over the top” (dajia renshou yidian, bu yao guofen jiu keyi le). The unity amongst the different Politburo leaders has been central to the survival of the UWSA, despite the fact there are varied backgrounds, interests, and ethnicities within it and the Central Committee. This unity also renders negotiations potentially more stable, since the tatmadaw has a strong aversion to re-

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95 This is not to suggest that there is no factionalism amongst the UWSA; disagreements and rivalries are a source of gossip in town, yet there are no overt adversarial factions or splits such as those seen amongst the Karen, Kokang, or Shan (See Gravers and Ytzen 2014; TNI 2012, Smith 1999; South 2008; Thawngmung 2012). Of course, the UWSA politburo is certainly not a homogenous singular entity with clearly defined and cohesive aims. But Chairman Bao and his 2 brothers, along with one other military commander, are ethnic Wa from the central Wa areas, while the Vice-Chairman and another military commander are ethnic Wa from the areas now carved into China. These form two-thirds of the Politburo. Three others are ethnic Chinese from border areas of Yunnan.
negotiating or recognizing factions who originate from parent groups with previous ceasefires, splintered away and then returned to conflict with them.

The UWSA leaders also have great pride in the value of their word and promises. Despite fluctuations in tensions and provocative stances on both sides\textsuperscript{96}, the ceasefire between the UWSA and the Burmese military held, a record Wa leaders proudly raise during present-day peace negotiations. They had constructed a narrative of honor and reliability around themselves. “We will never fire the first shot,” went the oft-repeated refrain. Officials I was less familiar with peddled the mantra that the Wa were always a peace-loving people, without the colonial ambitions of neighboring states and the British. It was common to hear people say of the many of the top leadership: “if they say they will do it, they do it\textsuperscript{97}”. These self-narratives were a distinct attempt to contrast themselves with the untrustworthiness of the Burmese military, and leaders of other armed groups – a minister once described the leader of another ethnic armed group with a winding movement of his hand: “he is like a snake”.

At the same time, they are proud of the sense that they have not been forced to sellout and sign followup ceasefires with the Myanmar military, not convert into BGFs, as opposed to other armed groups, whose promises – such as those not to sign or attend various peace talks – they feel are unreliable. They look at the track record of other armed groups in joining and breaking away from

\textsuperscript{96} Such as confrontations and standoffs in South Wa in 2015, and around Nam Tit in 2013.

\textsuperscript{97} Even Marshall and Davis managed to pick this up in their 2002 TIME article, quoting a villager as saying of Chairman Bao: “If he says he’ll do something, he does it”. (Marshall and Davis 2002)
alliances such as the National Democratic Front (NDF) or the United Nationalities Federation Council (UNFC), and take pride in their consistent positions or abstentions from talks\(^9^8\).

**Liminality: the Expression of Autonomy amidst Political Realities**

Autonomy was clearly a widely extolled value in Wa Region – a self-reliance, a pride in the promise of non-aggression, a deliberate disengagement from delicate political situations. As Wa Region became caught up in conflicts and negotiations with and between aggressors from the outside, and along with the development of modern weaponry and a standing army, survival often involved a partial retreat into secrecy. The agency to decide who and when to engage, who to trust, how much to offer up, and how to rely on oneself was of paramount importance to the UWSA. It was a mastery of political situations. It is not surprising then that narratives of primitivism, backwardness, and isolationism have been produced about the Wa (see chapter 1), given the tendency to disengagement and avoidance, especially in the 1990s and the period immediately after Kokang was attacked in 2009.

Local informants themselves spoke of a type of insecurity amongst the leadership, that they were looked down upon, regarded by other armed groups and the Myanmar government as warrior-like but uneducated and unsophisticated. One suggested that the flaunting of wealth, cars, and property were a means of hiding this insecurity. The indictment of their leaders for drug trafficking in the 2000s compounded this sense of being misunderstood, occurring just as they had announced plans for the eradication of opium. A disengagement from the sophistry of national politics was part of

\(^9^8\) Of course, a host of factors – terrain, geography, political support from China, military strength – contribute to the strength of the bargaining position that the UWSA find themselves in. I describe more of the larger strategic picture in Chapter 3.

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safeguarding themselves, not to be duped, wronged, underestimated, remaining insulated, and picking carefully the channels they would open.

There was also a sense of abandonment, first by the Chinese Communist government during the CPB period, and then by the international community following the appeals for help with opium eradication and political reform. An friend cited the Taiwanese political song “Asia’s Orphan” (yaxiya de guer) as an expression of this having been “left behind”. The perception of “left behind” by the “outside” world, was also compounded by the convoluted technological and political shifts amongst neighbors, as other groups courted alliances or developmental undertakings and then withdrew, or made promises for co-operation that were scuppered, such as with Khin Nyunt’s arrest.

Yet to accept too easily these suggestions of insecurity and of “abandonment” renders the observer susceptible to the allure of well-rehearsed narratives of primitivism, regarding the Wa as naïve and backward. On the one hand, they most certainly had a narrower understanding of international politics, development registers; worldviews were shaped by Chinese news reporting, and naturally skewed toward suspicion of the West. On the other, EAGs did not survive the Burmese junta and the opium trade without keen and hardened sensibilities. There remained a perpetual tension in writing about the UWSA – a sense always that they were more nuanced and sophisticated in their thought, especially when it came to political strategy, but also tempered by a general dismay when looking at some of the wealth inequalities, education, healthcare, and development standards of the region. While they outwardly made appeals for development assistance and for help from the outside, they remained suspicious of external programs and organizations.

This is where Wa Region becomes a liminal space. It is an aporia, filled with contradictions, encapsulating both a partial incorporation and the empirical fact of autonomy. While autonomy is constantly spoken of as a value in Wa Region, with great pride in their self-reliance and
unconquered, unsubordinated status, it would also be impossible to describe Wa Region as truly autonomous, given its dependencies on the geostrategic actions of China and Myanmar, and the necessity of engaging economically with surrounding regions for survival and development (see chapter 6).

I was once told that Chairman Bao had himself privately remarked, regarding the political negotiations of the NCA and federalism: “why can’t things be as they are now [with de facto autonomy], for we do not wish to join any other country, or submit to another power?” This desire to be left alone and unmolested, strikes a chord with similar representations at the Frontier Commission of 1947 (“we do not want to join with anybody”) and in 1989 (“we never kowtow before an aggressor army”).

Liminality in Wa Region is the logical outcome of the expression of a value of autonomy amidst the political realities of encroaching neighbors. Liminality is neither complete rejection of the Myanmar state and a fleeing to the hills, nor a capitulation to encompassment within the Myanmar nation-state. It is a careful balancing act of incorporation and autonomy, the partial mimicry and partial rejection of state forms, a political agency within limits, partly deliberate, partly contingent on the caprice of the borderlands. The geostrategic realities do not allow for isolationism, even if the UWSA might sometimes offer the rhetoric and appearances of this. And their actions in engaging the economy of the borderlands does not offer evidence for isolation. The production of liminality through political practice has guided the making of Wa Region since the 1950s, and it is to these practices I turn in the following chapter.

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In a township office, hung above the sitting room is a famous picture of Chairman Bao in military
garb, saluting, with rays of sunlight emanating from clouds behind him, messianic almost.
Uniformed soldiers marching beneath his frame. The red Chinese text superimposed over the image
reads: “if no one offends me, I offend none; if someone offends me, I must offend him” (ren bufan
wo, wo bufan ren, ren ruo fan wo, wo bi fan ren).
Chapter 3  Intermittence

“They were not part of any state, and their social formation emerged from a trajectory involving complex factors (including resistance to others’ statemaking) adding up to more than the negation of state-making.” (Fiskesjo 2010a:263)

Several mornings a week, I joined Wa officials from a government ministry in the sitting room in their office, enjoying the day’s dose of cigarette smoke and tea, watching CCTV News or World War II movies, or the Boston Celtics playing in the background, and listening to the latest going-ons in town. Officials sat on mahogany armchairs on two sides of the room; the seat directly facing the flatscreen TV was reserved for the Minister. He would read printouts of online news from both sides of the border, in Chinese, prepared for him daily. The workday of the officials wasn’t particularly long, lasting from 7:30 AM to just before 11AM, and visitors would arrive to raise their concerns or appeals to the Minister, much like petitioners before the king. Mundane issues could be settled by the department clerk – sometimes documents were issued, such as travel permits, or certificates demonstrating their Wa “citizenship”; others might require an introductory phone call. There were also visits from officials from other departments. Some days no one came at all, and the sessions quickly morphed into contemplative rounds of card games.

As a UN official in Wa Region, I was interested in remaining abreast of the current political and security climate, as well as meeting officials from other departments who might be important to our work in food security and education. My age however, was somewhat an impediment; I was perceived as not having much experience, or being the age of the leaders’ sons and daughters. I was often introduced as a Harvard graduate, which appeared to carry some weight amongst the ethnic Chinese officials, though many Wa officials seemed vastly unimpressed. Over time, I became part of the retinue of staff at the government ministry, commenting on the news and joining in with
observations on present-day affairs in town, but mainly listening to the directions which conversations took.

One morning, there was a stack of bright red wedding invitations on the table, embossed in gold Burmese script, which were to be distributed to some of the highest-ranking leaders. Officials were heatedly discussing who would do the deliveries to whom, each with equal contempt for the others’ suggestions. A deputy minister explained that these were invitations to the wedding of a high-ranking Burmese general’s daughter in Yangon.

“Will you attend?”

“No, of course not. But we will send some money,” came the reply.

“Do you know this guy?”

“Of course, we know all of them, and have for a long time. We used to help the Burmese fight other militia groups.”

This was most surprising, to say the least: that the leaders of the biggest opposing armed group would be on such cordial terms with the country’s military leaders as to receive invites to a daughter’s wedding. Though there was no real fuss over it, these wedding invitations could not be simply regarded as mere platitudes or formality. However trivial they seemed, these were genuine attempts to maintain a sense of intimacy or keep open potential channels of friendship, regardless of the actual quality of the relationship at that moment. It seemed the same courtesy would be extended the other way too. Naturally, there was clearly no expectation of actual attendance, not least because at the tensest of times, neither set of leaders would want to travel into the other’s territory. From the deputy minister, I learned over the next few months of the particular
relationships between leaders on both sides. A keen respect for each other’s positions and struggles, and personal memories of fighting alongside and against each other, punctuated the general mistrust between the two sides. Of course, there were also strong business and commercial ties and direct lines of communication between them where needed. This was a far cry from the narratives of isolation and remoteness that pervaded common perceptions of the UWSA.

**Political Practice at the Margins**

At first glance, Wa Region tells the tale of a rebel “anti-state” mountain stronghold resisting the encroachments of the Burman-majority nation-state. The UWSA resembles the archetypal “rebel army”, a thorn in the side of the tatmadaw, allegedly providing arms and support to other armed groups. Since 2000, the UWSA has consolidated its military and economic strength, acquiring increasingly modern weapons and supporting a larger standing army. Territory in South Wa on the Thai border has been fortified and economically developed, and relations with China carefully managed. The UWSA rejected tatmadaw demands to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF) in 2009, and did not allow the 2010 and 2015 general elections to be held in its area. It refused to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire (NCA) of October 2015, and also turned down numerous peace negotiations with the Myanmar government between 2012 and 2015, submitting its own proposed version of an NCA to the government in 2016. Most recently in 2017, the UWSA led a “Wa alliance” or “Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) of allied Ethnic Armed

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99 Rumors abound widely of the ties between tatmadaw and UWSA leaders (Lintner and Black 2009; Woods 2011) – even the Economist reported briefly on the ties between Thein Sein and the UWSA leadership (Economist 2012). These connections must be read in the larger context of Burma’s long convoluted history of politics – many of the leaders of the Burma National Army, post-independence AFPFL government, and the CPB were all together under the late-1930s Dohbama Asiayone party, before splintering into nationalist and communist strands after WWII (See Lintner 1994; Smith 1999).
Groups (EAGs)\textsuperscript{100} to the negotiating table with the \textit{tatmadaw}, insisting on negotiating as a bloc and not bilaterally.

Yet a closer examination of the relationship between the Myanmar and Wa authorities reveals a series of political, commercial, and historical intimacies that labels of “rebel” and “insurgent” too easily efface. These distinct political projects on both sides of the Salween river boundary dovetail and contradict one another, since the existence of an autonomous Wa Region undermines the sovereignty of the Myanmar nation state and yet reinforces the \textit{raison d’etre} of the Burmese military\textsuperscript{101}. Scholars studying Myanmar’s conflict economy have also described how shadow networks operate in parallel to one another despite the immediate appearance of an inextricably divided country (Meehan 2011; Woods 2011; MacLean 2008; TNI 2013). State-like bureaucratic structures and governance mechanisms have emerged mimetically in the UWSA apparatus (see chapter 4), along with elaborate economic and commercial enterprises. These intimacies and connections, built and ruptured simultaneously, appear central to the ambivalent and intermittent relationship between the state and its margins.

The careful and contingent process of political practice is the subject of this chapter, a process through which the liminality of Wa Region is negotiated, a partial but non-teleological inscription

\textsuperscript{100} The FPNCC consists of 7 groups based in Kachin and Shan States – UWSA, National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), Shan State Army-North (SSA-N/SSPP), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army (MNDAA), Arakan Army (AA), and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).

\textsuperscript{101} Observers have traced how the CPB and its successor EAGs have been continuously used by the \textit{tatmadaw} as the bogeyman legitimating military dictatorship. Lintner concludes his book \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma} asserting that while the disintegration of the CPB offered a chance for a political solution, the \textit{tatmadaw}, then led by Khin Nyunt, deliberately offered economic rather than political concessions so that conflict could be prolonged for its own interests (1990:47-54).
of Wa Region into the Burmese nation-state. This is a maintained liminality – the survival and consolidation of the UWSA and Wa Region since 1989, the success (so far) of this improvised navigation of political relations, even as its continually contests the nature and modality of its incorporation into the larger Myanmar nation-state. I seek to examine the type of political stalemate produced by these disparate and overlapping state-making acts and events. What are these political practices and what do they tell us about the underlying political logics between the Myanmar nation-state and its peripheries? How do they reinforce or undermine each other? And what does this apparent stalemate and ambivalence of connection and rupture ultimately produce?

This chapter performs three tasks. First, it adopts the “view from the periphery”, or more precisely, the agentive practices of the periphery, which might allow us an insight into the mutually constitutive nature of state and other, of the “civilized” and the “primitive”. While analyses of the margins often adopt state-centric approaches peering out towards the remote peripheries, here I examine instead the borderland other – the political practices, self-perceptions, and project making at the margins. It shifts the emphasis and perspective to the “non-state”, an obvious move, but one that has great utility in complicating political discourse.

Second, I argue that the intermittent and ambivalent nature of political practice in Wa Region, a series of connections and ruptures, expresses the reluctance of Wa Region’s inscription into the Myanmar nation-state. Uncertain of the terms of incorporation, the UWSA safeguards autonomy by maintaining the liminality of Wa Region through political practice. These practices include scuppered peace talks, arms acquisitions, military standoffs, inter-governmental meetings, travel and visitations, and other bureaucratic exchanges. They also include mobility of peoples and goods, commerce and trade (see chapter 6). As I demonstrate below, UWSA attempts to both build bridges and create ruptures in the process of diplomacy and governance, connections simultaneously
fostered and undermined in a delicate balance, reveal the complexities posed by the historically specific integration of an autonomous place into the order of nation-states.

Third, it follows that the maintenance of liminality, and not the resolution of conflict, is and has been the status quo in Wa Region, a liminality that is productive in its own right. Political analyses that attempt to chart scenarios and routes towards political settlement and conflict resolution are often disappointed by the ambivalence and see-sawing of relations, and mischaracterize them as failure to achieve political compromise. The temptation to speculate on political solutions and objectives is especially rife in contemporary Myanmar, given the rapidly changing political climate and maneuvering amidst the “democratic transition”, the proliferation of media outlets, the formation of a peace expertise apparatus comprising think-tanks, NGOs, and scholars, and burgeoning social media enabled by internet and mobile access. Yet for the UWSA and other political actors, declaring, altering, or remaining obscure about their objectives or intentions is an integral part of political practice. Viewing political events (federalism, settlements, statehood, disarmament, political dialogue, etc.) as objectives or end-states that will bring “political settlement” once achieved, pushes analysis down the teleological path towards “conflict resolution” and risks missing the larger point: what do peace negotiations and political liminality do?

**Political Analysis in Myanmar: “Resolution” and Opacity**

Political analysis of the armed conflict or long-standing civil war in Burma has involved coverage of several areas: uncovering the state-building histories and policies of the Burmese military (Callahan 2003; Maung Aung Myoe 2009; Selth 2002; Taylor 2015b), state-society relations, “democratic” transitions, and national politics in Myanmar (Callahan 2009, 2012; Egreteau and Robinne 2016; Gravers 1999; Pedersen 2011; Rotberg 1998; Taylor 2012; Wilson 2006) international
and regional geostrategic considerations of the Myanmar military and government (Steinberg and Fan 2012; Steinberg 2001, 2007, 2010), the nationalist and ethnonationalist imaginaries, histories, and conflict amongst the different armed groups (Chit Hlaing 2008; Farrellly 2014; Smith 1999; South 2008; South and Joll 2016; Sadan 2016; Foxeus 2016; Thawnghmung 2012), the relation of various shadow economies to state-building or violence (Meehan 2011, 2015; Woods 2011), and identifying challenges and solutions to political agreements or ceasefires (Thawnghmung 2017; South 2017; Kyed and Gravers 2015; Wilson 2017; Gravers and Ytzen 2014).

Since the signing of the NCA in 2015, scholars have turned their attention to the peace process and political settlement in earnest. They argue for supporting EAGs with technical know-how in their negotiations with the Myanmar government and military (Thawnghmung 2017), “conflict-sensitive approaches” in understanding and adapting to particular “hybrid governance” arrangements (both government and EAG authority) in the various EAG areas (South 2017), assessing the “incentives and motivations” of the EAGs and sequencing reintegration before disarmament in any political solution (Kyed and Gravers 2015), and clearly articulating specifics of a federal solution (Wilson 2017). Most of these scholars however, work on EAGs to the south, such as the Mon and Karen, not the “Wa alliance” bloc of the FPNCC where ongoing conflict and greater military strength renders comparative lessons less transferable.

Another source of analysis of armed conflict in Myanmar comes from think-tanks and research centers whose reports trace the histories, events, and policy decisions of various groups, deciphering the complicated strategies and intentions of different actors within the nationwide ethnic conflict. These include reports by the International Crisis Group (ICG 2016), Brookings Institute (Felbab-Brown 2015), Asia Foundation (Joliffe 2015, Buchanan 2016), Transnational Institute (TNI 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017), and Burma News International’s yearly “Deciphering

“While illicit economies fuel conflict, their suppression is often counterproductive for ending conflict and can provoke new forms of conflict. Prioritization and sequencing of government efforts to end conflict and reduce illicit economies is crucial.” (2015:iv)

Similarly, the ICG’s clear and useful analysis of the peace process (2016), asserts however that the EAGs are “unlikely to get a better chance to achieve a negotiated political settlement” than the present with Aung San Suu Kyi at the helm, with her supposed “unparalleled political authority” (2016:2). This is conjecture of course, as is their suggestion that:

“the prospect of a negotiated solution will recede, likely to be replaced by a messy, drawn-out endgame that fails to address the underlying grievances of the minority communities, including their demands for a federal system and greater equality.” (ICG 2016:2)

These reports provide historical background and causes of the conflict, descriptions of ongoing tensions and peace negotiations as they unfold, as well as policy analyses and recommendations for conflict resolution, including reasonable suggestions like “political dialogue”, “economic development”, “participation”, “human rights-based approaches”, and “sustainability” (TNI 2012, 2013, 2017; ICG 2016). But the complexity of the longest-running ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia, along with the governmental transitions and instability in Myanmar, however, have sadly left analysts with few feasible or meaningful recommendations to proffer beyond the obvious.
It has never been easy to reconcile the political “goals” of the UWSA. Imbricated knowledges – circulation of rumor and difficulties verifying sources – also make for unreliable or situated information. Relying on official pronouncements or edicts from political actors also offers only a surface scrape at these groups’ self-representations and self-portrayals, and not the lived social worlds of organizations and bureaucracies (Bernstein and Mertz 2011:6).

In 1993, four years after its founding, a proposal published by the UWSA called for the re-establishment of “Wa State”, much like that of Shan State, similar to the entities dubbed by the British as the “Wa States”\textsuperscript{102}. This did not materialize in the 2008 Constitution. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there appeared to be a period of obscurity as to the UWSA’s intentions\textsuperscript{103}. The present-day UWSA clearly does not have secessionist aspirations, as stated explicitly in Wa official documents (Chin 2009:34), nor does it seek to become part of China by referendum, contrary to incredulous and inflammatory Burmese sources (see Lintner 2014). Neither are claims made for a vision of a Wa nation that encompasses the 300,000 or so ethnic Wa living in neighboring counties on the Chinese side (Fiskesjo 2000:53), as do certain Kachin and Karen groups. Finally, the UWSA has also not made any claims to territory outside the areas that it de facto controls (North and South Wa areas) (Kramer 2007:48).

The UWSA restated the claim for a State in a federal union directly subordinate to the central Burmese government, much like that of “Shan State” in Eastern Burma (e.g. Kramer 2007:62–3; TNI


\textsuperscript{103} In a 7 Sep 2009 interview with Phoenix Television of Hong Kong, Chairman Bao stated demands for an “autonomous region” and a “state” within the federal union of Myanmar, using also the term “ethnic self-governing district”. The imprecision of such statements and the translation of political terminology between Burmese, Chinese, and English has led to much confusion in reporting and secondary analysis.
in 2015, requiring a rewriting of the Constitution. At the same time, observers suggest that signing the NCA would cause the UWSA to lose parts of the de facto self-governance it already possesses (ICG 2016:10). Several non-negotiables are touted such as the maintenance of an independent standing army, antithetical to any federal solution, yet this is a demand the UWSA military will not concede, tantamount to disbanding or subordinating itself to the tatmadaw.

We are thus faced with two difficulties with political analyses in contemporary Myanmar – from both scholarly, political commentary, and think-tank fields. First, political authorities are opaque in their intentions – not easily deciphered from a series of declarations and statements, along with the corollary problem of regarding intentions as a singular unity. Second, analyses tending towards objectives of conflict resolution or political settlement, which ultimately see stalemate and the inability to reach compromise or political dialogue as failure. Yet if we operate as if what political authorities do, and what their actions produce, are more instructive than trying to ascertain what it is they want, we find that this ethnographic attention to political processes and practices avoids the necessity of recommendations and resolutions, rather allowing us to comprehend the liminal status quo as productive in its own right. It also eschews branding stalemate as failure, finding that intermittence and punctuated negotiations are an alternative form of interaction and intimacy in themselves.

104 A problem with treating, as Mitchell notes in regard to the state, “the state as a system of decision making... a machinery of intentions – usually termed rule making, decision making, or policymaking – [the] state becomes essentially a subjective realm of plans, programs, or ideas” (2006).
Anthropology of the State: Turn to Practice

“The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.” (Abrams 1988:58)

“We must analyze the state as such a structural effect. That is to say, we should examine it not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, apparently metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist.” (Mitchell 2006:180)

“If the state is a set of practices and processes and the effects as much as a way to look at them, we need to track down these practices, processes, and effects whether or not they coalesce around the central sites of national governments.” (Trouillot 2001:131)

The anthropology of the state has shifted its focus over the last decades from an initial interest into processes and histories of state formation (Childe 1950; Friedman 1998; Leach 1954; Parkinson and Galaty 2007; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Sahlins 1968), to an acknowledgement of the Westphalian state’s disaggregation in a world of global flows – “translocality” (Appadurai 2003), “fragmented globality” (Trouillot 2001), the “lateralization” of sovereignty (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006), “graduated” sovereignties (Ong 2000), and the outsourcing or co-optation of state functions (Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Humphreys 2004).

At the same time, calls were made to resist essentialisms of a reified notion of the state (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Abrams 1988), recognizing that the boundaries between the state, society, the economy, and institutions were produced by techniques of the modern political order itself, the “state effect” (Mitchell 2006). Mitchell called instead for investigation into the “methods of organization, arrangement, and representation that operate within the social practices they govern, yet create the effect of an enduring structure apparently external to those practices” (2006:170). This injunction would be taken up by anthropologists who investigated and disaggregated the practices, forms, and techniques that produced the “structural effect” of the state (2006:180).
Addressing this problem of the “state effect” involved turning ethnographically to analyses of local ideas of the state (Bouchard 2011; Harvey 2005; Ferme 2013; Gupta 1995), contested and fractured forms of power and sovereignty (Ong 2006; Ferguson 2006; Hansen and Stepputat 2005, 2006; Buur 2005; Roitman 2005; Greenberg 2011), and the margins of the state where its reach is contested and authority challenged (Tsing 1993; Das and Poole 2004; Nordstrom 2000; Chalfin 2010). It has become commonplace to conceive of the state as contradictory and contested, disaggregated into agents and individuals “exercis[ing] their control on a temporal register” (Ferme 2013:958; 2004), located at varying scales and levels, and lacking singular rational intent, rather than the monolithic disciplining Leviathan of the early modern and modern imaginaries. Hansen and Stepputat call for analysis of the “language of stateness” that has both practical and symbolic registers, including territorial sovereignty, governance, law, and representations (2001). Studies of practice and processes (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005) tend to problematics of governance (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1998; Li 2005; Rose and Miller 2010), administration and bureaucracy (Gupta 2002, 2012; Bernstein and Mertz 2011; Heyman 2012; Hull 2013), and infrastructural enchantment (Harvey and Knox 2012). These studies also highlight how fetishized ideologies of the state are constantly being produced by rituals and representations (Geertz 1980; Taussig 1992, 1997; Aretxaga 2003; Navaro-Yashin 2002).

Drawing on this emphasis on state practices and their effect in constituting of political authority, I turn ethnographically towards state making processes and political practice of the UWSA in Wa Region – what do practices of negotiation and footdragging, connection and rupture, do; what larger political effects do they produce? I argue that there is no easily articulated end-state or political objective for the UWSA, and avoid assigning a teleological objective or consistent intentionality to what is a contingent and negotiated process of political survival and autonomy, and a shifting constellation of people and structures.
Rather than producing a “state effect”, political practice in Wa region produces liminality, a constant potentiality, allowing for adaptation to the changing political climate and dynamics. The ambivalence of the building and renewal of connections between Myanmar and Wa polities, coupled with their deliberate breakdown and rupture, is the expression of and instrumental to the process through which a marginal and historically remote area navigates its inscription into the political realities of the nation-state. Wa Region is integrated into the state only when and where expedient. Stalemate is not failure.

I describe this ethnography of political practice in two groups: the first detailing the nature of relations of with external groups – the Burmese military and other EAGs (this chapter), and the second detailing forms of internal governance in Wa Region (chapter 4).

**Negotiating Sovereignties, Enforcing Boundaries**

Despite the problems of governance in highland terrain, the UWSA were faring well, with the entirety of Wa Region de facto under their rule, and few official organs of the Myanmar state present\(^\text{105}\). Two contrasting boundaries surrounded Wa Region – to the West, reinforced bunkers and armed checkpoints guarded the three entry points to Wa region from Burmese areas. To the East, formal border stations run by Chinese border guards and armed police marked four official

\(^{105}\) Only a small Border Affairs office and a Myanmar hospital were located in Pang Kham in 2015, with a smattering of around 30 Myanmar-language teachers sent by the Ministry of Education to teach in Wa villages. Renard records two unarmed Myanmar battalions being present in Pang Kham and Mengmao after the 1989 ceasefire (Renard 2013a:149), whereas I was told that a Myanmar military unit was removed by 2012.
crossings along the boundary with China, a boundary that bifurcated the Wa hills and ran down to
the basin where Pang Kham is situated.

In Pang Kham, the official gateway to China sees the “Menglian Port Joint Inspection Station” on
the Chinese side, its Wa counterpart a large white building with blue roofs adorned with the horns
of the symbolic water buffalo. A small Dai-style golden roofed pagoda and arch complete the
cosmetically “multicultural” facade of the crossing point, a bridge across the Nam Kha river built in
2007. As a Chinese Provincial Level Crossing Point, a Chinese visitor to Wa Region would require
either a local county-issued Border Pass (bianmin zheng) or an Exit and Entry Permit issued by the
Chinese police (churu jingzheng) to pass through immigration. These could be obtained, with the
right household registration and identity cards, for use at a fixed set of border crossing stations. A
Wa visitor traveling in the opposite direction would merely have his Wa Identity Card (wabang
shenfen zheng) inspected and be issued a pass (churu jingzheng) in return for leaving his household
registration document at the checkpoint106. Travel back and forth was frequent and casual for
visitors and traders, some making the trip several times a day to deliver packages or goods. Policies
and access were, of course, subject to change depending on the political climate.

Outside the immigration checkpoints on the Wa side, a roundabout with a large tree in the center
offers shade to the men of all ethnicities who wait under it from early morning to late afternoon.
They play chinlone, the Burmese soccer game of keepy-ups played with a rattan ball, while waiting
for work in the relentless dust. They stand to earn a daily wage of 80-100 CNY for hard labor, most

106 A Wa visitor with a Wa ID card (without a Myanmar passport) would be allowed to travel up to Puer,
a 6-7 hour drive away. Checkpoints along the road prevented Wa from going further north into China,
and regulated their movements. Similar arrangements for visiting markets were described by Karin Dean
in the Kachin areas between Lweje (Kachin State, Myanmar) and Layin (Yunnan, China) (2005:822-3),
with a “green book” or “one-day ticket” to China. It is likely that these regulations have now changed.
often portering or digging and clearing. A pickup pulls up and they rush for the front, haggling collectively, before two pile on and the others, disappointed or indifferent, return to their game.

It is midday, and the light grey sky begins its drizzle. A clear and established division of space in the entire small-scale cross-border transport industry is in play here – heavier vehicles sit on the outsides of the roundabout, with large dump trucks or large 12-mt cattle trucks with double 4-wheel rear axles waiting for goods to haul. Smaller trucks for goods have open tops with metal bars. A large orange construction digger perches on a flatbed truck at one end of the roundabout. Inside the roundabout are short queues of 3 three-wheeler taxis waiting for passengers, and electric-operated three-wheeler carts for goods. Those registered on the Chinese side are red with green canvas roofs, those from Wa are yellow with brown roofs. A middle-aged woman waits nearby with handbag and brochure in hand, touting her motel to the occasional tourist. Toyotas, Lexuses, and motorbikes arrive to drop friends, customers, and goods. 4-5 Wa-registered cars return from China this hour, dozens of people crossing on foot in either direction. A group of trucks with Chinese plates and Menglian addresses have just come over the border, bags of carrots and leafy vegetables have made it through customs. Another is full of large brand-new tires for trucks. A cattle truck laden with despairing cows lumbers to China, on the last leg of its journey. Everything waits, waits, and then moves – sand, stone, bags of cement, rice, pipes, goods, boxes.

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But that was just the official crossing. Beyond the established legal regime of documents, laws, and checkpoints, there was also a real porosity to the China-Wa border, what Madeleine Reeves, working on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, refers to as the “front door” and “back door” controls, each with their own security and economic interests (2014). At many sections, people “took the small roads” (zou xiaolu), and one could just stroll into Chinese territory, at others it required
crossing a river. This was not a serious security concern for the Chinese law enforcement, since their key checkpoints were set up along the main roads hours away from the border, focused more on narcotics control.

At the Pang Kham-Menga border, throngs of Chinese workers, most headed for the mines deep in Wa territory, lined up on the Chinese banks of the Namka river waiting to be rowed across in rubber dinghies or bamboo rafts, artfully guided into slower eddies on the opposing bank\footnote{See also an account of this crossing in The Economist. 2010. “Good Fences: China dreads fighting along a chaotic borderland.” Economist, 25 Nov 2010.}. The boatmen charged 100 CNY (16 USD) to cross, and on the opposite side Wa government tentages were set up to “register” the visitors at a further cost of 30 CNY. There was a discreet mini-industry of Chinese locals living in Menga on the Chinese side, who arranged parcel delivery, lorries for goods, or three wheelers to ferry people from the river bank to the bus station. The rafts and dinghies were concealed in the shrubbery amidst the rubber plantations that lined the banks, but this was surely a symbolic gesture to avoid looking too brazen about transgressing the sovereign boundaries of the nation-state.

An official laughed at my surprise over such blatant contravention of immigration law, since certain crossing points were in full view of the official border bridge, challenging one’s impression of the Chinese state as totalitarian and controlling. “This does not count as illegal crossing (toudu),” he said, “illegal crossing is when you travel to America hidden in the back of a container. Here, this happens by the hundreds every day and it does not worry either side, since most are locals [Chinese or Myanmar nationals].” Other friends dismissed it with bravado – “I have been back and forth more times than I can count. Everybody does it. I just show them my ID if stopped; anyway, they
know I am not up to no good”. It was not unexpected that a border should be easily porous – but it was indeed surprising that Myanmar and China, two of the most security-oriented states in the world, would share a border that was so wantonly crossed by its nationals in full knowledge of the state. This was the security apparatus permitting circulation within limits, accommodating Chinese and Wa political economy interests (Foucault 2009), allowing ordinary people to eke out livelihoods for themselves, in search of opportunities without the encumbrance of documentary requirements.

**Figure 14:** Dinghy crosses the Nam Kha river into Pang Kham from China on the opposite side, in full view of the official border bridge crossing, September 2015.

The Chinese authorities did make some attempt to control this crossing, with armed police occasionally patrolling the banks of the river and circulating rumors of video surveillance. A tired barbed wire fence and signboard warnings were part of the obstacles that border crossers ambled indifferently past. Checks increased when numbers became too blatant, if security campaigns were
launched at the provincial level, or if a dignitary was visiting nearby. Other friends told me stories of warning shots being fired to stop border crossers in their tracks, but since these were mainly ordinary Chinese citizens, there was never a strong sense of threat. Many were let off after questioning in police stations, and others fined token sums of money. The general sense from my informants was that policing was rather civil and that the penalty depended on the status of the person who had been caught. This was a porosity that was selective, discretionary, and unpredictable.

By contrast, the Western boundary of Wa Region, separated from the rest of Myanmar-controlled Shan State by the Salween river, had a single official crossing point at the Tar Gaw Et bridge, spanning a deep gorge with long winding roads up each side taking hours to climb. The bridge was a strategic chokepoint, and the surrounding knolls and ridges were reinforced with bunkers, checkpoints, fortifications, many not easily visible to the observer. At the bridge, a compound of zinc roof huts housing customs, military intelligence, police, immigration, and special branch departments of the Myanmar government was surrounded by trenches and mud fortifications. In mid-2015 there were severe delays for Wa officials traveling across the Tar Gaw Et bridge, often waiting for four hours at the Burmese checkpoints. This, it later transpired, was a tit-for-tat retaliation for the UWSA’s previous refusal to allow Myanmar military leaders to pass through its territory on the way to China for talks. Ordinary civilians and traders were unaffected however. Uncertainty lay in the unpredictability of the particular travel regulations that might be in use at any given period, a temporal layering of mobility.
Figure 15: Tar Gaw Et bridge, seen from West side of the Salween on the Myanmar-controlled region, June 2015. Road running up the hill heads to Man Xiang and the first UWSA checkpoints.

Two other unofficial crossings across the Salween were located where the steep gorges levelled out into gentler slopes. Again, political tensions were inscribed into the physical landscape on both sides. Barges floated timber, cattle, and cars discreetly across with the tacit consent of military commanders from both sides and the promise of duties and taxes. Nondescript customs posts were set up by the Wa authorities on their side of the river, mud bunkers etched into the spur lines running up into the hills. Wood and mud fortifications were also present at the two land checkpoints to the North of Wa Region (Nam Tit, Xiao Bang Kong) and another two towards the South (Mong Phen, Mong Kar). Unlike the Chinese border, the boundary on the Salween was quiet – no queues or fanfare, just faint traces of gradual movement.
For Wa Region, protecting its territorial sovereignty was key to being taken seriously as a sovereign entity, a central gesture in the “language of stateness” (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). It meant preserving the integrity of the boundaries of Wa Region, or at least being seen to do so, through the deployment of military and security forces and legitimate regulation in the form of checkpoints, documents, laws, and enforcement. At the same time, it was also in the interests of the Wa authorities to enable the ease of movement of people, commodities, and trade in the borderlands,
keeping alive the very sense of opportunity and investment that Wa Region’s economy depended on. Liminality was a careful balance between mimicking state-like concerns for territorial sovereignty, economic opportunity, and legitimacy, and the need to promote informal and interdependent circulations of people and capital.

Movement and Enclosure

Over 90% of Wa Region’s 450,000 or so inhabitants are legally stateless\(^{108}\) – although they have identity cards from the Wa authorities, they lack the Myanmar identification (ID) card, or mahpontin. On one occasion, whilst chatting with friends in a government ministry, the Wa minister entered the sitting room in a huff, having just finished a meeting with Myanmar immigration officials over the provision of Myanmar ID cards to inhabitants of Wa Region. The Myanmar officials had arrived by car from Lashio the day before and were here for a week.

“Ah, these Burmese are longwinded (luoshuo) and never to the point,” the Wa minister snorted, as he sat down in the mahogany seats of the department’s sitting room, imitating the Burmese officials’ upright pose and stern faces during the meetings. The Wa requests had been simple – to finalize the numbers of Myanmar IDs the immigration department had come to issue (a pitiful 150 this time), and grant them permission to travel to the districts to issue them – a meeting they felt did not warrant 2 hours of politeness. The Myanmar officials, however, according to him, dragged the

\(^{108}\) Based on the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, calculated by aggregating township data and separating out government-controlled townships, the figure is 93.9% without Myanmar ID cards. Census figures are problematic in their own right, but the rate of 90% is generally accurate and corroborated by discussions at village level. This is noteworthy, that while the citizenship issue has been prominently in news regarding the plight of the Rohingya, it is rarely mentioned that large portions of the ethnic minorities in the highlands have neither Pink IDs or White IDs, although of course they have legal avenues to citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law.
meeting along for no good reason, seeming to judge the value of a meeting by its length. “We still have to provide lodging in hotels, buy them SIM cards, bring them for meals, and all this for a mere 150 IDs.” The ID cards were also said to have restrictions on the movement they permitted (Lawi Weng 2015b).

The minister wasn’t angry, more bewildered and disdainful, finding once again that his impression of the Burmese as full of gestures and empty promises was vindicated. Out in the parking lot, the uniformed Myanmar officials were busy making phone calls, their upright postures, briefcases, and stern speech patterns an attempt to project their authority across the courtyard. The Wa authorities had constantly raised the provision of ID cards during peace negotiations with the Myanmar government: “it is not right that you call people your citizens but do not issue them even with IDs”, the minister said. Weeks later, I followed up on the registration process in Mengmao district to the North, and was told by a secretary that “the government issued 173 in total, very reluctantly (mianqiang) increased from the planned 150”.

The negotiation over IDs was a theatre in itself, with requisite performances of hierarchy and appropriateness. While the Wa sent an External Relations Minister and even the Vice-chairman to the first round of talks, the Myanmar representatives who travelled to Pang Kham were low ranking District-level immigration officers. Though not necessarily taken as a slight, the disparity in their positions meant that some form of subservience or respectful posturing was expected from the Myanmar officials, a deference that was not forthcoming. “These Burmese officials are nobodies”, another official beside me said dismissively, “yet they come here and hold court with our ministers and impose on their time without shame”.

On another occasion, a group of Wa officials were discussing the allocation of Myanmar car plates amongst the leaders. The Myanmar government provided around 50 vehicle license plates to the
leaders, so that their cars could enter Myanmar areas legally. Wa vehicles ordinarily have their own license plates beginning WA, WB, and so on, but these cannot legally travel to Myanmar-controlled areas. With only 50, there was hardly enough to go around the central committee, ministers, commanders, and deputies, almost all of whom had several cars each. And the plates had to be paid for, costing the same value as the car itself. A Toyota Landcruiser, or Lexus SUV, which cost several hundred thousand CNY after being driven up to Wa from Thailand, would now cost double with official plates. While the cost was not prohibitive in any way to the Wa leaders, it seemed unnecessary and miserly. Surely those who make the rules control them, and the plates could have easily been given freely, if only the Myanmar knew how to “do things right” and were sincere about providing for and building relationships (see chapter 5).

The motives and sincerity of the Myanmar government were always doubted. A department head laughed it off, “this is just like in 2010, they make token registrations so they can claim the inhabitants of Wa Region are registered, then take their votes for themselves in the upcoming election. This is what they do.” A group of friends, again laughing, told me that these IDs came without an accompanying household registration document, meaning that they were worthless for the purchase of land or for a passport application. And even with the correct IDs, mutable policies at checkpoints might deny passage. In February of 2018, Myanmar police prevented ethnic Wa from traveling between Pang Kham and the Myanmar government areas of Kengtung and Tachilek in Shan State, allegedly in reprisal for the UWSA’s occupation of bases and a river port in Monglar, its own supposed ally (Lawi Weng 2018). In the face of what they perceived to be caprice, stinginess, a lack of sincerity, or hidden ulterior motives, the Wa response was one of disdain and mockery.

In 2014, the first Nationwide Census since 1983 was carried out in Myanmar with help from the international community, and included Wa Region. Some officials saw this census-taking as a
means of espionage, and the Wa government did not allow census-takers to go door-to-door in many of the remote villages. Why should this data, including information about access to electricity and water supply, be collected by the Myanmar government if there was no corresponding tangible output or developmental support? Why ask about household registration and IDs, if only 150 would materialize after? The issuing of vehicle license plates was perceived as a lack of generosity on their part, and the ID registration was seen as meager and insincere.

Figure 17: Road from Pang Kham to Mengmao, Kongmingshan Township, January 2015

While these events held the potential to build ties and trust, they often fell short because of the ineptness of performance and their dissonance with local understandings of trust and generosity. At other times, they were outright obstructed by the Wa authorities seeking to preserve their own interests. The Wa authorities were constantly faced with balancing autonomy and integration – the
potentially inimical risks of exposing themselves to the legibility projects of the Myanmar state, and arguably their partial incorporation into the state, were weighed against the small gains of limited citizenship rights and vehicular access, as well as a legitimation of the UWSA’s political status and territorial sovereignty. It was within such deliberate or contingent political practices of connection and rupture, that the dynamics of liminality unfolded.

**Defending Autonomy: Military Might**

With the strongest standing army of 30,000 across the armed groups, the UWSA is clearly far ahead of other EAGs. The army is reinforced by a People’s Militia capable of mobilizing additional troops. Rumors circulated every few years about the new weapons that they had purchased – from armored vehicles to anti-aircraft missiles to helicopters (see chapter 1). They reportedly had their own weapons factories, and according to the Myanmar military, were in the habit of supplying and arming the other armed groups109. Again, it was the vast and hilly terrain that offered cover for all kinds of weaponry and military bases, and fertile ground for the fears and imagination of their foes.

Rumors of hardware were compounded by tales of the fearsome feats of the Wa soldiers, one that had its roots in a deep historical reputation extending back to the 1500s: “Burmese traditions are said to report the fierceness of the Wa, supposedly unconquerable. Even the great king Bayinnaung is said to have sent an army against them that never came back” (Tinker 1956:331, cited in Fiskesjo 2013:14). James G. Scott’s gems of colonial snobbery included: “a Wa must go out with the same reflection as a self-respecting dog, who never takes a stroll without the conviction that he is more

109 This was an accusation repeatedly hurled at the UWSA during the 2015 fighting around Kokang, that the UWSA was arming other non-ceasefire groups. See Lawi Weng. 2015c. “Govt Wrong to Suggest Wa, China Involvement in Kokang Conflict: UWSA.” *The Irrawaddy*, 27 Feb 2015.
likely than not to have a fight before he comes home again” (1900:500). In the 1930s, the American missionary Harold Young had written admiringly of this “warrior culture” amongst the Wa: “The Wa are superb fighters when on the war path. They become so brave in battle that their actions often reach the degree of recklessness” (2014:8). He went on to describe the “uneARTHLY” and “blood-curdLING” hoops of Wa ambushes or headhunting raids, decapitation with a single stroke of the knife, chants “like a pack of bloodhounds baying in the chase”, and rounded up the account with “there is mysteriousness and strangeness about the Wa nature that few can understand” (Young 2014:21-2).

Along with their historical reputation as highland headhunters, they were also known as the fiercest fighters of the CPB, charging enemy fortifications with little regard for their lives (Lintner 2011). Senior generals in the tatmadaw today still remember their battles with Wa CPB soldiers, even if the younger cohorts have not witnessed it. “Wa soldiers are not scared to die”, was a phrase I often heard, and an alternative – “the Wa are good at dying”. Another friend who had himself been through basic military training told stories of bare-knuckled push-ups on gravel and long climbs – “the training is very tough,” he declared, shaking his head: “when our military instructors trained the Shan militia during exchanges, the Shan commanders implored them to go easy on their soldiers, who were mainly conscripts, afraid that they would desert.”

Narratives of the Wa soldiers’ bravery was also woven into a discourse of their “backwardness” and lack of education – a common tale about Wa fighters in the 1970s told of how they encountered a car in Burmese territory and returned to their commander, claiming that they had met a monster. “But don’t fear, we blinded it,” the story went, after they smashed the headlights of the car.”

A narrative also recounted told by Lintner from 1986 (2011:347).
Chinese businessmen friends from the East coast of China, were full of praise for the Wa as warriors. They described the toughness of the Wa soldiers, who were used to hardship and poor conditions, satisfied with a roof over their heads and meals. For these Chinese from afar, impressions of Wa bravery and toughness often blended into longstanding Chinese narratives of barbarism and savagery at their peripheries. Upon seeing pickups tear down the streets of Pang Kham, they would draw parallels with Wa ferocity, chuckling to themselves: “this is how the Wa drive!”

The bravery of the Wa was contrasted with disdain for the supposed cowardice, perversion, and ineffectiveness of the Burmese soldiers. A friend chuckled as he retold the tale of a company of Burmese soldiers moving through the jungles of Shan State, coming across 3 tigers and having more than 10 soldiers mauled to death, with the tigers allegedly escaping the scene. The same group of tigers came across a patrol of Shan militia later, but all returned unscathed. I was also told stories (by Wa officials nonetheless) of how Wa military units had helped the Myanmar military in battles against various Shan militia in the 1990s, including the notorious Shan “druglord” Khun Sa. One version described how a Burmese brigade of around 1,500 troops was having difficulty dislodging a Shan militia from a fortified hilltop, laying siege to the area for months without much success and many casualties. When the Wa reinforcements arrived, the Wa commander took a quick look at the fortifications, and loudly declared that it would only take only a few companies of soldiers (around 600) to overrun the enemy. The Shan stronghold was overrun within half an hour. Details may surely be exaggerated, but the self-representation of being far better fighters than the Myanmar military is clear.

An official went on to offer a revision to the “Wa are good at dying” narrative – that the Wa took good care of their casualties, bravely stretchering them down slopes under fire, to the medics waiting below. By contrast, morale amongst the Burmese soldiers was low – because they did not
take good care of their wounded during assaults, dragging them quickly downhill in longyis (sarongs) screaming, only to rapidly succumb to their wounds. Another friend, who grew up in Burmese-controlled areas of Shan state, told me of his hatred for the Burmese soldiers: “They take anyone, as long as you have hands and legs. Their army is full of drunkards and smokers, or old people, how could they possibly be effective”?

**Punctuated Peace: Footdragging, Rupture and Posturing**

With some degree of legitimacy and recognition accrued by establishing a government structure and strong military, the UWSA had long been able to dictate its own external relations with the Burmese government and military. This was especially so from the early 2000s when it consolidated its military might through organization and the acquisition of weapons, during the period of good relations with Khin Nyunt. The UWSA preferred low-profile bilateral talks rather than attending publicized peace conferences and summits, of which there were a variety every year when Thein Sein took power in 2011. Wa officials cautioned that the Burmese government often used the UWSA’s reputation and possible presence to pressure smaller armed groups into attending

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11 Bertil Lintner, having observed a battle between the CPB and the tatmadaw at Hsi-Hsinwan in 1986, was impressed with the fighting skills and grit of the tatmadaw then (201:276). The circumstances of sanctions on the tatmadaw have changed, and new weapons purchases, mainly from China and Russia, have equipped it with modern aircraft and missiles. See Asrar, Shakeeb. 2017. *Who is selling weapons to Myanmar?* Al Jazeera, 16 Sep 2017 and Tarabay, Jamie. 2017. “*Myanmar’s military: The power Aung San Suu Kyi can’t control.*” CNN, 6 Dec 2017.

112 The UWSA originally had Liaison Offices in the Myanmar cities of Mandalay, Lashio, Tachilek, and Kengtung, and in the capital Yangon (Chin 2009:35). All these offices ultimately closed, save the one in Lashio and another in Monglar, Special Region 4 of Shan State, controlled by the NDAA.

113 From March 2014 to March 2015, EAGs and negotiators met 7 times to discuss terms and drafts of the October 2015 NCA document, including a Deed of Commitment for Peace and Reconciliation in Feb 2015 that revived flagging confidence in the peace process (BNI 2017:25-6).
these meetings, and hence UWSA’s abstention would allow these groups to make up their minds by themselves. Either way, the UWSA refused to be used by the tatmadaw. In practice, a variety of excuses for absence were summoned – they had been invited too late, the meeting was too far away, or the leaders were preoccupied with other business. Wa officials at all levels repeatedly claimed that any negotiations and signing of new ceasefires was meaningless. In their mind, there was already a ceasefire that had been signed in 1989 and renewed in 2011, and there was no need for another since no open fighting had taken place. It would render all previous promises and agreements empty.

This appeared to stem from a lack of trust rather than a strict adherence to protocol – the Wa leaders were wary of divide and rule strategies. They also scoffed at President Thein Sein’s calls for peace, since the Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing was the key individual upon whom all military decisions rested. This was despite the longstanding personal ties between President Thein Sein and the UWSA leadership, stemming from when Thein Sein was the tatmadaw’s Golden Triangle Regional Military Commander. The President and his Union Peace Working Committee (UPWC) called for peace talks and mooted the NCA in February 2013, while the army continued its campaigns – in 2014-5, battles and skirmishes with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Shan

114 When junta chief Than Shwe stepped down in 2011, he supposedly divided power between his successors, handing Thein Sein the Presidency, Min Aung Hlaing command over the army, and Shwe Mann became the Speaker of Parliament.

115 As the Golden Triangle Commander, Thein Sein visited UWSA areas in South Wa, and declared in 2001 that he regarded Wei Xuegang and Bao Youyi (both members of the UWSA Politburo) as “real friends” (Lintner and Black 2009:98). A Politburo member I spoke with spent time together with Thein Sein during the joint military campaigns against Yawd Serk’s Shan militias in 1998 around South Wa.

116 For a history of the development of the NCA from Feb 2013 including the coalitions and groups involved, those abstaining or not invited to sign, see the Institute for Security and Development Policy’s “Myanmar’s Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement” (ISDP 2015).
State Army-North (SSA-N), Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (AA), and the Kokang (MNDAA). Yet beyond the fundamental lack of trust, the UWSA seemed also to be maintaining a liminal and non-committal position, in order buttress its bargaining position.

Tensions had begun in earnest in 2009, following the political shifts of the abortive 2007 Saffron Revolution (Steinberg 2008; Selth 2008) and the process of creating the new Constitution in 2008 (See Crouch and Lindsey 2014; Harding 2017; Taylor 2009), along with the suspiciously overwhelming support (92.5%) for it in a referendum. The tatmadaw announced in April 2009 a policy for all EAGs to be transformed either into Border Guard Forces (BGF), accepting its officers into their ranks, or People’s Militia Forces (PMF) under their command (see Buchanan 2016:18-9 for careful details of each type of militia arrangement). This move proved unsuccessful, with only a handful of smaller and splinter groups agreeing to be incorporated into the new system (see table in Buchanan 2016:26).

While BGF negotiations were ongoing, in Aug 2009 the Burmese military attacked Kokang Special Region 1, territory of the Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army (MNDAA), on the pretext of seizing munitions and illegal weapons factories. The Kokang forces were led by Peng Jiasheng, an old CPB comrade and ally of the UWSA. The MNDAA was weakened by infighting and factions capitulated within a few days, with around 30,000 refugees fleeing across the border into China. With tensions running high in the area, UWSA military units were mobilized with the possibility of reinforcing their allies to the north. But the conflict had simply ended too quickly. Wa officials recalled how the Burmese military had concurrently sent assurances to the UWSA that they would not be attacked. They dared not risk the entry of the UWSA into combined open conflict. Other friends in the Wa government recalled this event with some consternation, pointing to the divisions within the Kokang leadership that had weakened them, the chaos that it had created in Wa Region.
Another friend told of half-day long queues of Chinese nationals at the Pang Kham border crossing, closing their businesses and returning to China, afraid that fighting would spill over into Wa Region. He told of the Wa Vice-Chairman’s attempt to reassure the frightened Burmese teachers and government officials who tried to flee Wa Region fearing revenge killings. Yet again, the conflict reinforced how the tatmadaw would employ divide and rule tactics, negotiating peace with one group whilst attacking another. It solidified their belief that the Burmese could not be trusted, how they provoked factions within groups to destabilise them.

After this “88 incident” (8th of August), Kokang ceased to be an autonomous region, governed now by rivals of the Peng group, a BGF friendly to the military regime. The following year, overtures of peace were made by the tatmadaw to several EAGs to quell the tensions that the Kokang conflict had created, while repeating calls for them to either disband to convert into the BGF. These conflicting postures by different actors and agents within the Burmese military, were part of the push and pull, the making and breaking of ties and relations. In June 2011, skirmishes gradually became full-on conflict with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), breaking a previous ceasefire signed in 1994, ultimately resulting in more than 100,000 displaced. A Wa township leader, observing the political developments of 2014, told me: “to speak frankly, without a strong army, the other armed groups have to negotiate and fight at the same time, it is a joke.”

Yet in September of 2011, the Burmese military signed another ceasefire with the UWSA, de-escalating tensions and seeming to abandon the BGF demands. It then went on a campaign to sign bilateral ceasefires with most EAGs, with 14 signed in total between September 2011 and August 2012.

117 A series of follow-up discussions continued in 2011 and 2012, whereby the government agreed to allow its health and education ministries to return to support its Wa counterparts, and agreed to the return of international NGOs (TNI 2012).
2013 (Buchanan 2016:21), though fighting with the KIA continued in Kachin State. The present 2016-7 political map resembles what the Economist termed an “alphabet soup of guerrilla groups” (The Economist 2016), with more than 20 EAGs governing or controlling pockets of territory across the peripheries of Myanmar.

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In February of 2015, heavy fighting broke out again in Kokang region, when the Peng’s MNDA attacked to regain control of the territory it had lost in 2009 (TNI 2015). Tatmadaw casualties were high, and journalists banned from reporting on them. Around 80,000 refugees poured into China for the second time in just over 5 years. A strong anti-Chinese sentiment stirred in Lower Myanmar, since the Kokang, ethnically Han Chinese, were said to be receiving support from both China and the Wa. Rumors circulated of Kokang soldiers using weapons manufactured and marked in Wa
Region, and even Wa troops joining in the battles against the tatmadaw, rumors that were roundly denied (Tin Aung Khine and San Maw Aung 2015).

In response to the Kokang fighting, the UWSA hosted the first, landmark EAGs’ Summit in Pang Kham in May 2015. Worryingly for the Myanmar government, the normally standoffish and isolationist UWSA had initiated this ostensible gathering of solidarity in response to renewed conflict. The meeting itself was inconclusive despite pronunciations to the contrary, but President Thein Sein travelled to Kengtung to meet with UWSA and NDAA leaders the following week, each side reassuring the other of their benign intentions. Then in October 2015, the President convinced 8 EAGs, most based further south towards the Thai border, to sign a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which he framed as the legacy of his presidency. Notably, the UWSA and its northern allies refused to sign or even engage in talks, dismissing the government with bland excuses and blatant footdragging. Several Myanmar officials openly accused China of undermining the NCA by pushing these groups not to sign, an allegation which China vehemently and angrily denied (Wee 2015), further souring relations between the two countries.

**Breaking Apart, Coming Together**

With the Myanmar general elections occurring just at the end of my fieldwork in November 2015, a convoluted political terrain was forming amidst the disparate interests of a host of actors\(^{118}\). It looked almost certain that Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) would win. How would the tatmadaw seek to buttress its position before it inevitably had to cede parts of its power to the NLD? How would the incoming government treat the nascent EAG alliances that were

\(^{118}\) For a list of EAGs, and a map of the latest EAG zones of control and territories, see BNI 2017 Fig 5.
forming – both the signatories of the October 2015 NCA, and the non-signatories? And would the perennial problem, that of the Myanmar military refusing to heed the President’s calls for peace and continuing its skirmishes and territory grabs, continue to undermine the peace process? 11 “non-signatories” then convened as a separate group in Pang Kham, again hosted by the UWSA, for the Second EAGs’ Summit in November 2015, barely a week ahead of the watershed national election, to discuss their joint response to the election and the continued fighting in Shan and Kachin States.

Aung San Suu Kyi won the election of November 2015, and took power in March 2016, making the peace process an explicit priority.119 Friends in the higher ranks of the UWSA expressed a willingness to engage with her, encouraged by the potential for a new negotiating partner, a new player in the peace talks. Yet others were slightly skeptical, given that they had no prior relationship with her and did not know what to expect. Wa Politburo members met with her in late July 2016. They were apparently not convinced, because the UWSA delegation walked out of Suu Kyi’s landmark 21st century Panglong Conference in September 2016, in the circumstances with which I opened the dissertation. This first iteration of the 21st century Panglong Conference was said to be a rushed, unilateral headline project of the new NLD government, attempting to make symbolic headway in the peace process (ICG 2016).

Following the first Panglong Conference, the Kokang (MNDAA), Palaung (PSLF/TNLA), and Arakan Army (AA) who were excluded from the NCA, along with the KIA who were also in open

119 The national peace infrastructure underwent wholesale changes with the arrival of the NLD government, as part of ASSK’s attempts to control it. The Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC), the government’s peace centre that facilitates peace negotiations with armed groups, was reformed into the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC), and the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC), set up to monitor the October 2015 NCA, was revamped (see TNI 2017).
conflict with the tatmadaw, declared the formation of a “Northern Alliance” in November 2016 (BNI 2017:6-7). They received the open backing of the UWSA in February 2017, calling for an alternative mechanism to the NCA. A key disagreement over the NCA was the suggestion that signing it was a prerequisite to political dialogue, a position many of the larger EAGs could not accept, insisting on political dialogue before signing. A draft NCA was also sent by the UWSA to the tatmadaw and the NRPC, in March (Lawi Weng 2017). At the 4th EAGs summit in Pang Kham from 15-19 April 2017, the UWSA openly declared the formation of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), or what commentators dubbed the “Wa Alliance”. A 27-page document was issued entitled “The General Principles and Specific Proposition of Revolutionary Armed Organizations of all Nationalities upon the Political Negotiation”.

The new bloc was gaining steam. The UWSA and allies attended the second 21st Century Panglong Conference in Naypyidaw in May 2017 as “special guests” (see also TNI 2017). Despite unhappiness with the term “special guest”, the FPNCC members stayed for the Second Panglong Conference and participated in talks, but as a result of Chinese persuasion, rather than genuine interest in engagement (Horsey 2017). An Irrawaddy interview with the UWSA’s Foreign Affairs Minister Zhao Guo An reiterates this point:

“We don’t know how China handled this [arrangements for the UWSA and allies to attend]. While we were arranging for a visa at the Burmese Consulate in China’s Kunming, we said we would not attend unless we were invited as the FPNCC. China promised to try, and said we would be able to attend as full-fledged delegates, and not as observers or guests.

China also promised it would make sure we were able to give an opening address and that we needn’t sign the DoC [Deed of Commitment to attend]. China negotiated with us on May 21, but the conference was scheduled to start on May 24, and we needed time to make preparations. They [Burma government] usually play that trick—they only made arrangements when the conference was too close. This made it difficult for us to attend. Our assessment is that they wanted to create a situation in which they invited us, but we did not attend.” (Kyaw Kha 2017)
The “Wa Alliance” of April 2017 was the latest group to claim to deal with the government as a conglomerate, and not individually. Yet these shows of solidarity often broke down as with the National Democratic Front (NDF) and United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), the latter seeing the resignations of 6 out of 11 members between 2014 and 2017, including the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) heavyweights. The Wa-hosted EAG summits were similar – starting with 15 groups in May 2015, there were only 7 present by the April 2017 meeting in Pang Kham, having lost participants to the signing of NCA and other political changes. Leaders of the groups communicated amongst themselves, but there was always an uncertainty as to whether each group would hold up to its end of the bargain.

At the first EAGs’ summit in Pang Kham of May 2015, there was much excitement about the discussions to take place, a forum to which the Burmese government had not been invited. Despite ethnic media descriptions of the watershed meeting as “a tremendous boost for non-Burman ethnic unity” (Shan Herald 2015), insiders described the meetings as rife with disagreement and petty posturing. “Not everyone can sit at the center of the table,” a friend told me, frowning and shaking his head describing the sort of jostling that took place: “many groups demanded a ‘VIP’ pass for all their representatives, but we can only give 2 ‘VIPs’ and the rest ‘observer’ passes, there’s simply not enough space in the conference room. Ah...the names of the [one of the EAGs] leaders are so tricky, they get upset when their names are misspelt, as if we speak any Burmese ourselves. Their hearts are so small, how can there be any lasting solidarity amongst us against the government?” There was also incongruence in expectations of appropriateness behavior as guest and host: “it’s going to be a nightmare organizing the next summit, the media, armed groups and all the security needed,  

120 The most famous of the EAGs’ coalitions, the NDF, formed in 1976, was then the latest in a succession of “United Fronts” (see Chart 2 in Smith 1999).
not to mention the hotel and meals we have to pay for as hosts. We’re too polite to tell them to limit their delegations to 6 or 8, but they should know better.” Such discord and jockeying for position was unsurprising, as were the shaky alliances that transpired.

By mid-2017, it seemed the KIO’s relinquishing of its leadership role in the UNFC was replaced by the UWSA’s leadership in the 7-member FPNCC. The UWSA had in the past been thought of as politically disinterested and unsophisticated, with Tom Kramer asserting that UWSA had an impoverished understanding of the policies of other armed groups (2007:64). There were also insecurities amongst the UWSA leadership and a sense of being insufficiently respected by the other EAGs and ethnic groups, seen as fighters rather than negotiators. But the UWSA were no longer the remote warriors of the hills; they had emerged as the leader of the EAGs. They were receiving praise from other EAGs, and I was surprised to hear from colleagues in 2016 that they were being envied for their cunning and ability to drive a hard bargain with the tatmadaw. Perhaps their footdragging and stalemate was not simply due to a “lack of trust”, as was the official explanation, but rather an effective form of dialogue, an productive practice in its own right.

Liminality and the In-Betweeners: “Pawns in a Chess Match”?

The 1989 achievement of “Wa State” had created a new set of balancing acts in the Wa hills – where once the retreating KMT was pitted against the Burmese army and later the CPB in a battle for control of the Wa hills, present-day political discourse in Myanmar propagates the sense that Wa Region and the UWSA are “caught in between”, a pawn in a larger “chessmatch” (Pye and Saw Yan Naing 2013), sandwiched between two powerful states who manipulate it. The UWSA seems required to appease the Myanmar state, of which it ultimately is a part, yet conform to pressure
from Chinese authorities, who offer it political support, weaponry, border crossings, and supply routes and markets for its raw materials such as tin and rubber (ICG 2009; TNI 2016).

China’s official stance has been to encourage dialogue (quanhecuitan) and respect the principle of non-intervention and the sovereignty of Myanmar, but dabbling turned more overt after Thein Sein suspended China’s plans for the Myitsone dam project in 2011, which would have supplied 90% of its power to China121 (see Sun 2017). Myitsone was part of what the Transnational Institute describes the “Malacca dilemma” for China – the need to develop an alternate oil supply route to the Straits of Malacca, seen as a channel friendly to the US – building instead oil and gas pipelines from Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal, along with the Trans-Asia Railway, a road network to India, and a series of hydroelectric dams in Upper Myanmar (TNI 2016). The fighting of the Kokang crisis of 2015 further damaged relations between China and Myanmar: when several bombs landed in Namsan in China killing 5 civilians, the Myanmar military was accused of disregard for China’s security. The tatmadaw capitalized on anti-Chinese sentiment in the battle against the ethnic Chinese Kokang group to gain national support (Ferrie 2015)122. As a result, China’s approach to the Kokang rebels, and by association the other EAGs softened. The NLD government of 2016 later showed a willingness to accommodate and renegotiate some of the Myitsone plans, and the Chinese Special Envoy to the Peace Process, Sun Guoxiang, was sent to persuade the Wa and Monglar groups to

121 The China-Myanmar relationship is a key topic of political analysis and commentary (See ICG 2009, 2010; Sun 2017; Fan and Steinberg 2012; TNI 2016; Lintner 2017b).

122 See Ferrie, Jared. 2015. “Burma Military Wins Rare Praise in War with Ethnic Chinese Rebels.” Reuters, 27 Feb 2015. The anti-Chinese riots of 1967 (Fan 2012), rumoured to be stoked by the military junta, were part of a long history of hostility towards landholding and capital accumulating foreigners. In today’s Mandalay and Northern Shan State the presence of PRC Chinese and their business and property investments are particularly visible, causing Burmese to feel pushed out of their cultural heritage areas (ICG 2009:25).
attend the first 21st Century Panglong Conference in Sep 2016, which they did reluctantly. Such vicissitudes were complicated by China’s “multi-layered policies”, with Sun’s diplomatic channel, the International Liaison Department of the CCP, and the Chinese military (Peoples’ Liberation Army) all lending different faces to its intervention (Lintner 2017b). In addition to this, different policy approaches by the Yunnan and Beijing authorities have added more complications to the China-UWSA relationship (ICG 2010).

Most analysts argue that arming the UWSA is China’s political means of keeping the Myanmar government in line, with Anthony Davis quoted by Reuters in describing the UWSA as “unquestionably the biggest stick Beijing wields” (Lee and Slowkowski 2016a) in negotiations. Myanmar’s supposed closer relations with the US and the West since 2013 are said to allow the EAGs some leverage in bargaining for Chinese support (Sun 2015), even as they cosy up to China by declaring support for its “One Belt, One Road” infrastructure development strategy.

Other observers suggest that China is keen to maintain the stability of its border regions as a buffer zone from drugs, disease, and disorder (in the form of refugees and crime). Concerned with stemming the flow of heroin and methamphetamines, the Yunnan Provincial government created an Opium Replacement Fund in 2006 to encourage Chinese companies through subsidies and incentives, to start poppy-substitution projects in Myanmar, investing USD 26.5 million by 2007 (TNI 2012:22-5). From a livelihoods perspective, these were reported to be a failure, with Chinese companies often abusing the subsidies through fraudulent projects, or alienating Burmese farmers by through poor compensation and a heavy-handed approach. Other aid to Wa Region included bringing Wa students to Yunnan on study exchanges, easing up immigration requirements to allow short trainings and middle-schooling, or training doctors and nurses in China. These however, were too few to be significant. The officials of neighboring Yunnan counties and prefectures were often
invited to Wa Region for celebrations and festivals, and Wa officials travelled to China for visits, short courses, and governance exposure.

These ties, along with the use of Chinese currency, mobile networks, trade routes, and Chinese as an administrative language in Wa Region have created a tangible closeness between the UWSA and China, leading the Global New Light of Myanmar, the propaganda newspaper of the tatmadaw, to declare in May 2015:

“Civil administrative positions are being taken by ethnic Chinese and local culture is being swallowed... now is the time to monitor if they all are real ethnic Wa tribesmen or if they are (Chinese) people pretending to be (Was) and trying to use Wa image for their own selfish interests.” (Aung Zeya 2015)

The same article accused the UWSA of taking the path to secession, being the biggest manufacturer of opium and methamphetamines, conducting forced conscription of child soldiers, and “antagonist characteristics”. It even suggested that the May 2015 EAGs Summit in Pang Kham was a way to sell Kokang drugs to other armed groups to raise money for the MNDAAs war with the tatmadaw. Aside from its blatant hypocrisy, the article rehearsed misrepresentations of the Wa as manipulated and hijacked by Chinese interests, and standing in full defiance of the Myanmar nation.

Misunderstandings about the Wa and the UWSA have flourished in central Myanmar as a result of such representations. The links between China and the UWSA are often overplayed, even the ridiculous rumor that the UWSA wants to secede and join with China. In the 2000s it was mistakenly believed that many of the Wa leaders were ethnic Chinese (Milsom 2005:80), though

123 A rumour I heard of in Yangon went that some Burmese saw fighting the UWSA as pointless, because “they were Chinese, and more Chinese would simply come over the border to fight, a never-ending stream of soldiers”.
this is partly true. A Reuters article titled “Through reclusive Wa, China’s reach extends into Suu Kyi’s Myanmar”, based on their 2016 visit to Wa Region, exaggerates the “monitoring” by Beijing, and repeatedly highlights Chinese citizens amongst the Wa government officials, as if this were evidence of grand machinations (Lee and Slowkowski 2016a). Bertil Lintner describes the UWSA as a bargaining chip for China, and goes as far as to write:

“any military action against the UWSA would pit the Myanmar army against China. The Wa leaders are always accompanied by Chinese intelligence officers, and it is no exaggeration to say the UWSA is an extension of China’s People’s Liberation Army.” (Lintner 2014)

Assessments of the UWSA being a Chinese proxy are clearly flawed (See also TNI 2016:24), and the UWSA is careful to continually remind others that they are not pawns of the Chinese. Perhaps aware of the media reports and hearsay that tells of Chinese advisors and intelligence officials working in the Wa government, officials often made comments or statements distancing themselves from China. For example, when declaring their desire to have the UN and China as external observers to the peace process in 2015, the UWSA vice-chairman justified this by saying that China was a neighbor on the other side of the border. It also became apparent when the Chinese Special Envoy struggled to convince the UWSA to attend the Second 21st Century Panglong Conference, succeeding ultimately, but with a great cost of political capital.

A township leader suggested that it was the Burmese CPB and their Chinese Communist supporters who brought Chinese as a working language to the Wa in the 1970s, it was not an active choice to use Chinese. “Nobody else offered any assistance,” he explained. Chairman Bao himself reminds visitors that he is grateful to the Chinese for providing basic education to the early Wa leaders. The historical affinities and sentimental ties between China and the UWSA, stemming from the CPB period are gradually wearing away as the previous generation of UWSA Politburo leaders step down, and Yunnan officials change. A Wa official, describing the stance of the younger Yunnan provincial
and local authorities, lamented that “nowadays amongst the younger officials, there are no longer any old sentiments” (*nianqing de ganbu yidian ganqing doubuyou*).

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The intricacies of this contextual geopolitical situation however, must not give the impression that the UWSA are puppets or pawns. For sure, the geostrategic implications of straddling the border between China and Myanmar have become much more significant within the last decade, with the opening of Myanmar to the West and the projection of Chinese power. Yet ties and relationships to Naypyidaw or Kunming and Beijing remain ambivalent and contingent. They shape and constrain, but do not determine the actions of the UWSA.

It is precisely this in-betweenness and liminality that the UWSA has adopted and adapted to, resisting incorporation, yet building connections to neighboring actors. To negotiate and have dealings with the Myanmar government, and to be taken seriously by international and regional actors, the UWSA needed to accrue political authority and speak a “language of stateness”, mimicking the functions of a nation-state, with great concern for its territorial sovereignty, military strength, bureaucratic apparatus, economic well-being, and diplomatic ties to the surrounding political entities.

Intermittence of political practice was central to managing liminality. Connections made, maintained, ruptured, re-made. The selectively porous sovereign boundaries, armed resistance, footdragging in peace talks, forming of political coalitions against the Myanmar government, and managing relations with China were political practices that turned with the vicissitudes of the political winds. They were both agentive and contingent. And rather than viewing these ambivalences and ruptures as stalemate and setbacks in the peace process, an acknowledgement of
the productive potentiality of the liminality it produces, might allow us to rethink our understandings of what “conflict resolution” should look like.
Chapter 4 Integration

In this chapter I build on the examination of political practice, a series of connections and ruptures which produce and maintain the liminality of Wa Region. I examine the “problematics of governance” (Rose and Miller 2010) as a form of political practice through which the UWSA exercises sovereignty over its territory and subjects. I argue that governance and administration in Wa Region produces two effects (amongst others) that operate in tension with one another: (1) through the production of political authority, governance practices strengthen the UWSA’s bargaining power vis-à-vis the Myanmar state by legitimating their rule of Wa Region, ensuring degrees of self-determination and autonomy. Simultaneously, (2) governance practices also integrate and incorporate Wa Region into the Myanmar nation-state through the mimicry of legibility techniques and bureaucratic practices – such as controlling the population through registration and census making, the construction of road networks, the engagement of international organizations, drug eradication campaigns, and selective symbolic subordination to the Myanmar state. Governance then, is a domain through which the liminality of Wa Region is navigated.

By focusing on political practices of governance and the production of authority, I circumvent the characterizations and definitional debates about whether Wa Region and the UWSA is a de facto “state within a state”, a “non-state actor”, or a political entity competing with the Myanmar state for authority (see chapter 2). I also avoid state-centric comparisons and normative evaluations of the nature of governance, as “good governance” proponents and development perspectives tend to do. This, of course, is neither apologism nor the shoulder-shrugging of cultural relativism, but an attempt to set the wider context of what practices and discourses produce.
I first engage discourses about governance, in particular the discourse of “good governance” as promulgated by observers who deploy a standard yardstick of Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy. I suggest that such observers inadvertently overlook the wider effects of these practices and rituals of governance (cf. Ferguson 1994; Li 2005). I ask instead, how do these practices unfold within the social and cultural context of Wa Region, reproducing and constituting political authority? What effects does the constitution of political authority have on the political arena within the wider Myanmar state? And what debates and discourses over forms of governance take place between locals?

The chapter focuses ethnographically on governance as a realm of contestation wherein different political elites and everyday people struggle to navigate domains of authority within and without Wa Region. Three types of political practices might be discerned in an ethnography of governance in Wa Region, similar to “languages of stateness” (Hansen and Stepputat 2001): (1) governing practices themselves, a series of acts and policies to master population and resources, (2) discourses about governance, commentaries or evaluations of its efficacy according to internal and external norms, and 3) symbolic and material registers of the governing apparatus and political system. I describe administrative structures, social services, infrastructure, livelihoods, and campaigns, demonstrating how they negotiate the same tension between autonomy and integration. I tell stories of both governors and the governed – how policies of the UWSA shape and intersect with

\[\text{124} \] For Hansen and Stepputat, the “languages of stateness” are the “bundle of widespread and globalized registers of governance and authority” through which the process of construction of forms of the modern state takes place (2001:5). They discern three languages of governance and three symbolic languages of authority.
the mobilities and livelihoods of everyday villagers and town inhabitants, as they traverse boundaries and regimes in search of social mobility.

I conclude by examining evaluations of “good governance” and development in Wa Region, finding that it bears uncanny resemblance to narratives of primitiveness that have long marginalized and relegated the Wa to the peripheries of Myanmar political society. Governance in Wa Region is not just a domestic affair, it is intertwined with criticism and development aid from the international community, and the political constraints of the relationship with the Myanmar government. I observe how narratives of backwardness and a “lack of exposure”, alongside reflections on inequality and development, are concurrently co-opted and manipulated by Wa elites to exert autonomy as a value central to their way of life.

**Governance and the Production of Political Authority**

A newer body of political science literature on armed conflict and “non-state actors” has been dubbed that of “rebel governance”. This literature “seeks to understand rule by insurgents who provide public goods and regulate conduct in areas they hold... conceptualized broadly as the set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war” (Arjona et al. 2015:3; also Mampilly 2011; Lidow 2016; Worrall 2017). Rebel governance offers an injunction to attend to political practice, but as the anthropologist William Reno argues: “the task here is inquire as to how odious (including predatory) behavior may be related to a process of governance, rather than how these practices deviate from international standards” (2015:267). Practices, processes, and their effects are central, rather than a calculation of adherence to standards of “good governance”.

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Work in the anthropology of the state, building on the turn to state practices and effects, offer a means of transcending the state/non-state dichotomy (see chapter 3). Archaeologist Adam Smith argues that the analytic of the State and the search for evolutionary forms of state formation has blunted the conceptual tools available to scholars for “attending to the central problem of political analysis: what did early complex polities actually do? How did polities manufacture sovereignty?” (2003:25) Smith is concerned instead with the constitution of political authority through particular landscapes, cities, and spatial configurations, paying attention to semiotic sensibilities, representations, and the experience of space (2003:10). While his emphasis is on monuments, urban planning, and architectural design in early complex societies (Mayan, Mesopotamian, Urartu), his larger point – that analysis of political practice should examine how authority is created through material and meaningful acts – is most instructive.

Political scientist Christian Lund draws attention to the processes of production and negotiation of public authority by formal and traditional institutions in “failed” or “failing” states (2006). For Lund, “state” qualities of governance are not exclusive to government institutions, but are often also found in traditional institutions or civil society organizations that explicitly proclaim themselves to be “non-state”. Public authority is “orchestrated” through symbolic registers, claims to legitimacy, or taxation, by different institutions (Lund 2006).

Rose and Miller have attended to the “problematics of government”, which is to say, the study of the “complex assemblages of diverse forces” that produce power as an effect125 (2010:281). For them, 

125 Rose and Miller suggest that their analysis of the problematics of governance might also be scaled up to geo-political level (2010:276), viewing, then, Myanmar as a “geo-political field” within which the state and armed insurgent groups exist in particular configurations with each other, “establish[ing] the limits and coherence of the domains of political authority, [and] demarcat[ing] the geographical and conceptual spaces of political rule” (2010:276). These assemblages of governance, political rationalities, programmes, technologies, and expertise could be analyzed within Myanmar, and the dynamics
governance extends beyond the fetishized imaginary of the “state”; it is a domain of political rationality, knowledge, technologies, inscription, and expertise:

“In arguing against a ‘state centered’ conception of political power, we do not mean to suggest that government does not produce centers. But centers of government are multiple: it is not a question of the power of the centralized state, but of how, in relation to what mentalities and devices, by means of what intrigues, alliances and flows – is this locale or that able to act as a centre.” (2010:282)

From Rose and Miller, Lund, and Adam Smith, we gather an understanding of authority as constituted and accrued by a host of disaggregated institutions, organizations and individuals, falling into both the traditional categories of “state” and “non-state”. Diverse centers of power and governance form an assemblage through which power is produced. This is especially the case in Wa Region, where the UWSA clearly wields power and political authority, yet only partially exhibits the traditional institutions characteristic of a state, and relies on connections, political circumstance, and personal power to govern. The notion of assemblage then offers a conceptual device for thinking through complex configurations of power and authority in Wa Region: the legal-rational in the UWSA bureaucracy, the charismatic authority vested in the personages of Wa leaders and their departments or military units, the political authority accrued through the symbolism of Wa State and its protection of its people from the Myanmar government, and its contestation amongst everyday people.

between groups and their practices. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but would be most useful to disaggregating the Myanmar “state” and its armed conflict with “non-state actors”.

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Contested Political Authority and “Good Governance”

Governance is a site of contestation where political authority is concurrently produced and undermined. The UWSA attempts to accrue political authority through its provision of infrastructure, social services, and law and order, within the parameters of self-administration set by the Myanmar government, and heeding the appropriate symbols and registers of subordination to the national authority. Yet its shortcomings in administrative capacity, the prevalence of illicit economies, and the stark economic inequality between elites and people, falls foul of discourses of “good governance” from the international community.

The late historian Ronald Renard, previously head of the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) office in Wa Region during the opium-substitution development projects, felt that many of the Wa leaders “did not have their people’s best interests in mind”, a feeling shared by a fellow UN official working in Wa, who stated that: “the next issue [after the opium ban] I have with the Wa is good governance” (Renard 2013a:144, here quoting Milsom, his predecessor at UNODC). Tom Kramer echoes this, describing the UWSA as having “weak capacity”, “hierarchical”, “with a top-down leadership style and little room for participation in decision-making for local communities” (2007:xvi). Milsom himself calls for “all stakeholders [to] have a voice” (2005:62). NGO or UN visitors to Wa Region during my time there often had their not unreasonable doubts about the UWSA leadership, shocked by the levels of poverty, and finding the Wa leaders unable to articulate a feasible plan for developing their area.

126 I was often able to arrange meetings between international visitors and members of the Central Committee, given the local ethics of hospitality and norms of visitation. It was perhaps this intimacy that made the UWSA leadership seem at once accessible and yet detached in their lack of support for
By “good governance”, these observers were referencing the rhetorics of strong institutions, capacity, participatory procedures, anti-corruption, and transparency (e.g. Weiss 2000; World Bank 1992). Political appointments in the UWSA were seen to be based on nepotism, social capital and connections, and failed to match rationalized standards of democratic state processes. Observers also referred to the ramshackle and substandard provision of social services and public goods for the people of Wa Region, and the lack of a functioning public administration. There was little resource management, with extractive industries in mining and logging operating in “unsustainable” ways. They were uncomfortable with an administration that perpetuated gross income inequalities between elites and everyday people, without any accountability or transparency to its subjects. Nor was there any distinction separation between law-makers, enforcement, and policy implementers. Most of all, the observers were troubled by their inability to explain to the top UWSA leadership what such “good governance” might look like127 (see Milsom 2005; Renard 2013a).

To be clear, social indicators, insofar as they can be reliably gathered, are dismal. Illiteracy is an estimated 77.5%, with 64.7% of people aged 5-29 having never had schooling of any form. Only 8.1% of those aged 25 and above have had some primary school education128. Healthcare indicators are disheartening, though the reliability of statistics from the Wa Health Department is far from development initiatives. By contrast, few INGO or UN staff have access to the top rungs of the tatmadaw or Myanmar government.

127 As a development staff myself, and as the latest in the line of UN officials to work in Wa Region, I too was not exempt from such concerns and struggles whilst working in food security and education. The gulf in status and authority often made it difficult to establish a platform for meaningful dialogue. An official told me, after hearing out my suggestions for education reform: “this thing that you are telling us, everyone already knows.”

128 All these figures above are derived from the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, calculated by aggregating township data and separating out government-controlled townships from the UWSA-controlled ones.
instructive (See Kramer 2007:32-3). Food security indicators are poor. The World Food Programme’s Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) branch classified 43% of surveyed households at “Borderline” and 25% as “Poor” in food consumption patterns, with 60% of households with less than 2 acres of land, and only 48% of households with access to irrigation\(^{129}\). UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) finds Under-5 stunting to be at 57.7% and wasting at 7.3% (UNICEF 2005). The datedness of these statistics shows just how it is to conduct reliable data-gathering at ground level, due to staff and funding shortages, poor accessibility owing to security reasons, and the lack of donor interest to begin with. Social services, in short, are rudimentary.

Yet it is clear that notwithstanding the political science critiques of the “good governance” discourse\(^{30}\) (see Doornbos 2001), measuring the UWSA by these Weberian state-centric metrics misses the larger point: the UWSA is not striving for good governance through social services, drug eradication, transparency, and institutions, rather, it garners sufficient authority and legitimacy to uphold its autonomy, whilst avoiding over-reliance on and incorporation into the Myanmar state\(^{31}\).

\(^{129}\) WFP VAM, “An Analysis of the Food Security Situation in Selected Areas across Wa.’ June 2010 (unpublished). The study looked at 310 households across 14 townships in Wa Region. Food consumption scoring was based on a calculation of food diversity and availability (food insecurity).

\(^{30}\) Sylvia Tidey argues that the juxtaposition of Weberian models of rational-legal bureaucracies against local moral economies based on reciprocity, led to simplistic notions of corruption and nepotism (2016). Tidey’s own work describes how Indonesian civil servants carefully navigate local moralities and ethical behavior in reciprocal favors and connections, complicating easy definitions of “corrupt” behavior under the rules of the good governance framework.

\(^{31}\) In line with the turn to “state effects” and practice in the anthropology of the state, Tania Li (2005) makes a similar point when examining state schemes of “improvement” and the governance roles of entities beyond the state like NGOs and researchers: rather than examining efficacy (“why have the schemes failed?”), anthropologists should look at their effects.
Good governance standards as a simplistic (yet ambiguous, see Tidey 2016) evaluative checklist obfuscate the contests and performances of authority within local contexts and political culture.

It seemed that lacking was a perspective able to accommodate or comprehend local practices of reciprocity, the navigation of networks and connections, and negotiations of social and political capital by powerbrokers in Wa Region (see chapter 5). The local moral economy surrounding governance in Wa Region was based on historical legacies from the CPB period, commercial practices of the borderland economy (see chapter 6), and local sensibilities of power and authority. Within these layered forms of authority, actors improvised and navigated rules and norms of appropriate behavior, and propagated their own discourses and counter-discourses about what governance, authority, and development should entail.

Authority and Assemblages of Governance

Government Structure and “Vertical Encompassment”

The common dismissive labels of “drug lords” or “warlords” dished out by journalists, drug enforcement, and observers (e.g. TIME 2002; Global Witness 2015) do little justice to the forms of authority that takes hold in the Wa hills. Authority was strong in the imaginaries of local people – a combination of the personas of leaders (see chapter 5), the uncompromising monopoly of violence of the UWSA, visible apparatus, uniforms, and insignia, and an extended bureaucratic administration adopted from the CPB structures. The UWSA also has a political party, the United Wa State Party (UWSP), though in everyday function and parlance, the Army and Party are indistinct, and largely referred to as the Wa government (wabang zhengfu), or to the leadership in general (wabang lingdao). The party itself plays a less important role, since the key party cadres (ganbu) are heads or members of work units (danwei) in the administration, all terms derived from
the Chinese political nomenclature. There are no elections in Wa Region, and officials are appointed by the Politburo or supervising authorities.

The central government is headed by the Politburo and Central Committee\textsuperscript{132}, with seven departments (\textit{bu}) – Finance, General Staff or military, External Relations, Political Affairs, Construction and Development, Agriculture, Justice – and a series of smaller bureaus (\textit{chu}) beneath them\textsuperscript{133}. The military (\textit{budui}) is held separate from the administrative branches, and divided into brigades (\textit{lù}) and battle commands (\textit{zhanqu}), each responsible for a certain area of operations. The military does not feature heavily in the administrative functioning of government departments, but rather holds a parallel authority alongside them, a de facto control of jurisdiction that can at times be very confusing\textsuperscript{134}. Under these central authorities come the 3 Districts and 24 Townships (including 2 Special Townships). Officials from all Wa ministries and governing levels congregate twice yearly in the capital Pang Kham for the biannual workplan meetings (\textit{quanbang gongzuo})

\textsuperscript{132} The latest reshuffling of the Politburo and Central Committee saw Bao You Liang and Zhao Guo An elevated to Vice-Chairmen, making a total of 3 Vice-Chairmen alongside Chairman Bao. As of Jan 2018, there were 9 members in the Politburo and 11 more in the Central Committee. See BNI 2018. “\textit{UWSP reinforces leadership with middle-aged and young bloods}”, BNI News Online, 22 Jan 2018.

\textsuperscript{133} The present structure of departments as at 2017 differ somewhat from Kolin Chin’s (2009:35) and Ronald Renard’s diagrams (2013a:154), perhaps due to administrative changes. The main difference is that several Bureaus (\textit{chu}) have been subsumed under other Departments (\textit{bu}), and others elevated to Department status. My translations of \textit{bu} and \textit{chu} also differ from theirs; whereas they use “Bureau”, I choose “Department” instead. I refer to Heads of Departments as Ministers. The terminology in English is less important than the hierarchies and relative authority between the units, and translations are an attempt to convey the extent of authority.

\textsuperscript{134} This decentralization of authority and power is in line with Jeremy Milsom’s account (2005:69-70); where he also argues that military units often seemed to be more powerful than the civil administrative structure. To complicate things further, the rubber plantation companies (most owned in part by Wa leaders or “bosses” from China), had responsibilities to administer the movement, education, and healthcare of their own workers and workers’ families, with little accountability to or oversight from township authorities.
huiyi), where each district, ministry, and military unit gathers key statistics about their work and gives a report to higher levels.

An impressive governing apparatus and series of regulatory regimes exist in Wa Region to tax, document, and provide for the population. There are license plates and road taxes by the Traffic Police, cattle immunization registries and food safety certificates from the Health Bureau, commercial taxation and business licenses from the Commerce Bureau, residence papers, household registration, and travel permits issued by the Ministry of Justice, business registries at the Finance Ministry, and a Mining Bureau which registered and taxed resource extraction, amongst others. Rural taxation in the form of a grain tax was common, and even though central authorities had outlawed the collection of tax, it continued at the lower levels, causing some discontent amongst the rural communities. A cash substitute was not accepted, much like the opium tax prior to the 2005 opium ban.\textsuperscript{135} Taxes on commerce, property, and construction businesses were also high, although at times difficult to enforce, since income was secretive and never declared, lumped under the nebulous term of “business” (shengyi). The head of the Tax Bureau would have a hard time collecting taxes from companies belonging to top leaders’ and their affiliates: “everyone is part of the same family”, I was told, “it is not easy to go to someone and ask them to pay taxes on their new hotel”.

\textsuperscript{135}The opium tax was not standardized, it differed from household to household depending on local authorities’ estimate of their yield. Authorities made visits to each field just before harvest, and fixed a certain weight per household to be taxed in kind. The remainder of the opium was sold to the authorities at a fixed price, and private sale of opium was not allowed (Chin 2009:58-60).
Government officials are paid pittance in salary, ranging from between 150 CNY to 1200 CNY (25-200 USD) even for ministers, along with a monthly rice ration of 10 or 20 kgs. These were clearly insufficient, and officials were to find other sources of income. Each ministry is responsible for its own workplan, budgeting, and staffing, though financial budgets were often unclear – ministries ran their own businesses, such as rubber plantations and mines, and leaders chipped in to provide for the financial needs of the department where necessary (see also Chin 2009:45). Nor were districts guaranteed an annual budget from the central government; this was on an ad hoc basis according to decisions made by leaders. Ultimately, the most effective departments and districts were run by the wealthiest and most powerful leaders, whereas poorer ministers often struggled to find funds to implement programs. It was also the reason why standardized policies in agriculture, education and healthcare were difficult to enforce – without funds and budgets provided, the districts and townships had no reason to follow directives from the central authorities (also Milsom 2005:70). This non-standardization of policy was partly a vestige of the value of autonomy in Wa Region, but partly also sense of propriety, that a central authority that provided no assistance had less authority to dictate terms on less important issues.

Authority then overlapped in two ways: first, leaders or governing units often doubled up control over districts and areas, and second, it was often difficult to discern the influence any official or leader had, solely from his formal governmental position. An official, for instance, might be more powerful than his superior simply because of his greater wealth. It was sometimes a struggle to

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136 For comparison, the wage rate for manual labor in the towns was 50-80 CNY (8.30-13.30 USD) per day, and 20 CNY per day (3.30 USD) for labor in the fields. It was difficult however, to consistently find work for even 3 days a week; in Pang Kham, laborers waited at the roundabout at the border crossing to China, or at the main entrance of the casino in the mornings, when potential employers came by to find day labor.
figure out who the most influential or powerful person in any given domain was. Apart from the top few leaders such as the minister described earlier, rank and power often shifted with the political winds. Locals nonetheless, were experts at figuring out and operating within these constraints, given that a series of scripts and local contexts formed the basis for social interactions and power plays (see chapter 5). People were keenly attuned to social hierarchies and political capital, and sensitive to the situational cues – when starting a mining business, for instance, one had to understand which authorities (administration or military, district leader or secretary) to approach, and in what order. Such a sensibility not only enabled them to behave appropriately and respectfully, but also challenge and contest power where advantageous.

While authority was sometimes difficult to ascertain, formal hierarchies and norms of protocol were enacted with symbolic certitude. Everyday performances of political authority made sure to represent subordination to the Myanmar state, and avoided antagonizing it. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) refer to these as rituals and representations which affirm the “verticality” and “encompassment” of political order. At many Wa government buildings and some schools, the union flag of Myanmar flies elevated slightly above the flag of Wa region and the UWSP. Key sectors such as education and health are “Bureaus” rather than “Ministries”, an acknowledgement of being subordinate to the Myanmar Ministries of Education and Health, since the Myanmar government provides Wa Region with some assistance on these fronts. As discussed in chapter 2, the tension

137 In 2015, the only presence of the Myanmar government in Wa Region was a Myanmar government hospital in Pang Kham, a Ministry of Border Affairs (Natala) Office, and about 50 teachers sent from Myanmar Ministry of Education to teach in Wa villages and townships. The Health Bureau Head frequently travels down to Naypyidaw for conferences and meetings, but other Ministers are less engaged owing to the political situation. A Myanmar military company in Pang Kham was present up till 2012. Renard reported that Myanmar military units in Wa Region were unarmed, with one in Mengmao as well (2013a:149).
over the naming of “Myanmar Special Region 2 (Wa State)” and “Myanmar Shan State Special Region 2 (Wa State)” was central to this argument over subordination to national or state level authority.

On one occasion, friends from the External Relations Department asked me to double-check the correct acronym (in the English alphabet) to be sewn as patches on their sleeves. They drew parallels with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (waijiao bu), and were clear that they were not at that level of international diplomacy. Instead, the department was called the External Relations Department (duiwai guanxi bu). Hence, instead of WJB (the hanyu pinyin acronym for Foreign Affairs Ministry, or FAM, they settled upon ERD, for External Relations Department.

In 2015, instructions were sent to all Wa government departments to conduct basic Burmese language classes for their staff, as a gesture of willingness to engage with their counterparts in the Myanmar government. Office staff searched for basic Burmese textbooks for language instruction, but the initiative came to a gradual halt, the Wa authorities complaining of a lack of support from the Myanmar government in offering textbooks or even acknowledging their efforts. A friend described this as mere posturing (zuo zitai), one that was ultimately not reciprocated with goodwill by the Burmese.

Such symbolic gestures are an acknowledgement of appropriate protocol and political terminology, an attempt to take and be taken seriously as ratified participants within the political arena. It is also a demonstration of deference and respect for what they interpret to be institutionally appropriate behavior (hefa\(^\text{138}\), lit. legal or biaozhun, standardized). Whilst not the same as full acceptance or

\(^{138}\) By contrast, the term buhe, was frequently used to describe inappropriate behavior or action, such as in a game of cards, or manners and etiquette.
acquiescence to Myanmar political authority, it shows the embodied awareness of the importance of symbolized hierarchy and decorum amongst the UWSA. At the same time, symbolic representations inscribe the UWSA themselves into Myanmar state forms and functions. Yet the hollowness of these performances in the context of Wa military autonomy renders this symbolic subordination a mockery at times.

**Top-Down Campaigns – “Drug Lords” Reformed?**

The campaign-style policies of the UWSA were top-down and directive-driven, a legacy of the Communist-era even if results were mixed – crackdowns on drug abusers (saodu), on prostitution (saohuang), and on gambling (kangdu), adopted the same militaristic language as that in China. In May and June of 2014, nearly 1,000 drug users were arrested and sent to prison, detained at spontaneous checkpoints were set up along the main thoroughfares in Wa region. Months later, inhabitants of Pang Kham woke up to find that the string of gaming shops that ringed the casino compound had been shuttered. More than 20 such shops hosting the popular video-game “Fish Hunter” (dayu pai), where players sat around a video machine “pond” and fired off virtual bullets of all kinds at unassuming fish, had been forced to close down. Owners had to sell off their machinery and lost their businesses overnight. The stated reasons for this were that it was a highly addictive game that drained the incomes of families, including children, it was a form of costly illicit gambling, and that, being open 24 hours, it attracted all kinds of unsavory characters (allegedly abusers of methamphetamines, who found themselves unable to sleep). No compensation, no warning, just an immediate order to close. This was undoubtedly a public good, reflecting the _______________

139 See Rath, Robert. 2016. “*Why Cops Are Raiding Arcades Over a Fishing Game*,” Waypoint, 24 Nov 2016, for an US explanation of the mechanics of this game, popular across Asia, and being raided by California police. There are both gambling and non-gambling versions.
responsiveness of the UWSA to some social ills, even as the main casino itself loomed large behind, unassailed by anti-gambling operations.

Drug trafficking and production has been the source of most of writing on Wa Region (Chin 2009; Jelsma et al. 2005; Lone 2008; Kramer 2007; Chouvy 2010), and is perhaps the issue which placed Wa Region onto the maps of UN and Western governments in the 1990s. As early as 1990, the UWSA had begun planning for a ban on opium growing and trafficking in their territory\(^{140}\), one that ultimately took effect on 26 June 2005 in strict and heavy-handed fashion\(^{141}\). Sympathetic UN observers argued that the region was not prepared for such a drastic transition, and that despite sincere intentions, the lack of appropriate development assistance, isolation, and poor planning would send hundreds of thousands of farmers into food insecurity. They noted however, a sincere push to eradicate opium production and gain international acceptance (Milsom 2005:64), with the UNODC entering Wa Region in 1998 to prepare alternative livelihood substitution programs. But these programs were “woefully insufficient” to cope with the loss of cash income so vital to Wa farmers (Lone 2008:91), leading to increased poverty and hardship for tens of thousands of households\(^{142}\). In January 2005, months before the opium ban was set to begin, the US indicted 8

\(^{140}\) Opium eradication campaigns have had their roots in the CPB period, where crop-substitution programmes were launched in the 1970s. The launch of a 15-year development plan in three 5-year plans in November 1989, saw the announcement of the plans to eradicate opium in 1990 (Renard 2013a:150). Saw Lu’s open proposal to the international community in 1993 was a plea for help to “free ourselves from slavery to an opium economy” (1993).

\(^{141}\) Heavy fines and jail terms were the punishment for opium growing in the immediate years after the ban. I heard stories of township officials been caught for running their own opium operation, turned in by local villagers.

\(^{142}\) Milsom argues that the “misguided image” of the UWSA as a dangerous drug cartel forced the leadership to enact the opium ban at such a drastic pace, imperiling its own people and their livelihoods (2005:86).
key Wa leaders on drug trafficking charges, a serious setback in the UWSA’s attempts to gain political legitimacy. This of course, confused the UWSA leadership, since they felt their sincere attempts to reform had not been given due credit.

As part of opium eradication plans, the UWSA began voluntary and forced resettlements from districts in the North to South Wa, with between 50-100,000 villagers moved between 1999-2006\(^ {143}\) (Milsom 2005; LNDO 2002; Fiskesjo 2017). Government officials I spoke to placed the figure around 100,000, noting that relocations were not all to South Wa, but also a redistribution of population within North Wa itself, to other less populated or flatter-relief townships like Mong Phen, Mong Kar and Wein Kao. Many were moved from the hilltops to spur lines beside roads, and large villages were carved into several smaller ones\(^ {144}\). These could have contributed to the discrepancy in the figures, with not all migrants destined for or reaching South Wa. Nonetheless, 100,000 people comprised at least a staggering one-fifth of the population of North Wa being located to the South.

The mass relocation was painted as a drastic and disastrous move. Fiskesjo describes how the uprooting of such large populations affected the social and traditional fabric of village communities, as it “cut large numbers of people off from their traditional maps of local gods and spirits, their sacred groves, in effect the entirety of familiar ground and local historical memory” (2017:16). Malaria and travel-related deaths wreaked havoc amongst the population, physical and social suffering compounded by their loss of access to traditional and ritual means of propitiating local

\(^{143}\) Chin Kolin suggests tens of thousands were relocated to South Wa from 1999 to 2001 (2007:32), while Lone’s interviews with district leaders in 2008 had total figures of around 50-80,000 (2008:44).

\(^{144}\) Sai Lone cites the third official UWSA Five-Year Workplan of 2000 issuing orders to township authorities to enforce resettlement and consolidate villages to around 50 households (2008:42). This was a practice of both the CPB and the Chinese Communists in the 1960s, part of the attempts to control and administer populations (Fiskesjo 2000:369).
spirits. He notes how information regarding numbers and motives for the relocation were contested and subject to bias (2017:15), possibly to make room for Chinese agro-business and rubber plantation interests, or due to the need to consolidate UWSA territory in the South, or the need to provide livelihoods and farmland for a population heavily affected by the poppy ban.

The campaigns of opium eradication and mass relocations demonstrated three things about UWSA governance – (1) their ability to implement large top-down logistical operations without consultation, (2) a willingness to impose unpopular and even damaging collective plans on their people, and (3) their awareness of the need to accommodate the political climate and criticisms from China and the international community. Lone’s interview with the Vice-Chairman Xiao Ming Liang in 2008 is telling:

“If you ask, anyone who agrees with the opium ban to raise the hand, I am sure that nobody will. We are making the decision against the will of the whole population in the Wa region... However, the problem is too big for us to solve alone. We still need a lot of assistances and support from our central government and international community to prevent the outbreak of humanitarian crisis in the Wa region that might [be created] by the opium ban.” (2008:65)

Projects on opium substitution and drug eradication in Wa Region began to peter out by 2010, as shifting political interests sidelined any sustained efforts at development. UNODC’s project in Wa Region closed in 2008, and their presence in Myanmar significantly reduced by 2010. US funding for the UNODC-led Wa Project (which made up three-quarters of its funding) was cut in 2005, after three DEA agents in Myanmar received death threats. With this loss of funding, the project struggled on for 2 more years before closing (Renard 2013b).

145 The LNDO report “Unsettling Moves”, published in the middle of the relocations, and endorsed by the WNO’s Sao Mahasang of Yin Phan, reports 126,000 moved by 2002, and 4,000 deaths in 2000 alone. 48,000 inhabitants of the areas in South Wa were affected, their land taken away, with thousands fleeing to Thailand (2002). Interviews with those relocated describe deaths on the journey and disease upon arrival.

146 US funding for the UNODC-led Wa Project (which made up three-quarters of its funding) was cut in 2005, after three DEA agents in Myanmar received death threats. With this loss of funding, the project struggled on for 2 more years before closing (Renard 2013b).
this, the Transnational Institute found that opium production had started to increase again from 2006 despite its ban in Wa, Kokang and Monglar regions (TNI 2014), production in other parts of Shan and Kachin States had simply increased to fill the void and take advantage of the higher prices. Production and trafficking of methamphetamines also skyrocketed (See Lintner and Black 2009).

**Enchantment: Road Construction and Travel**

Landslide up ahead. Huge rocks, large enough to crush a man, have covered the entire tarred road to a depth of 2m. Vehicles have already begun to detour, skirting around the blockage through the mud at the edge of the slope – one skid and any given car would plunge into the grey below. The rains have come in quick drizzles, evaporating on the hot roads, a damp and docile vapor rising from the tarmac. The air is hot and heavy, mist fills the valley below. Men stand at the sides, sleeves and trousers folded, throwing large rocks into the mud to give traction. An unwitting bus now gets stuck in the mud. Shouts and raised hands greet the driver, who has now blocked the only remain pass. We shut off the engine and wait. The passengers disembark, but thankfully a military truck is in the queue behind. It comes to the front, ropes are tied, and it drags the bus out of the mud. The driver parks it at the edge, he will not try again. The oncoming cars start now, and this time a Chinese-made pick-up. My Wa companion laughs at the inferior Chinese vehicles and says that they just not strong enough for this area. One of the Chinese drivers runs to our side, imploring someone to help tow it. The third car in line agrees, and drives to the front, full in reverse to drag it out. Other men continue throwing huge rocks into the muddy area to prevent more cars from being stuck in the detour. Travel in these areas is a communal affair.
Travel is nightmarish during the rainy season. Dirt becomes thick mud or large ponds, bogging down vehicles, impassable in many areas. Here, good roads are simply wide roads, where one does not fear slipping off the edge of a cliff. Thick cloud and fog at night deflects the headlights of vehicles downwards, reducing visibility to a mere couple of meters. Wandering livestock and waterlogged mud compound the moving elements, while deep ruts and rocks in the road push the vehicle from side to side as it advances. Rain is friend and enemy, nourishing crops whilst eating away the dirt roads that villagers rely on for their access to markets. Rainwater undercut the slopes above and below the roads, causing them to fall away, and road repairs of all kinds are carried out every year after the rains have done their worst. Local Wa authorities are responsible for
maintaining stretches of dirt road within their areas, mobilizing groups of villagers, one person per household in this communal division of labor. Groups sit alongside the road in early November, eating, chatting, smoking, waiting for lunch to be over, when they resume chipping away at the sides of the slope to fill the ruts caused by large vehicles.

But travel was also a visual delight – the stunning beauty of the highlands unfolded in a horizontal sliver of bluish green in the distance, where hilltops emerge above the layer of low cloud. During the rainy season a light blue-grey canopy perpetually blankets Wa region, the sun absconds for weeks. The yellow green spread of rice fields fans out across the hills, punctuated by dark green clumps of bamboo sprouting intermittently from cleared slopes like fraying badminton shuttlecocks. Shrubbery or pine trees in small plantations line the edges of the highway, just above the 2 or 3-storey high sloping walls of exposed orange dirt, large stepped terraces cut into sides of the hills by the voracious diggers of the road building companies. Roads exposed the expanse of terrain to scrutiny, channelling the vision of the traveller, making the hills legible. For the Wa government, this was control and access to the people, for outsiders, a visual surveillance of former poppy-growing areas.

The UWSA had grand ambitions to construct a series of main arterial roads which ran through the entire Wa Region. As the Chinese saying went – “if you want to prosper, first build roads” (xiangyaofu, xianxiulu). This project was to be completed by 2019, the 30th anniversary of the founding of the UWSA. As it was, by late 2014, new asphalt roads already ran through the northern townships of Wa Region, tellingly perhaps, since they linked the Chinese towns of Cangyuan and Ximeng to the Wa townships of Kunma, Nam Tit, and Mengmao, the home areas of top ranking Wa leaders. These roads devoured impressively the edges of the narrowest of spurs and ridgelines, winding around knolls and descending sharply into valleys, complete with drainage and even safety
ramps\textsuperscript{47} in certain areas. The scars of progress were etched into terrain – the exposed bright orange sides of hills, rows of partially demolished houses, and fragments of gates and porches left in its wake. By order of the Wa government, there was no compensation for owners whose properties had succumbed to the call of the greater good – people bore the loss without formal complaint\textsuperscript{48}.

The road building project was an expensive endeavor, but central to governance: buttressing the power and legitimacy of the Wa authorities as a spectacular infrastructural project, “enchanted” subjects with promises of connectivity, modernity, and development (Harvey and Knox 2012), and opening thoroughfares for the mastery and legibility of its own territory (Scott 1998). In addition, it would allow for commodities, especially rubber and minerals to be shipped off to Chinese markets; see the quick transport of troops and reinforcements from north to south; reduce travel time for people and leaders alike. Given the lack of access of many ordinary people to cars and larger vehicles (though Chinese-made motorcycles were prevalent across the hills), the roads seemed not aimed primarily at development for the people, but access for the military and leadership.

In the CPB period, the road from Mengmao to Ban Wai (Sao Pha), and then downwards to Pang Kham was mainly a dirt track for horses and mules. This road was painstakingly widened by hand, carved into the hillsides and paved with cobblestones, completed in 1988 and passable by motor traffic (Lintner 1990:88). This road made its way to Cangyuan in China. The cobblestone remnants

\textsuperscript{47} Runaway Truck Ramps, or arrester beds, a safety design made of ramps filled with gravel to stop vehicles whose brakes had failed, a curious investment along roads that had relatively little traffic volume.

\textsuperscript{48} This also happened in Pang Kham town in 2015 and 2016, where roads were widened and tarred, drainage installed throughout the town, all with the use of Chinese construction technology and workers. This was done at a cost of 300 CNY per square meter, and funds were raised from road and property taxes. In typical UWSA fashion, no compensation was granted to any buildings that saw their porches or front gates demolished by the road widening.
can still be seen today in higher sections of the hills, or at the sides of the asphalt road. Other segments in the hills, including a more direct route between Mengmao and Pang Kham, were built in 1995 by the UWSA. The Myanmar government under Khin Nyunt had played its part, providing materials to connect Dangyan in the West up to the Salween edge of Wa Region with a narrow asphalt road.

*Figure 19: Map of roads across Wa Region, to the North, Northwest, and Southeast of Pang Kham*
The project to link all townships with all-weather asphalt roads began in 2012, with three main thoroughfares targeted – 1) a North-South road from Pang Kham to Mengmao and Nam Tit; 2) a Northwesterly road towards the mining areas and then Lashio in the Burmese-controlled areas; 3) a Southeasterly road through the lower lands and onwards to Monglar Special Region 4, and Kengtung in the Burmese-controlled areas. By mid-2015, the travel time from Pang Kham to Meng Mao, the second largest town in Wa Region, a road distance of about 150 km, was reduced from 5-6 hours to 3-4 hours. The old cobblestoned roads were removed, and traffic diverted even higher into the hills along narrow dirt roads. Because the road still followed the winding bends of the old roads, there was a limit to how fast one could travel, unlike the high-speed freeways in China which used tunnels and bridges to create roads as straight as possible.

Bumpy and uneven surfaces pooled with water and mud were now replaced with a smooth glide across asphalt road. This was the experiential feel of progress, a distinct contrast from the perpetual bouncing about or meandering of a vehicle in second gear on potholed roads. This often encouraged some overzealous drivers to round bends at breakneck speed – skid marks on the asphalt, or large flattened portions in the vegetation at the side of roads bore testimony to misjudgments, injuries, and even fatalities. And the battle with the elements continued, large sections of the tarred road had collapsed in at least five areas. Friends blamed this on the cheaper material and substandard contracting work carried out by one of the construction companies, pointing out that another main road built by another company had fared better. Yet landslides caused during rainy season (May to September) rendered roads in frequent need of clearing, rupturing travel sporadically without warning.
Roads also engendered connection beyond Wa Region, linking it to other Special Regions and to Lashio, Hopang, and Kengtung, facilitating the movement of goods and people across boundaries. They also pulled in networks of capital in the shadow economy – a potential form of money-laundering, where illicit earnings could be converted into legitimate profit on the books. I was told that the roads within Wa Region were being built at a suspiciously exorbitant cost of 2 million CNY (USD 330,000) per kilometer, with companies parcelling out road contracts in sections to bidders from China who brought in construction equipment and workers. Roads outside Wa region were
also built by large conglomerates with direct or indirect ties to Wa and Kokang networks\(^{149}\) (Felbab-Brown 2015; Woods 2011), part of a larger *laissez-faire* joint commercial enterprise between the *tatmadaw* and EAGs’ leadership, legacy connections from the Khin Nyunt era.

**Truncated Mobilities: Pang Kham**

On my first visit to Wa Region I asked a man what he did for a living, only to learn to be more cautious in future: “we Wa have no jobs because we have no education. We do a little buying and selling of small items to survive.” This expression of being “backward” (*luohou*) was common. Ron Renard writes: “Wa leaders themselves, as shown by their ignorance of the Wa written script, often see Wa as backward, far inferior to groups they perceive as civilized, such as the Chinese” (2013a:142). Similarly, Chin’s interviews in a rural village yielded the following: “People like us who do not have education or know how to do business can only do hard labor; if we don’t, we would starve” (Chin 2009:38). Formal education was in crisis – enrollment rates were an estimated 44% for school-aged children in 2014\(^{150}\), but more startlingly the attrition rate between Grade 1 and Grade 6 was 92%, meaning that for every 100 children who enrolled in Grade 1, only 8 made it to Grade 6\(^{151}\). There were 354 primary schools (Grades 1-6, though many village schools only offered Grades 1-2) across Wa Region, but only 9 middle schools (Grades 7-10). Schools operated in different mediums –

\(^{149}\) Asiaworld, the company founded by Kokang KKY leader Lo Hsing Han and run by his son Steven Law, is responsible for the construction of various highways through Shan State, including from Lashio to Hopang), the Yangon Airport, hydroelectric dams, hotels, and ports (Fuller 2015).

\(^{150}\) Milsom states that in 2000, “the number of children with access to primary education has increased from less than one thousand in 1989 to over thirty thousand, or roughly 30 percent of all children” (2005:71).

\(^{151}\) This figure was calculated from WFP data on school feeding projects, based on population estimates and distribution numbers. Some private schools in town and schools in military camps or rubber plantations are not included, but the figure is generally indicative.
Chinese, Wa, and Burmese. Middle school was sparingly available as an added expense, and there were no high schools (roughly ages 17-18) in North Wa, except for 2 classes in the Myanmar school in Pang Kham. Though parents spoke of the importance of education, they had in mind mainly basic schooling from Grades 1-2. The lack of emphasis on education could also be seen through the lowly wages teachers were paid – for village schools, wages were between 150-400 CNY (25-66 USD) a month, with the standard monthly ration of 20kg rice, their wages paid either by the township or the villagers themselves.

The choice of language of instruction would draw future generations of Wa Region closer to either China or Myanmar, as Lone found in a village in Mong Pawk district:

“[In the] last few years, with the agreement from local Wa authorit[ies,] [the] Burmese government sent two teachers to establish a village primary school in our village, but after staying for two years the school collapsed as there [were] no children [wanting] to attend the Burmese school. The language barrier between teachers and children was one of the reason[s], the other reason is [that] most of the people in Wa region don’t want to learn to learn Burmese as they think that it is not useful in their daily lives since the official and commercial language used in this region is Chinese. It is easier for us to go to China than Burmese control[led] area. When we go [to] China, we just need to register our name at the border checkpoint, in the case of Burmese control area there are a lot of military checkpoints along the road and [they] ask us to show a lot of document[s] which are impossible for us to obtain. So we feel more close to China [than our] so-called country Burma.” (Lone 2008:62; edits made for readability).

The further truth was that even with formal education, there simply weren't many jobs. Employment in Pang Kham and other towns was mainly in the service industry – for girls, working in the casino (3,000 CNY/month or 500 USD), health centers for foot reflexology (4-5,000 CNY/month or 660-830 USD), or as shop assistants (1,500-2,000 CNY or 250-360 USD). For boys

152 Wa and Chinese medium schools (82% of total) ran on a Chinese curriculum, while the Myanmar-medium schools adopted the Myanmar curriculum (18%).
the opportunities seemed less, and the fortunate ones ended up as drivers or aides for Wa leaders and officials. Other positions in the Wa government rarely paid close to 1,000 CNY per month on the high end. Most joined the army, voluntarily or through conscription. Almost all of my ordinary Wa friends (those not children of leaders or rich businessmen) were in the army, as drivers, logistics, soldiers, or in the personal entourage of Wa officials.

Wa youth travelled to China for employment, but often not in any significant numbers nor for sustained periods of time. In contrast, Wa leaders and those with means sent their children for studies in Lashio, Mandalay, Yangon, or China. Many sought to start their own businesses – small shops selling goods imported from China such as CDs, electronics, underwear, apparel, or selling items over the Chinese social networking app WeChat. Skilled labor was not often done by Wa – hairdressers, clerks, and teachers in town were Chinese and car mechanics and skilled craftsmen Burmese – much less engineers, doctors, or accountants. Many administrative posts in the government were staffed by local ethnic Chinese.

153 Each household was expected to send one male to military or government service (teachers, clerks, etc.), a point of contention for many families. Service was for life, but I was told that depending on area, the units were not too strict on deserters. Chin records the following explanation from a Wa official: “if an elder brother who is sixteen does not want to join and the younger one wants to, then we will recruit the younger one even though he may be only thirteen. The new recruits are trained for three weeks in Bangkang and then dispatched to various army divisions or regiments” (2009:43).

154 The Vice-Chairman of the UWSA suggested in a meeting in August 2014 that there were an estimated 2,000 inhabitants of Wa Region working in China, mostly in regions close to the Myanmar border. He raised this in response to news reports that several young women found working illegally in China had been returned across the border by Chinese police.
Small businesses were prone to failure. Another Shan friend who ran his own provision shop in town complained of the high taxes. Commercial taxes in Pang Kham were around 150-400 CNY per month for a small eatery, rates that also caused some resentment, and were blamed by residents, along with the weakening economy after the opium ban, for the gradual decline of the town population. Uniformed tax collectors travelled door-to-door in Pang Kham, ensuring shopkeepers were up-to-date with payments. A friend told me how the Commerce Bureau had enforced a rule requiring all shopkeepers to display the prices of individual items on the shelves, to prevent price gouging. This would work for the 4-5 department stores in town, but not for those running small

Figure 21: School in Longtan township, July 2014
provision shops like himself, whose shelf inventory was constantly changing. “Ai,” he grumbled, “the Wa government, doesn't deal with the big things, only deals with the trifling ones”.

There was an implicit narrative of laziness, or a lack of capacity amongst locals, and the Wa in particular. A Chinese hairdresser from Kunming told me that there was no way they could train local Wa in hairdressing: “they are just not hardworking enough, they don't stay long enough to learn.” This in earshot of his Wa assistant present in the salon, who was clearly an understudy. He had come to Wa Region having read about the intrigue of the Golden Triangle, and returned home twice a year, living in Pang Kham on a temporary residence pass that cost 960 CNY (120 USD) a year. Here, he earned 7-8,000 CNY (1166-1333 USD) a month, compared to 4-5,000 CNY (666-833 USD) in China. Officials cited figures of 60,000 Chinese workers in Wa Region, including the tens of thousands working in the mines near Man Xiang. Especially when it came to valuable resource extraction, the Chinese bosses appeared to hire ethnic Chinese to perform tasks. Networks of trust and affinity, rather than necessarily skill, were the chief criteria.

A local Chinese friend who works regularly with various ethnic minority workers on his father’s mineral processing plant and rubber plantations remarked: “it baffles me that the villagers are 1km away from a water source, but have all this while never thought or digging a well in their own village. Think of how much time they have spent carrying water back and forth. I always scold them for this but they never change. They could produce so many vegetables to sell in the market, where


156 Hansen’s ethnography of Xishuangbanna in neighboring Yunnan describes these tensions between ethnic minorities and the Han migrants to the peripheries (2005), the latter arriving with more education and capital than locals, quickly monopolizing businesses.
there are currently only 4 types available. They never have this idea. He noted however, that in the mines there was a reluctance by the ethnic Chinese workers to train local Wa for fear of losing their jobs. “For the locals, they never have the pressure of finding a well-paying job. If all fails they simply return to the village. They go hunting with a large group of friends for days, without catching anything at all.”

![Figure 22: Children in Wa village, Ban Wai township, November 2015](image)

157 One possible explanation for this might be the Wa reluctance to affect or dig into waterways, where they believe malignant spirits reside (Fiskesjo 2000:368). James G. Scott makes a similar point when he notes how villages are never built near streams for fear of fevers. He describes the Wa bamboo aqueducts used to bring water into villages, with “considerable engineering skill is sometimes shown in winding, or zigzagging this aqueduct about” (1900:507).
A friend of mine is in town to stay for the next 3 months. Ah Ping, a short stocky 31-year-old ethnic Chinese man whom I met on the football field in Pang Kham, spends his time traveling between Pang Kham and his home town of Mong Yang in the Burmese-controlled areas. He is unemployed, always searching for work. His elder sister married one of the bodyguards of a Wa Politburo member and has been living in Pang Kham for several years. She often gives him money for expenses. Over the years he has been all over eastern Shan State, Wa Region and into China. He speaks fluent Mandarin, Burmese, and Shan.

Mong Yang is a small town just outside the southeast edge of Wa Region, along many of the trade routes that connect Pang Kham down to Eastern Shan State and on to Thailand. I once passed through his town on the way to the Burmese domestic airport in Kengtung. Ah Ping’s family runs a medium-sized provision store here, haphazard stacks of plastic buckets, incense sticks, packs of toilet paper, inundate the storefront of his family’s shophouse along the main market street in town. Movement across boundaries has been a hallmark of Ah Ping’s life thus far. In his twenties he used to drive a tractor cart across the boundary into Mong Phen in Wa Region, selling Burmese and Thai goods there. “I sold everything,” he tells me. Looking around his shop, he was clearly not exaggerating. Products from Thailand as valued more than those from China – many Western household names like Danish Butter Cookies, Oreo’s, or Dettol reach Wa Region from the Thai border via Kengtung. Taxes imposed by the Myanmar customs on imports from Thailand have become very high in recent months (in 2015), including taxes at checkpoints, and traders have been less keen to carry them to Wa.

Ah Ping has both a Myanmar pink ID and a Wa identity card, on the former his ethnicity is given as Lahu, one of the minorities in this region – “it is not easy to make an identity card as a Han
Chinese,” he explains. When tensions were high in the 2000s, he ran to the relative safety of Kengtung, afraid of being recruited as a porter for ammunition by the Myanmar army. He hates officials, soldiers, and the police – “They are greedy and take from the people. They are all the same, the Myanmar military is full of beggars and criminals.” He has no allegiance to either side – “it is the people who suffer, we run to wherever is safe when fighting is about to begin. If here is chaotic we run there, if there is chaotic we run back here.” Eastern Shan State is periodically plagued by small scale skirmishes. He claims however, that there is no discrimination in Myanmar unlike in America where the blacks used to be slaves. “Here, people generally get along and it’s the government and military that they don’t like, since the military abuses everyone, Burmans included.”

![Figure 23: People's Park, Pang Kham, May 2015](image-url)
The search for work is always difficult: “I would like to travel out to find work, but I have no education, it is always hard to find work outside”. Ah Ping sends me voice notes when he is back in Mong Yang, and video clips of himself hanging out on a friend’s porch in front of paddy fields. He reports on the latest football tournament he played in, the scores and results. There is little to no work for him. More recently, Ah Ping found work as a foreman for a hotel construction project, a hotel owned by Ah Cai, another of our friends. Ah Cai is 27 and Wa, his uncle is a deputy minister in the Wa government, furnishing him with a series of useful connections. He works for a Wa government-linked company that deals in businesses of all sorts, though I never managed to figure out the capacity in which he did so. As usual, the answers were the same – “I work for Good Health company”\(^{158}\). “What business do they do?” “They do all types of businesses.” He clearly had the capital to build a hotel of his own, and presumably was in charge of one of their business portfolios. He was in charge of building a section of road near Dangyan for the company, which had been awarded the contract by the Myanmar government. Towards the end of the year, running his hotel became too much work for him, and he leased it out to a group of young male entrepreneurs from Zhejiang Province in China to manage.

Ah Cai was the grandson of a Wa community leader from Cangyuan, on the Chinese side of the border. His grandfather left China during the Cultural Revolution, settled in Wa Region briefly with hundreds of other kin and followers, before moving on to Dangyan, on the Burmese side. Born in Dangyan, Ah Cai schooled there and later attended high school in China, before settling in Wa Region to do business. He lives with his young Wa wife in a large 4-storey house at a key junction in Pang Kham town, the walls of which are plastered with studio processed portraits of his wedding.

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\(^{158}\) Good Health Company was involved in construction, trading, and logistics businesses across Wa Region, with a specialty in gems trading (Lintner and Black 2009:118-9).
Despite his diminutive stature, Ah Cai is the de facto leader of a group of young Burmese men on
the football pitch. Many are his neighbours from Dangyan, who came over to Wa Region to work
for him in construction and a variety of skilled labor tasks. I met them on one occasion on the roads,
traveling out into the Burmese areas together. Ah Cai sits regally in the front seat, the others carry
his bags and laugh at his jokes. They live in a series of room built into his large house, some “have
been with us since they were young”, a form of social care for those with lesser means. He is a job
creator, a mobile subject of these borderlands.

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One morning, a friend came to my office to look for me, uncharacteristically bothered and angry.
Wu was a Hui, or Chinese Muslim\(^{159}\), who had moved to Pang Kham from neighboring Lancang in
China several years ago to start a beef noodle shop (profits were higher in Wa Region because of
the amount of wealth in circulation, albeit heavily concentrated: a bowl of noodles went for 10 Yuan
instead of 6 across the border in China). Agitated, Wu was speaking in heavily-accented Yunnanese,
which he normally tempered when addressing me. His wife had just returned from the Chinese
Consulate in Mandalay, where she had spent nearly 10,000 CNY (USD 1,600) applying
unsuccessfully for Chinese nationality for their two daughters, aged 8 and 11. The consulate had
instead referred him to the local authorities in Wu’s hometown in Lancang, Yunnan. Both
daughters had been born in Wa Region, and possessed only three forms of identification – a Wa
Identity card, a Wa Hospital birth certificate, and a Myanmar birth certificate that gave the

\(^{159}\) Wu’s ancestors were Hui Muslims from Dali areas in Northern Yunnan, forced to flee south down to
Lancang near the Burmese border with thousands of others during the Panthay Rebellion in the 1860s
and 1870s. His mother was a Han Chinese and he married a Hui wife from Dangyan in Burma, finally
settling in Pang Kham, halfway in between both their families. See Hill (1998) for a generational history
of the travels and trade of the Yunnanese Muslims, also Forbes (1988).
daughters’ place of birth as Mandalay. None of these documents were useful for claiming Chinese nationality, since the Wa documents were unrecognized by the Chinese consulate, and their only official document – the Myanmar birth certificate – had left blank the column for the father’s nationality. They had no other documents to prove or disprove the nationality or birthplace of their two children.

Wu himself had a Chinese and Myanmar identity cards and a temporary residence permit for Wa Region, while his wife, being from Dangyan, only had Myanmar ID. Wu’s Myanmar ID, issued in Pang Kham during a visit from a Myanmar government immigration team just after the 2009 Kokang crisis, also listed him as a Lahu, for convenience of applying for Myanmar citizenship. His wife travelled to the consulate in Mandalay by herself as his Myanmar ID was now missing. Being poorly literate in either Burmese or Chinese, she ended up spending 60,000 MMK (around 60 USD) to have the birth certificate translated into English and notarized. They had also paid 200 CNY to have a letter issued from the Wa External Relations Department (ERD) confirming that they had married and had children in Pang Kham, on which it clearly stated that the father was a Chinese national. This too, held no weight at the Consulate. They were denied Chinese citizenship.

Wu wanted me to help figure out what the next course of action might be, dismayed at the amount of money already spent. I brought him to those I knew at the Department, but they had no further suggestions for him, since their own letter had not been recognized. This was a tragedy of legal personhood at the peripheries – lacking the literacy and knowledge of how to navigate the bureaucratic systems, large groups of people fell between the cracks, with grave implications for the citizenship and mobility of their children. Wu had a Grade 6 education in China, and his wife was not a strong reader. It was intimidating for them to make appeals to authorities, or to understand the options available to them. There was little public understanding of the importance.
of documentary records, and ensuring that details such as parents’ nationalities were clearly recorded. They would be eligible for Myanmar citizenship, but would not be able to live in China, where Wu was from. His alternative was to send his daughters to Northern Thailand to study, in the hopes that they might eventually naturalize there. He would remain in Pang Kham with his noodle shop.

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These were the limits to livelihoods: education, mastery of languages, the ability to navigate administrations and their procedures, capital, social connections and networks, and identity documents. So many of these factors could determine one’s future routes, as people moved in between the interstices of economic, political, and legal domains, seeking channels yet meeting enclosure. The assemblages of authority, through the very mobile (or not so mobile) subjects it produced and enabled, drew Wa Region closer or further away from the Myanmar state. This was the domain of political practice, of autonomy and incorporation.

Appropriation and Rural Livelihoods: Yaong Noone

The village of Yaong Noone\textsuperscript{160} is blanketed in a tired canopy of grey, the cool air moist and misty, the grass damp. One can vaguely make out the lighter white tufts of cloud in the valley below, just beyond the perimeter of trees that protect the village from strong winds. Perhaps the clouds have entered the village, perhaps the village has entered the clouds. Yaong Noone is nestled in a gentler east-facing slope on one of the many mountainous ridgelines that run through Wa Region. A

\textsuperscript{160} Village name anonymized.
patchwork of dark brown thatched roofs is interspersed with the occasional zinc roofing of the better-off households, cheap foot-long Chinese-made solar panels planted carefully on the corners of the roofs. There are 23 households here, all ethnic Wa, all rely on subsistence farming and livestock. Chickens roost in a neat line on the bamboo platform that rings the veranda of a thatched house, supervised by a slumping dog. A man feeds his pigs boiled jackfruit seeds and bamboo shoots, carefully fending away unwelcome imposters from a neighboring household. Jackfruit and banana trees, clumps of bamboo, and a variety of garden plants, fan out amongst the houses. Piles of cow dung, food wrappers from Chinese-made snacks, chopped firewood, and mossed-covered stones flank the well-worn paths that run amongst the houses. Building material is strewn beneath houses, awaiting the next project. Dusk approaches, and movement returns, villagers, dogs, and cows make their way home.

Yaong Noone is the oldest village in Man Xiang township, an estimated 300 years old. From the township seat of Man Xiang it is a mildly treacherous 20 minute motorcycle ride downhill to Yaong Noone, the narrow and steep track impassable to four-wheeled vehicles. The dirt road, overgrown with tall grasses in certain parts, continues into the valley and reaches the Nam Rai river an hour later, where a rickety bamboo footbridge provides a crossing into Ka Laung Pa township. Before this dirt road, there were footpaths, the villagers gesture to these invisible arteries fanning out across the scrub and forest of the hills. The records and accounts of travelers who have passed through Wa region, though not necessarily at this place, chronicle the traders, muleteers, soldiers, foragers, migrating villagers, and farmers who have criss-crossed these hills. One imagines the bedraggled and heavy-laden who have journeyed through – battling gravity, resilient undergrowth, and the scourges of mud and rain. The hills are an unforgiving corporeal experience, an accretion of local knowledges, skills, and histories.
Rainy season, and villagers weed their light green fields of upland paddy, a short walk downslope from the village. The paddy runs to the edge of the slope, then falls away into the darker secondary forest of the valley. As mist clears, the adjacent spur is dissected by dirt roads meandering downhill, bright orange trails of exposed soil bearing testament to the ubiquitous feats of everyday engineering in these hills. The two mountainous ridgelines of Man Xiang and Ka Laung Pa face each other down – “they would raid us and we would raid them”, a villager recalled, referring to the village sitting atop the opposite ridgeline, during the times of headhunting raids prior to each harvest. The stone upon which they used to lay the severed heads still sits obscure amongst undergrowth and saplings, just off the main path, covered with moss and leaf litter.
Harvest, and the villagers knot bundles of cut rice stalks together, piling these in a circular fashion and forming a stack in their fields, like elven straw houses. Villagers call out to one another as they walk through the fields. The citrusy scent of cut grass fills the air. This year, only half of Yaong Noone’s households produced enough rice for 12 months, the others have gaps of between 2-4 months. Upland paddy has been the key staple in these hills, a swidden agriculture that sees the rotation of the annual crop between 10 different areas surrounding the village. The current plot being used this year is close to the village, easily discerned by the makeshift fences of thorny branches and sharpened stakes which dissuade stubborn cows from entering. The hills have bestowed unequally their gifts of soil and water for centuries – springs well and dry up, soils and minerals wash away with rain, or gather abundantly in other areas. Upland paddy is hit-and-miss, at the complete mercy of the gods. Disparities of yield between households, villages, and townships is common, disparities in wealth and food security. The villagers of Yaong Noone could dig terraced rice paddies, as in other parts of Wa Region, but the water source is more than a kilometer away, and not large enough to water their fields. They could dig terraced farmland to retain fertilizer, as in other parts of Wa Region, but they worry about removing the fertile topsoil when digging, or not having the correct variety of seed, or developing land only to have it claimed by a local leader. In recent years, 8 of their 10 plots for rotation have been lost to rubber plantations, or other villages enforcing their customary claims to the land. The hills give and the hills take away.

In 2004 the Wa authorities ordered the Yaong Noone villagers to move up to the township seat of Man Xiang, in an attempt to consolidate the population. The villagers built new houses in the township centre, but returned after a year because of a lack of water and firewood. A few families, however stayed behind after the return, starting small shops in the market area. Man Xiang is the last major village in Wa territory before one reaches the Myanmar-controlled areas, making it a transit point for traders who travel from the Burmese town of Dangyan, baskets of peanuts, rice
snacks, fruit, and cartons of cigarettes dangling precariously from both sides of their motorbikes. Pajero taxis from Lashio to Wa pass through here, and a daily bus service runs from Man Xiang to Pang Kham. The permanent stalls in the market area are supplemented with goods every five days on market day, when villagers walk up from the surrounding villages to sell produce. Here the full repertoire of languages can be heard – Burmese, Chinese, Shan, and Wa, including the different dialects and accents. Cucumbers, pineapples, groundnuts, home brewed spirit, and rice sit alongside the cigarettes, fried snacks, thanaka (sandalwood) paste, bottles of petrol, clothes, salt, and cooking oil brought in either from Myanmar or China. Goods are laid out on tables under large red umbrellas. A bus arrives, and a trussed-up pig is unceremoniously dragged out from the trunk underneath, and flung squealing onto the side of the road.

Perched on the Western front of Wa Region, Man Xiang is separated from Myanmar-controlled areas by the Salween River. Yet other than the odd patrol of soldiers around the township, nothing else suggests that the Myanmar checkpoints are only a stone’s throw away. Despite this proximity, only one person from Yaong Noone, a novice monk, has been to the Myanmar areas – they have no identification documents nor any desire to do so. Most do not speak Burmese, though several speak Shan and could communicate with others there. In the last 8 years, Man Xiang has risen to prominence amongst the townships following the discovery of large tin deposits. Large hills have been carved apart, and the roads leading down are smothered in a blanket of dust. Apparently, there are around 10-20,000 Chinese workers in the Man Xiang mines, brought across from neighboring Chinese provinces to work machinery and extraction. A shantytown of eating places, massage parlors, zinc sheeted motels, and wooden shops has arisen. The mines are less than an hour’s motorbike ride away from Yaong Noone, but few villagers travel there to work.
Figure 25: Wa villager, Yaong Noone village, October 2015
Yaong Noone's is a story of appropriation: the maize devoured by birds, the papayas destroyed by insects and fungi, the cow they lost to an attack by a tiger. 7-8 young men from the village went over to the mines to work, but the boss ran off without paying his staff when the venture failed. In 2002, five households were moved from their village to South Wa, they haven't been heard of since. A cow of theirs wandered into a rubber plantations and was shot, other cows break into rice fields and destroy crops. 4 young men have only just returned from their mandatory militia training with the army. The relentless curse of gravity takes its toll – erosion eats away farmland and roads, while water runoff draws fertile topsoil down and away.

The land available for their swidden agriculture has receded, most of it claimed by a local military commander who then enlisted the villagers to tap the rubber plantation he set up on their land – where there were no land titles, only the dictates of customary use. Now there is meagre pay for collecting latex from his trees, about 25 CNY (USD 4.16) a month for tending to 150 trees about an hour's walk from the village. Villagers told me that the township agricultural officer did little for them, only gathering villagers together annually to suggest crops they can grow, without actual input of seedlings or agricultural products. Road repair duty occurs about three times a year, every household sending an able-bodied member for 2 days' work each time. Taxes paid to the township authorities are a basket of rice (20kg) per person aged between 10-60 per year, even though directives from the central authorities have banned grain taxes across Wa Region.

Rubber plantations were first introduced to Wa Region in 1997 in Mong Pawk areas (Renard 2013a:163). See TNI 2012 for description of the cross border agro-rubber industry where subsidies were offered by the Chinese government to Chinese companies who set up plantations in Wa Region, to help with their opium-substitution efforts.
These are the encroachments from the outside, the new sets of challenges that integration brings. Once left to their own devices, the arrival of the CPB and UWSA eras rid the hills of headhunting feuds, but incorporated them into new economic regimes and political arenas they have little control over. It isn’t a sob story, just a making do. I share with the Yaong Noone villagers the English saying on death and taxes, and they laugh dryly, “here there is tax even without income”.

**Good Governance, Development, and the New Primitivism**

A conundrum emerges when examining governance in Wa Region: how does one write about such dismal economic, educational, and health indicators, without slipping into the easy portrayal of the UWSA and its leadership as simplistically ignorant, negligent, or callous? Inequality was jarring and materially apparent as powerful Humvees ploughed through the hills past ramshackle villages and struggling crops. Skeptical political observers I spoke to in Yangon suggested that keeping their people poor and uneducated was a means of ensuring their rule and suppressing dissent. But this did not reconcile itself with the genuine appeals and attempts by many local officials to improve the conditions for their people. And it did not fit in with the distinctive pride that the UWSA took in its autonomy and survival.

Contemporary charges of Wa mismanagement are many. Authoritarian decision making, a political culture with close relationships between business interests and governance, impoverishment amongst rural villagers, and dire social inequality have seen the UWSA’s governing practices critiqued by external observers, many of whom were development workers for the UN and other NGOs\(^\text{162}\). The top-down capacity of the UWSA leadership to carry out campaigns, as evidenced by

\(^{162}\) This is the angle from which most writing on Wa Region has taken place: Ronald Renard wrote his article (2013a) reflecting on his time as the Project Manager of UNODC’s Wa Project from 2006-7, as was
the 2005 opium ban and relocation of villagers to South Wa, also work against the UWSA – more is expected of their governance. In the early 2000s, development workers noted the lack of exposure to governance outside of the CPB structures, the lack of understanding of the need for provision of social services, and technical capacities including basic record-keeping (Renard 2013a).

Tom Kramer writes that “leadership capacity” is weak, related to the “lack of educational opportunities in Wa region” (2007:39). Decision making is said to lack key values of “consultation” and “participation”. He quotes a UN official as saying: “The Wa are very much influenced by China, they want to make big projects. It is very difficult to make them understand community development” (2007:32). Milsom writes more sympathetically, suggesting that the UWSA lacks support (assumed to be vital) from outside: “pursuing its development goals in relative isolation, the WCA [Wa Central Authority] has embarked on a number of sometimes poorly informed and poorly planned initiatives to support its people after 2005” (Milsom 2005:64). These concerns are also repeated in other EAG areas of Myanmar, where South and Joll identify two challenges for EAGs – governance and service delivery, and gaining recognition from state, international, and everyday people163 (2016:188).

Jeremy Milsom before him, who contributed to an edited volume on the opium economy in Burma (2005). Sai Lone, whose MA thesis was on the political economy of opium reduction (2008), worked for UNODC in Wa Region for more than 10 years in the 2000s. Tom Kramer, working with the Transnational Institute (TNI), visited Wa Region several times in 2003 and 2004 in collaboration with the UN. I myself worked for the World Food Programme in 2014-5.

163 South, mainly focusing on the Karen National Union (KNU), examines the transition from armed rebels to legitimate political organizations engaging in “hybrid governance” where authority is joint between EAGs and the Myanmar government (2017). South argues that international organizations supporting peace must attend to both the state’s institutional weakness, and also develop the EAGs’ capacity for “inclusive and participatory governance” (2017:11). “Hybrid governance” is less present in Wa Region, where the UWSA shoulders almost all of the responsibility for its own policies.
News media covering the enrichment of elites in Wa Region through the plantation economy and the drug trade (Lee, Yimou, and Shwe Yee Saw Myint 2016) have described “long-suffering” Wa villagers as the “serfs of the army” (Marshall and Davis 2002), noting the extreme poverty that wage labor and land appropriation has created. These are often juxtaposed with elites’ lavish expenditure on houses, cars, festivals and celebrations. Renard notes dryly how Chairman Bao responded to questions of inequality from a journalist by asserting that “it was natural for the top man to have so much” (2013a:143).

Wealth disparities and the disparities in livelihoods, healthcare, quality of housing are real, and mismanagement and “bad governance” were a key reservation for international organizations looking to support development. A group of visitors I brought on a tour of Wa Region travelled the main road that ran through the township of Mong Phen, dismayed by the large cars, supermarkets, casinos and hotels along this stretch, wondering: “why are we even working here?” They had just arrived from other parts of Shan State and this was the first Wa town they were traveling through. It seemed prosperous by Myanmar standards. Disgruntlement subsided when we turned off the main road on the way to a project village, where asset creation projects assisting beneficiaries in creating terraced farmland was underway. The thatched roofs and wood panelling, muddy tracks and barefooted children in tattered clothing had changed their minds, visual markers and cues of poverty in the absence of data and statistics. NGOs working in Wa Region have often had to

\[164\] Gathering data in Wa Region was an arduous affair that left little satisfaction. I was always dubious about the reliability of quantitative food security surveys employing recall methodology: “how many of these vegetables have you eaten in the past week?” Yet there appeared few better solutions – short of travel to Wa Region (which donors and directors could barely afford given that it took 4 days just to travel in and out, pending Myanmar government approval which was often denied, and complicated by project sites within Wa Region that were easily 6 hours apart) statistics were the only means of communicating need. A sense of scarcity of development resources, and a culture of disbelief was
justify to visiting donors why they should provide development assistance, when the leaders had so much personal wealth, and would seemingly not help their own people (at least in the manner the development community would). The same, however, might be asked in Myanmar as a country, and many other countries around the world.

**Parallels with the Past**

Yet it was striking how in addition to its Weberian state-centricity, the “good governance” discourse, of which the UWSA supposedly falls foul, also functions as the newest iteration of narratives of backwardness and primitivism in the Wa hills (see chapter 1). It treats the UWSA as amateur rulers, blinded by their wealth and insecurities, ignorant and lacking in technical capacities. One quickly notices the parallels in the patronizing and paternalistic attitude of both the historical writings of colonial powers and the contemporary developmental criticisms of the technical and administrative capacities of the UWSA.

Fiskesjo notes how the recorded histories of early British and Chinese travelers and administrators visiting Wa Region constantly downplayed the ability of local Wa to work the mines within their areas, citing the administrator Chen Can, writing around 1908: “the barbarians here do not know the methods, and *all the extraction and management is done by Han people*. When the Kawa come, they are treated with liquor and food, for fear of otherwise provoking their anger and stirring up inevitable amongst the aid community, exacerbated by the wealth and lack of a clear vision from the Wa government.

165 Intriguingly, a friend in the Wa government suggested that the lavish expenditure and acquisition of the latest cars, trinkets, and furnishings was a means for Wa elites to cover up their insecurities of being seen as unsophisticated, much like a purchase of cultural capital.
trouble” (Fiskesjo 2010a:257, my italics). Fiskesjo instead marshals Shan sources to paint a brief picture of the work of Wa smiths in mining and processing of iron.

Elsewhere, Young infantilizes the Wa temperament when discussing the notion of feuds: “The Wa are extremely sensitive and take offense at very trivial things” (2014:28). He goes on to give accounts of how they started feuds and raids at the smallest insult, the whimsical and unreasonable demands they would make on their neighbors, concluding with an insight into “Wa nature and its apathy and indifference to emotion or excitement” (2014:36).

Alan Winnington, visiting the Chinese Communist Party work teams in the Wa hills in the 1950s noted that “tradition and superstition have to be surmounted before any appreciable results can be got in farming” (2008:148), for “farming was, and remains, of the most primitive kind. An area of jungle is burned off and the land scratched a little before the seed of dry upland rice is scattered by hand. No fertilizer is used... animals are not used...” (2008:130). He described the painstaking efforts to introduce the Wa to wet-field rice farming which would double the yields from the same seeds (2008:153). Under the supposed threat of having their heads removed should the crops fail, the Chinese cadres introduced the Wa to the co-operative system, with shared use of buffalo for ploughing, diversified crops, fertilizers, new planting methods, and equipment distributed by the Chinese government. The Wa were gradually taught “not to quarrel and fight” (Winnington

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In fact, Wa resistance to newer farming techniques such as irrigation and wet rice farming can be said to have its roots not in primitive and simplistic beliefs but rather an aversion to disturbing and rerouting waterways, and the centrality of swidden upland rice farming to religious practices and the propitiation of spirits through land management (Fiskesjo 2000:368). Fiskesjo suggests that the Wa preferred to have irrigation through rainfall and not the canals and ditches of the wet rice terraces. On the Chinese side of the border, cattle plowing and fallowing of land were practices more readily accepted by the Wa than on the Myanmar side (2000:367).
2008:163), with headhunting feuds mediated by the Party’s cadres, and headhunting itself shown to be unnecessary for a good yield.

Winnington’s and Young’s accounts contributed to notions of the Wa being petty and lazy, disinterested in innovation, yet malleable under the forces of education and indoctrination. Implicit was the potential for a civilizing mission to relieve them from the throes of ignorance and backwardness, one that ultimately materialized not under the British or Chinese, but in the CPB period.

The parallels with present-day forms of primitivism are striking. Renard describes a failed joint venture between Wa investors and a Chinese company to start a paper mill near Pang Kham in 2003. The paper produced was ultimately of substandard quality and could not be sold in China, “after several efforts to turn the project around, the Wa gave up, and assumed they had been cheated” (2013a:157). Similar stories of the Chinese cheating the Wa (see chapter 6) have a long history, with the missionary Harold Young recounting stories of the “gullible” Wa from his stay in the 1920s, and how “the Chinese had started wild rumors among the Wa”, that if white men were to walk in their fields, they would become barren (Young 2014:50).

“Lazy, Slow, and Scared”: Co-opting Criticisms

Intriguingly, narratives of primitivism and charges of “weak capacity” were also reproduced by Wa elites, who often disparaged not only their own governing capacity, but the capacities of their people. Wa officials at all levels would often tell me that they were undeveloped, lacking in experience and exposure: “we recognize we were backward, we used to cut heads”, and other related
narratives. Kramer’s interviews revealed a similar sentiment from a township leader: “we are among the least developed people in the world” (2007:29).

During a discussion about development and the economy with a district leader at his office, he unceremoniously described his people as “lazy, slow, and afraid” (lanmanpa). This particular leader had worked with many previous UN officials in Mong Pawk, and was familiar with the operations of development agencies. He was perturbed by Wa villagers’ inability to diligently manage the rubber plantations that the district authorities had ordered them to tend. Adopting the Chinese term for human capital, he claimed that many Wa villagers were of “low quality” (suzhidi), lacking in education and initiative, or a drive to improve their own conditions. This was neither arrogance nor tongue-in-cheek flippancy; it seemed borne out of his frustration at their lack of interest to labor eagerly on the rubber plantations, along with other mandatory labor such as road repairs. Or perhaps it was his own attempt to explain why his subordinates continued to languish in poverty where he and other leaders had amassed wealth of their own.

Kramer and Renard seem to have taken too seriously the Wa elites’ self-characterization as admissions of failure. This manner of humble-speak, as if embarrassed or apologetic for the socioeconomic conditions of townships and villages, or of administrative inefficiencies, may well have been carefully co-opted by Wa elites themselves. In meetings with Wa leaders, especially those regarding development and education, I was repeatedly given the “we are backward” rhetoric, delivered not so much in a self-deprecatory manner, but rather in an attempt to dampen

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167 There was in fact a historical basis to the self-awareness of lack in the Wa hills, in comparison to the areas and groups around them. Fiskesjo records certain Wa anti-myths which provide explanatory models for why they lack writing, or appear to be more impoverished than neighboring groups, and suggests that these demonstrate their awareness of being “in some material sense the have-nots of the region” (2000:107).
expectations: “do not ask too much of us, our abilities are limited”. In reality, they understood far more than they sought to let on, and were capable of producing results when needed. This often happened when I asked for demographic information or statistics at township or central levels, or participation of local officials in food distribution programmes. It also occurred when NGOs requested funding assistance or partnerships from the Wa authorities, perhaps disguising other motives for their lack of desire to contribute. In yet other cases, it was part of the request for assistance in development projects – “look at the state of our schools, kindly provide new desks”.

Amidst external criticism of their authoritarianism and illicit economies, disparagement of their own “backwardness” and strength was the UWSA’s means of asserting their own agency and independence from the registers and imperatives of development, a reassertion of the value of their way of life and the validity of their political culture (see chapter 5). There were historical parallels for this. Fiskesjo suggests that in the past, the self-conscious styling of “primitiveness” and “wildness” is simultaneously regarded by the Wa as a source of pride and strength (1999:146), adding:

“the Wa have also, at times, self-consciously played on their own imagined ‘wildness’, casting themselves as being much more like the king of the forest than like their lowland weakling cousins... the image of the Wa as dreadful, wild warrior people, an image which is not necessarily one shared by everyone among the Wa today, has been enormously powerful in the region, and, unquestionably, has also served as a deterrent” (Fiskesjo 2000:107).

To take these self-assertions of laziness and governing weakness at face value would gloss over the UWSA’s pride in their survival and autonomy. Governance in Wa Region was not an attempt to

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168 Similarly, in the domain of agricultural techniques, Fiskesjo argues that “the slow progress of the expansion of fixed-field irrigated farming is not so much the lack of capability on the part of the Wa, as in the prevailing Chinese explanation, but the weak feasibility of farming as such... the avoidance of irrigated farming was also a matter of upholding an ideal Wa way of life” (Fiskesjo 2000:368).
fulfill standards of a “good governance” criteria, but rather about the production of authority and legitimacy in providing for its people.

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The implicit paternalism of the “good governance” perspective made it hard for international organizations to avoid assumptions that “lack” – of capacity, of “awareness”, of “exposure” – needed to be combated in order to lift villagers out of poverty and improve living standards169. “What is their plan and why won’t they provide adequate healthcare for their people?” were common, and not unwarranted attitudes. This lack of awareness was supposedly displayed by both leaders and villagers alike. For instance, I was told an anecdote about the need for gradual “awareness building” of development projects by a former development worker: a group of Wa out hunting were thirsty, and hacked open PVC water pipes that were part of a gravity flow water system built by an INGO to transport water to a village. Other villagers allegedly preferred the pipes to fall into disrepair so that they could be sold for scrap. In this way, months of project implementation were ruined.

Another NGO was unhappy that the healthcare assistants that they had sent to China for training to later work in village clinics had simply abandoned their post and left. Supplies had been pilfered from the community clinic. A Chinese staffer from the NGO barged into my informal meeting with the township leader and secretary, to insist that they be punished: “in the other townships they jail them, and there is no more absconding”, implying that the township leader should take drastic

169 This form of thinking was similar to that observed between Chinese companies and local Myanmar people, where Chinese companies felt that the oil and gas pipelines and hydroelectric projects were not problematic in their own right, rather, it was the inability to “convince” local Burmese people of their correctness – “a lack of public understanding about these projects, or due to lower levels of scientific knowledge on the part of Myanmar’s people’s” (TNI 2016:21).
action to help them enforce their community health projects. This brusque and task-oriented manner, and harsh request, was at odds with her exhortative rhetoric of “working together for our common objectives”, with which she had tried to cajole the officials into supporting her project.

**Poor Governance as one of many Considerations**

Yet in addition to the UWSA’s “weak capacity”, NGOs on the ground also had a clear understanding that the wider security and economic situation (see chapter 3, 6) was a grave structural impediment to any “sustainable” development efforts. There was a resigned sense of “there’s only so much we can do”, since long term projects were difficult to see through without reliable access from the Myanmar government, or stable commitment by the Wa authorities. NGOs had been forced out of Wa Region by the Myanmar government in 2010 after the Border Guard Force pressures and Kokang incident of 2009, and from 9 organizations in 2008, there were only 3 left in Wa Region by 2012\(^{70}\).

Funding priorities had changed after the eradication of opium, since the new form of the drugs trade could no longer be said to be a developmental issue (methamphetamine production was carried out covertly by syndicates with less community involvement compared to opium production). After 2012, the concerns of the international community gradually shifted towards the peace process and political conflict (including displaced populations) rather than the criminalization of communities and drug “kingpins” (TNI 2014; Lone 2008; Jelsma et al. 2005).

\(^{70}\) Memorandums of Understanding and Travel Authorization to Wa Region from the Myanmar Ministry of Health, Ministry of Rural Development, or Ministry of Border Affairs, were increasing difficult to obtain after 2009, placing restrictions on the travel of international staff. This, together with funding cuts, meant that German Agro Action, Terres des hommes, AMI, Care International, UNODC, and the Food and Agriculture Organization all ceased operations by 2012. Only Health Poverty Action, Malteser International, and Wood Food Programme remained by 2014.
The UWSA leadership was increasingly perplexed after the mass withdrawal of the NGOs by 2012. “We have gradually learnt to work with you” [since 1999], and now you are leaving before the work is complete”. They blamed the withdrawals on the Myanmar government, seen as denying access to the NGOs to put political and economic pressure on them. Development assistance became one

Figure 26: Terrace and upland rice farming in the Man Tun township, October 2015

‘7’ Working with and accommodating NGOs was often perplexing for the Wa authorities, whose top-down modus operandi differed greatly from international organizations. In Wa Region, all it took was the approval of the minister in charge, and a program or operation could begin with no obstruction or argument from lower authorities. By contrast, the “holistic” livelihoods programmes of the NGOs required surveys, data gathering, “consultation”, “participation”, pilot schemes, and monitoring, a series of activities that seemed cumbersome, unnecessarily exacting, and stingy to local authorities.
of the bargaining chips in the intermittence of political practice, used by the Myanmar government to build and break connections with Wa Region.

At the same time, with autonomy as an overriding value, assistance was requested and accepted only on the UWSA’s terms – they would never be held hostage by international organizations or the Myanmar government, regardless of need. In many cases they appealed for interventions to be altered to fit their conceptions, although they often relented out of respect: “if someone provides something, you cannot reject it either”. Some NGOs interpreted this as resistance or a lack of “awareness” and cooperation, finding the UWSA “difficult to work with”.

This was the dual nature of governance – the production of political authority through providing for its people and establishing order both integrated Wa Region into the Myanmar state and simultaneously bolstered its autonomy from it. Development and governance were only two of the many domains of political practice through which the liminality of Wa Region was produced, a constant making and breaking of ties. And while this wider political context was central to the feasibility of the work of international organizations and NGOs, not all understood the extent of its sheer complexity. It was often easier to blame failure or resistance to projects and programmes on “bad governance”, “lack of capacity”, and the “lack of exposure” of the UWSA. This was the tidiest and most readily deployed narrative when choosing not to engage with the UWSA for a host of different reasons.

172 There was obviously a distinction between the views of the donors and Country Offices based in Yangon or worldwide, and the Field Offices in Wa Region. Few observers in Yangon had a clear understanding of the politics and complexities involved, and understandably so, as Field Offices struggled to communicate these. Wa Region was merely one of the different nationwide contexts and programs they had to deal with, and certainly one of the prickliest.
Missing the forest for the trees was not new. Ping Fu-chang, the secretary of the Communist Party Working Committee in Ximeng in the Wa Hills in the 1950s, and a facilitator for Winnington’s visit, admitted to some “mistakes” in their attempts to integrate the Wa into the Chinese state:

“we sometimes saw only the backwardness and misled ourselves into ignoring the progressive ingredients of the situation, and we sometimes made the mistake of thoughtlessly transplanting ideas here which were based on experiences in other places where conditions were different” (Winnington 2008:172).
Chapter 5  Intimacies

The road leading up to the Longtan township office was lined with school children, villagers in traditional dress, townspeople, and township officials, their coordinated black and red vests snaking nearly half a kilometer down the road to the main market. All manner of guests had assembled in the hours prior, and the courtyard of the township office was inundated with neat rows of parked cars. The schoolchildren, each provided with a dark red Wa waistcoat for the event, had been practicing their hand-waving and welcome chants under the early morning sun, chattering busily amongst themselves. The teachers ushered them into neat lines, spacing them out along the road at orderly intervals.

This was the third day of the New Harvest Festival celebrations, the biggest and most important celebration in Wa Region, occurring after most of the harvests were complete. Celebrations were usually hosted at district level, but the wealthier townships could organize events for the public. Longtan township had set up four days of celebrations, and the funfair’s temporary shelters and umbrella stalls were still drying in the reluctant sunlight from the damp of the previous day’s drizzles. Longtan was the Wa township at the highest elevation of around 2,500m, and rainy days often saw the town draped in a thick layer of mist. The town spent several months of each year shrouded in a cold greyness. Today, however, was a cautious September morning, bright yet not sunny. Temperatures fell to freezing and people huddled around fires even during the day. I sat in one of the two noodle shops in the township market slurping down a bowl of Chinese “convenience noodles” whilst waiting for the event to begin. Women hurried down the main market street in traditional garb, one in a red headscarf and dark blue blouse and slacks, complete with an orange Wa bag slung diagonal across one shoulder. Others were heading to the bus station to catch a bus to other towns, indifferent to the scenes that were about to unfold.
This tiny town comprised a main road of no more than two hundred meters, the permanent market and bus station at its center, flanked by shops selling produce, hardware, and Chinese household goods. A new hotel had been opened for the hosting of this event. It was market day as well, once every five days when villagers would hoist baskets of produce over their shoulders, secured to their heads with a forehead strap, and begin the long trundle up to the market with several children in tow. The main street would be lined with baskets and mats, squatting Wa women, and the occasional man selling poultry or fertilizer. This morning, uniformed police with startlingly white gloves cordoned off the road with cones and flagged lines, marshaling villagers selling their produce to the roadsides.

A large convoy of nine cars rolled down the road through the market street, and halted at the foot of the slope. The district and township leaders were ready and waiting to receive their guest. The doors of the lead gleaming white Landcruiser opened, and a portly regal man was helped out of the vehicle by guards. In a flash, all doors of the other vehicles opened, and around a dozen soldiers leapt out, dashing to the front clutching assault rifles and grenade launchers, despite the lack of any apparent security threat. The people started clapping, and the schoolchildren began their synchronized welcome chants, with its shrill rhythms reverberating up the hill. The minister was not in the prime of his health, and made slow yet steady progress up the hill. Everywhere, villagers and leaders bowed politely, welcoming him with a nod.

He proceeded up the hill, past the rows of singing schoolchildren, past the dancing villagers dressed in black traditional garb, past the uniformed soldiers and policemen. Escorted by the officials from the township and district, the entourage made its way slowly up the slope to the township government office, where two rows of teak chairs, facing one another, had been laid out under the porch. My companion and I followed at a great distance. The leaders sat down, and the drinking
and greeting began in earnest. The minister, flanked by other senior officials, had his soldiers pour out home-brewed tiger-bone whiskey into small shot glasses for those around him. Despite being the visiting dignitary, one of his soldiers with a canteen full of said liquor was never far. Businessmen, acquaintances, and all manner of important officials were lining up to toast and greet him, to be seen and to remind him of their existence, their business plans, and projects they had in mind. They came to be part of his wider social circle, just as his arrival had honored the authorities of Longtan township. It was these presences, the visits, the sitting with, the slight bows and two-handed toasts, the drinking, smoking and dining, that brought people together and built up their carefully negotiated networks and relationships. This was the phatic labor (Elyachar 2010) of being with, a form of cultural competence.

Figure 27: New Harvest Festival, Longtan township September 2014
After a half hour of sitting and greeting, the officials proceeded for lunch in one of the many adjacent rooms of the township office, laid out carefully with round dining tables. Soldiers of the township authorities were responsible for serving portions of food cooked up in the temporary kitchen downstairs. Careful attention was paid to the hasty seating arrangement. Within the banqueting, one had to literally know one’s place. The more senior and powerful officials were invited to sit closer to the minister, while more distant and less important guests sat further away. Of course, not till after the customary gestures of deference, shows of humility, beckoning others to sit in certain places instead of oneself, and appropriate behavior. The vectors of rank, place, and hierarchy were in full play – a person inappropriately seated was frowned upon, but rarely admonished. There were invited guests from China, as well as from several other Wa townships and government bodies. In this predominantly male setting, the table turnover rates were high, with guests filing in and out as tables were replenished.

My position as an international guest was somewhere in in the middle of the social hierarchy, carrying some weight as the head of the United Nations office in Wa Region, but also of diminished standing because of my relatively youthful age. I was neither a well-worn, hardened member of society, nor a businessman of economic importance. At this stage, I had already been in Wa Region for several months, and was beginning to find my way amongst the various leaders and hierarchies. I decided to join the setting just as lunch was winding down, partly due to my hesitation and partly to strategically avoid being plied with liquor from the get-go. I had earlier recognized one of the minister’s personal bodyguards as the entourage had pulled in, having met this soldier at the

173 Much like the refusal of gifts, a show so vehement that I once genuinely believed that I had caused offence by bringing a carton of cigarettes to a friend. He later kept the gift, despite instructing me to bring it back when I left.
leader’s house months before. A jovial and attentive 20-something year old, this soldier had been an ally, carefully pouring me less of the toxic tiger-bone liquor every time the toasts came around, preserving my sobriety and general bodily function. The bodyguard brought me into the dining room, went up to the minister and whispered in his ear. At this stage, the minister had already had dozens of liquor shots, and slowly raised his gaze, looking at me quizzically.

“I have met you before, but I do not recognize you now. You are a different person from the one I met. You have become black,” he uttered. “The sun in the Wa hills is very strong,” I replied, scrutinizing his complexion and deciding that this was a bit rich coming from him. Seated next to him was a Wa businessman whom I had known for a while, a friend from the Chinese side of the border. This man rescued me from the humiliation of anonymity (saving my dark blushes), and proceeded to introduce me with kind words, the type of vouching-for so integral to the building of ties. He apologized to the leader for not bringing me in earlier. “Sit with us,” the leader beckoned, as other soldiers rushed to add a chair next to him. We fumbled through the rest of the meal, spicy marinated chicken flavored with MSG, stir-fried roots of all kinds, braised pork, and clear vegetable soup. By this stage the frequency and volume of toasts had fallen markedly, and a Chinese businessman seated at our table, visibly drunk, had begun to rant on and on about how close he was to the leader, and how much the minister had done for him. He put his arm around the minister’s shoulder, and continued to blabber away. He soon crossed the line of intimacy, and since the bodyguards were too low in social stature to physically restrain him, another of the minister’s aides had to diplomatically intervene, gradually prising him away. The minister insisted it was fine, but others at the table repeatedly told the businessmen to retire and rest. A “face-saving” move restored the guests’ sense of propriety, and the minister had not needed to disrespect the drunk man.
Power and Authority

Longtan township had hosted this entire New Harvest Festival celebration at the supposed cost of 3 million yuan (USD 500,000 at the time), with dance performances on an outdoor stage, basketball and tug-of-war competitions, funfair-style booths, and lunches and dinner throughout for at least a thousand people – officials, villagers, and soldiers alike. It was this kind of spectacle that might lead an observer attuned to other markers of “good governance” to wonder whether money could be better spent on schools, healthcare, and infrastructure. Longtan township was one of the wealthier of the 24 townships in Wa Special Region, and bordering China with easier access to trade and technology, and owned several mines which turned a profit for its coffers.174

The Longtan New Harvest Festival however, provided a window into political culture and authority in Wa Region in more ways than one. These events were spectacles for the performance of authority through providing for and taking care of subjects and subordinates, a task expected of “big men” and powerholders to maintain influence (Bayart 2009; Sahlins 1963; Barth 1959; Strathern 1971). Excess, lavish expenditure, and scale – providing commensality for thousands of people and the hosting of funfair and market spaces – was situated within a larger ethic of hospitality and generosity that pervaded social interaction in Wa Region. Leaders provided capital and furnished their presence, “respecting” the place and its people by gracing the event, a prestigious and face-gaining occasion for the organizers.

174 Ronald Renard observed a similar festival in Nam Tit in 2006 funded mainly by proceeds from rubber sales (2013a:156). These township-level celebrations are organized in addition to those held by the central authorities, but by 2015 the Central Committee decided to curb such large-scale celebrations to save expenses.
Events such as this brought together two parallel structures that produced authority in Wa Region – the politico-military administrative governing structure (see chapter 4), and the personal authority of different members of the elite, whose power and prestige was on full display. These public gatherings were also one of the many arenas within which authority could be contested and reaffirmed through interactions between leaders, guests, subordinates, and everyday people. Invitations, attendance, and conduct were central, as guests and subordinates reaffirmed their respect and reverence for leaders through deference – a corporeally marked practice at shared meals and ceremony – and adherence to an unspoken etiquette of behavior and interaction. Conversely, breaches of these rules could be taken as a deliberate disrespect, or as direct challenges to the power or authority of a particular leader.

Far from lawlessness and chaos in the borderlands, and in spite of cultural hybridities and fluidity of movement, the local world of Wa Region comprised a script and shared rules and norms through which people negotiated their relationships with others. It was an embodied lens through which people sized one another up, maintained and severed ties, manipulated, collaborated, or competed with each other. Power (quanli) and connections (guanxi, or renshi lit. knowing someone) were central concepts (and frequently used in everyday parlance), integral to social interactions, political maneuvering, and business dealings. Locals had keenly honed mental maps of relations and hierarchies – who was related to whom, who one need be wary of offending, who one might appeal to for help, or who was irrelevant by virtue of his lack of power. Part of learning to be a social person in Wa region was developing such mental maps and navigating the networks of power and patronage.

In this chapter I describe the production, exercise, and navigation of authority through intimate forms of interaction between governors and the governed, between people and elites in Wa Region.
If, as Rose and Miller (2010) describe, governance consists of an assemblage of forces that produce power as an effect, then political culture in Wa Region is the social context of that very assemblage, particularly running parallel to the mechanisms of governance that take place in Wa Region. Authority is reproduced through political practices across a variety of arenas – enacted through scripted settings such as festivals, meetings, and social events (Geertz 1980), performed in practices of visiting and hospitality, embodied in sensibilities and bodily comportment, and circulated in ad hoc everyday encounters and gossip.

I utilize the notion of intimacy, inspired by Achille Mbembe’s brilliant essay “The Banality of Power” (1992), to describe the contingency, tactics, and play embedded in relationships between powerful elites and everyday people in Wa Region. Mbembe speaks of the “intimacy of tyranny”, looking at the “myriad ways in which ordinary people bridle, trick, and actually toy with power instead of confronting it directly” (1992:22). While somewhat resembling Scott’s “weapons of the weak”, Mbembe’s intimacies are not mere resistance and footdragging, but also a type of play and improvisation, the “toying” with that he describes, which creeps into and guides social interaction:

“the subjects of the commandement have internalized the authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life, such as social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, dress styles, rhetorical devices, and the political economy of the body.” (Mbembe 1992:23)

Intimacy in Wa Region relies on the tenuous nature of building and breaking personal and institutional connections, between and amongst elites and everyday people alike, and through networks of social connections and personal ties extending outside of Wa Region. Despite the ostensibly authoritarian setup of the Wa government, labelling political culture as merely coercive and tyrannical effaces the complex set of obligations and norms of leaders to provide for their people. Intimacy was a reverence and respect for leaders that they reciprocated through forms of
patronage, protection, hospitality, and generosity. People manipulated and utilized ties with leaders to secure capital for themselves, in a Bourdieuvian game of strategy and improvisation.

Whereas chapter 4 examined the production of political authority through practices of governance, I lay out in this chapter the social foundations of authority in contemporary Wa society – wealth and patronage, networks of connections, personal histories, and performances of power – equally integral as the political and administrative governance structure. I describe patronage and protection, the knowledge and mastery required to manipulate and manage relations, and people’s embodied local sensibilities and bodily comportment, social etiquette and norms. I ask a series of questions which explore political culture: What is the nature of authority in Wa Region, and what makes given individuals powerful? What are the historical and contemporary influences shaping present day Wa political culture? How is authority performed, embodied, accepted, or critiqued in everyday interactions? I argue that the notion of intimacy opens a space for attending ethnographically to the micro-techniques and tactics of production and contestation of authority, more analytically productive than criticisms of authority in Wa Region as simply hierarchical, oppressive, and authoritarian, and in need of “democratic” reform and “good governance” (see chapter 4).

**Foundations of Authority**

Luke Freeman’s essay Why are Some People Powerful? (2007), an analysis of the Madagascan president Ravalomanana and his authority, draws inevitably on the work on power and authority by Weber (1964) and Sahlins (1963). Demonstrating that Ravalomanana’s authority is a blend of
Melanesian “big men’s” acts and abilities and the inherited authority of Polynesian chiefs (Sahlins 1963), as well as a combination of Weber’s famous charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal authority (1964), Freeman describes how power is performed through wealth and economic success, connections to followers, a perception of warmth, appeal to foreign legitimacy, spectacle and the breaking of taboos.

Similarly, authority in Wa region rests partially on administrative rules and a constitution, but is mainly vested in the persons of leaders, backed up by a threat of violence. Sources of authority include one’s position in government or military, his wealth and property, his personal history of valor and involvement in the CPB or post-1989 period, the place of his family in Wa history or cultural capital, his ability to provide for people or protect them, or finally his charisma and “ability” (nengli) to manage business tasks. Equally important are kinship relations and personal or business ties to top-tier Politburo members or military commanders, as the bureaucratic apparatus played second fiddle to their pronouncements and decisions. The two supremely powerful families in the Politburo were the Baos and the Weis (see chapter 2) – the former the warrior-hero family of the revolution who broke the shackles of the CPB; the latter seen as the ethnic Chinese financial strategists of the UWSA, steadily filling the coffers with their business investments (See Lintner and Black 2009; Chin 2009; Milsom 2005). But outside the Baos and the Weis, authority was contested and shifting. It was not easily apparent which of these variables would hold more weight.

175 Sahlins’ typology of the Polynesian chief and the Melanesian “big man” (1963) posits that the Polynesian chief’s authority is feudal and pyramidal, his status a right accorded to him, while the Melanesian “big man’s” authority stems from his charisma, skills, and acts, his leadership measured by his influence and ability to persuade others to follow. The Melanesian “big man” has no structurally coercive authority over his followers, and must continuously persuade or motivate them personally – “their obedience to the headman’s decisions is caused by motivations which reflect their particular relations to the leader” (Sahlins 1963:290).
Sovereignty overlapped and was in flux between leaders and their kin, based on different forms of political and social capital.

Fundamentally, wealth and the ability to provide for subordinates played a central role in a leader’s authority, which in turn was a vehicle for accumulation, the “straddling” of political and commercial interests in a “politics of the belly” (Bayart 2009), rendering the distinction between public and private wealth unclear. With no central budget allocated to townships, it was up to the township leader to invest personal and township funds in businesses and projects to generate revenue, drawing on local resources to develop rubber or tea plantations, hydroelectric dams, and tin mines for instance (See also Chin 2009, chapter 2). The Central Committee would set up some policies and guidelines – for example, the goal for each township to spend 5% of its budget on education and 5% on healthcare by 2019. Being successful at revenue generation and the smooth administration of the public coffers was testament to the “ability” and “leadership qualities” of an official, conversely, poor management would lead to being replaced or reassigned. On occasion, it was difficult to find township leaders at their offices since they were busy running either their personal or public businesses, leaving a contact number on the office board instead. A friend dryly called this “working in name only” (mingzhi shangban), although a more sympathetic reading would have noted the pressures on leaders to finance their own departments, and of course to manage their own personal wealth.

I was told of a certain leader who had been newly appointed minister of a department, and supposedly lacked the personal wealth to do his job successfully. A friend spoke with sympathetically of this leader, asserting that his job would be strenuous and frustrating (chili), and that the department would suffer. What this interlocutor meant was that the new minister could not afford to fund department projects or cover shortfalls with his personal wealth. Officials in the
government were paid between 150 and 1200 CNY (25-200 USD) and around 20 kg of rice a month, and different departments offered different wages. To survive, officials relied on their positions for the social capital with which to start businesses such as hotels, rubber plantations, petrol stations, and other conglomerate companies. They also received gifts and favors from visiting businessmen, or concessions from the Wa government for their businesses. This income was the only means of funding the department. As such, the distinction between individual and state wealth was often very unclear, and many businesses were owned partly by a work unit (danwei) and partly by the leader himself.

The careful display and concealment of wealth made it impossible to know how much capital a leader actually had. In this region of shadow economies, much prior wealth was accrued through the trade of opium and heroin before eradication. This money was then continuously been reinvested in hotels, property, businesses, plantations, and mines, such as the famous Hong Pang company\textsuperscript{176}. Wealth was a symbol of status and power that was often displayed through excess – a fleet of large cars on the mansion grounds, a large household and following of soldiers provided for, and entertainment events, guests hosted with lavish meals, alcohol, and entertainment. Small distinctions indexed the wealth of leaders – the brands and types of cigarettes they smoked, the cars they drove, the venues and restaurants at which they hosted meals and events, the brews of their homemade rice spirits.

\textsuperscript{176} Hong Pang company, owned by Wei Xuegang of the UWSA Politburo, has a whole series of associated companies and subsidiaries. Widely suspected of being involved in money laundering profits from the drugs trade, businesses included timber, fruit and vegetable farms, cement, road building, metal smelting, pig farming, and retail. Hong Pang is involved in many joint ventures with other leaders of the UWSA and Myanmar military, rendering a complex tapestry of ownership and accumulation (Lintner and Black 2009).
At the same time, wealth in the borderlands exhibited a *spectral* quality, concealed and partially visible. Because of the potentially dubious sources of income, many people in town (and not simply officials) were afraid to reveal the extent of their wealth, what a friend dubbed “the rich pretending to be poor (youqian zhuangqiong)”. He told stories of how this wealth was discovered when ordinary people were caught carrying bags full of Chinese currency when fleeing across the Chinese border during the Kokang crisis in 2009. Others were afraid of being asked to lend money to friends and relatives, or of having burdens of hospitality fall upon them, and being seen as miserly. The display of wealth had to be managed carefully – status was important, yet wealth that did not correspond to position would trigger suspicion and jealousy, or incur obligations.

Wealth alone was no guarantee of authority, however. There was the story of the district leader who had fallen from grace. The concrete paved road and layout of the district seat were all his handiwork, school and clinics part of his attempts to provide for the people of his area by running businesses owned by the district. But after several years in office, he was removed from power and put in charge of an obscure department back in the capital. Friends gave a variety of reasons for his downfall:

“He built a new market and invited the villagers to sell their goods there, circumventing the authority of the ruling family, who had built the original market that was now emptying out. Nonetheless after he was displaced, the use of the new market was accepted. He was too arrogant – one should know their place and not compete with the main family. People (referring to the district leader) should be reasonable and not overstep their authority”.

Another suggested: “He had built roads, gas stations, and set up a whole series of companies to generate revenue, but it was the organization of the celebration of the UWSA 20th anniversary (in 2009) which landed him into trouble. It was too grand, and caused a loss of face for the other leaders. He was replaced a few years later (in 2013).”
“Well, he is not a Bao, what did he expect?” came an even more cynical reply.

With the replacement of this district leader, grand plans for the conversion of one of its townships into a Special Township fell through. This township was closer to the Monglar area and though small in size, was close to a border crossing with China. It had a casino, sports gambling center, a series of hotels, a large pond with a golden bull in the center, a golf driving range, and a large department store selling a wide variety of household products from China and Thailand. The town was laid out along a single road (paved by this district leader), a road lined with a continuum of new but empty shophouses and buildings, testament to fallen hopes and ambitions, and fallen leaders. It was a symbol of precarity, the nagging notion that in these borderlands there was always a host of factors that might conspire to bring tragedy – global market prices, the regional security situation, closure of checkpoints or bans on trade, and of course bickering between leaders.

Authority then, was both historical and circumstantial. Wealth and its careful or strategic expenditure was key. But other leaders were powerful by virtue of their kinship ties – nephews, cousins, or relatives of the influential families, or close friends. Others had proven their mettle and worth in the battles with Shan militia in the 1990s, or were respected for their roles in the CPB administration prior to 1989. Everyone who was someone had a backstory that was known, or gossiped about over dinner banquets and during visits to others’ houses. The winds of political change could bring a leader and his affiliates down, just as the passing of one’s patron could signal a change in fortunes.

**Chairman Bao and the Trope of the “Leader”**

A Chinese businessman once told me a story of how Chairman Bao’s car was traveling on a narrow road in the hills, with a whole line of cars gathering behind his, simply because no one dared to
overtake his vehicle. He finally stopped to allow others to pass, cognizant that he was holding up traffic. This story, while somewhat unlikely since he owns some of the most powerful and fastest cars in the region\textsuperscript{177}, was an exemplar of the almost mythical reverence reserved for the Chairman, also the Commander-in-Chief of the Army (zongsilin). Even the Chinese visitors understood how the revered revolutionary leader of the UWSA was surrounded with an aura of respect and adulation. His portraits, along with that of the late Secretary of the Politburo Zhao Nyi Lai, can be found in government offices and homes across the region.

The sensationalist Time magazine article of 2002, based on Anthony Davis and Andrew Marshall’s visit to Pang Kham, describes Chairman Bao with little reverence as “a squat man in his early 50s with a bulldog face”, painting him as a wily “tribesman” intent on building a narco-fortune for UWSA leadership whilst posing as a “heroic enemy of the narcotics racket” (Marshall and Davis 2002). The journalists caricaturized the Chairman in their exchange:

“‘These drugs!’ he cries, karate-chopping the air for emphasis, revealing the diamond-encrusted gold Rolex he wears on his wrist. ‘I detest them! You think drugs have been harmful to others? Let me tell you: they have been a much greater disaster for the Wa! Our people are stuck in such poverty they haven’t even got clothes to put on their own backs.’”

This was an interview that took place before the recent illnesses that have ailed Chairman Bao over the last several years, and the journalists depicted a combative, defiant and confident man. They listed critically several of the commercial ties and connections he and his family had to Myanmar and China, “But his reputation, fueled by rumor, is gaudy, befitting the lord of a narco-fiefdom. Bao is reputedly so rich that he would need two trucks to carry around all his money.”

\textsuperscript{177}This seems only possible if he were periodically pausing to inspect or observe the villages along the countryside.
They noted, if patronizingly, the admiration of the Wa people for their leader:

“Though Wa peasants know little else but poverty, disease and war, their de facto leader Bao is nevertheless revered. They call him uncle. ‘He’s a very good man,’ says Ai Sin. ‘If he says he’ll do something, he does it.’ Says another elder: ‘All the Wa love him.’ Unconvincing as they might sound to outsiders, these sentiments seem genuine.”

Necessarily, a large part of his influence was due also to wealth. A cynical interview told Chin, regarding the drug trade: “Bao is perfectly clear who is doing what, but he needs money to develop the Wa State and to maintain his power. Here, money talks and it is everything; if you don’t have money you cannot be the top leader. Bao is the most powerful leader mainly because he knows how to make money” (2009:222). This account exaggeratedly reduced Bao’s charisma and historical achievements to the mere fact of economic capital, but it was not uncommon to hear local rhetoric cynically asserting that all capital was economic and that no other modes or currencies ultimately mattered.

In 2005, a New York circuit court indicted four Bao brothers and 3 Wei brothers on charges of drug smuggling, and placed sanctions on their wealth, as well as warrants for their arrest and rewards for information leading to capture. Sanctions were easily circumvented through the establishment of shell companies or businesses run by affiliates, but travel was more severely restricted. This meant that the top leaders of the UWSA, despite rumors of being able to move reasonably freely in China, had little access to visits to the wider region. Their progeny however, studied and lived abroad in China, Thailand, Singapore, and even the UK, amongst other destinations.

Within Wa Region, Bao’s name took on folkloric life of its own. A friend described with pride how he, as a young teenager, had been brought by his aunt to see the Chairman, and declined a cigarette when offered one. The chairman told him that it was good not to smoke, and that from now on he should never smoke, unless in the presence of the Chairman. Others described him as having the
well-being of his people at heart, even though the inability to travel out of the region had resulted in a lack of exposure to developmental paradigms of the outside world amongst the key leaders of the Politburo. Officials with knowledge of the inner workings of the Central Committee suggested that the older generation of leaders were willing to seek out new perspectives, acknowledging their lack of administrative experience. Prior to his bouts of illness, Chairman Bao had been keen to engage with the international development workers in Wa Region, granting them access to projects and gradually coming to understand their mandates. He also gave interviews to news media, including one in which he described the beginnings of the Wa militias, and finally their revolt against the CPB: “after 20 years of struggle there was little economic development or outcome to show for the people of Wa Region, so we asked them to ‘take a rest’”\textsuperscript{178}.

People, places, and projects associated with his name were invested with an authority and respect. Members of his family – brothers, cousins, children, nephews, and wives were heads of administrative and military units, and seemingly untouchable. On the occasion of his grandson’s first birthday, the skyline of Pang Kham was lit up by a grand display of fireworks, and anyone who was anyone in town had gathered at his mansion for the lavish celebrations. Videos of his inspections of military parades and ceremonies were uploaded to YouTube, and his recognizable uniformed image was splashed across banners and news reports.

\textbf{Roots of Authoritarianism}

“Ah, we in Wa Region, only learn the bad and not the good,” an official lamented semi-jokingly as we sat together once morning, recounting the different origins of certain practices in Wa Region,

\textsuperscript{178} 7 Sep 2009 \textit{interview} with Phoenix Television of Hong Kong.
such as the flaunting of wealth, banqueting and gift-giving, and the keeping of mistresses by older men. It was said that the period immediately following the formation of Wa Region in 1989 was one of chaos and disorder (luan), when the arrival of Chinese syndicates engaged in the drug trade led to the proliferation of “gangster-like” violence and predatory behavior, a ruthlessness and competition for influence. From the Chinese, they had supposedly learnt the one-upmanship of conspicuous gift-giving and obligation, or other forms of currying favor.

This period of disorder in the 1990s made prominent the image of the “warlord” or “drug lord” in the borderlands, unhelpful terms that trivialized the relations of power and authority cultivated over the last three decades since the formation of the UWSA. As Jeremy Milsom, former head of the UNODC office in Wa Region, writes:

“with most groups striving for peace, the concept of the ‘drug warlord’ is rendered a myth that ignores the complex political and ideological struggles underlying much of the historical legacy of the Shan State and the role of organized transnational crime networks that take advantage of the resultant state of instability and relative lawlessness.” (2005:63)

This was located in the context of political power in Burma historically being “highly personalistic, defined by relationships of obligation to rulers and overlords rather than jurisdictional control over territory” (Callahan 2009:31; also Kramer 2007:37). And as Chin Kolin notes in his criminological work on the drug trade:

“the difference between a state builder and a drug kingpin, between benevolence and greed, and between public funds and personal wealth became all the more difficult to delineate” (2009:234).

So much then for the much-touted egalitarianism of the Wa chieftains of the past (see chapter 2), which had been overrun by hierarchical forms of authority. The CPB military campaigns and administration created a top-down political structure, and the shadow economy and extractive
industries had widened wealth inequalities and “big man” personas. The communist ideologies of the CPB were all but absent however, contrary to the erroneous assertions of news organizations that had earlier reported the UWSA as “left-wing” (Bhaumik 2010). As a township leader put it, “yes, we all had the little red book, whatever was suitable we took, and that which was unsuitable we did not take”. It was partly this loss of ideology, or “grievance”, that facilitated brandings of the UWSA as an amoral, ruthless, greed-driven drug cartel. It appeared to me however, that the authoritarianism that pervaded the UWSA administration was yet tempered by the autonomy of decision-making at the local district and township levels, as I described in chapter 4, the seeming vestiges of an egalitarian ethic.

I described these thoughts to a cynical friend, a mid-level official in the Wa government, who dismissed them with a wave of his hand, “you have got it wrong,” he exclaimed, “it is a completely authoritarian setup. The power is centralized and the leaders at the top make all the decisions. There are only some areas in which they feel bad to tell the lower levels what to do, because they provide no central funds to support them whatsoever.” But this still seemed an equally reductive assessment of the networks of patronage and complexes assemblages of authority.

The closeness to China and use of the Chinese language means that political views and perspectives on international issues are shaped by the narratives of Chinese state television. The full range of Chinese state television channels are available in Wa Region, and while a handful of Burmese channels are broadcast, few Wa officials understand Burmese. Leaders’ main external interactions are with Chinese businessmen and government officials, making the methods and registers of the Chinese political apparatus familiar to inhabitants of Wa Region. I once sat together with officials from a government Department, watching the Chinese celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II on CCTV1. The officials watched the proceedings with a
muted admiration for the progress made by China, along with misgivings about why President Xi Jinping was saluting the troops with his left hand. The minister chided another official for attempting to leave early before the parade had finished, jokingly (but not jokingly) suggesting that he lacked respect for such a solemn event. If anything, there was a sense of camaraderie with the Chinese Communists through their shared experience of warfare and struggle during the 1960s and 1970s.

Political culture then, as well as critical discourses about governance, corruption, and authoritarianism, mirrored that of the contemporary Chinese Communist Party. Most overtly there was a style of campaign-driven laws passed by edict – pronouncements of drug eradication, crackdowns on casino gambling and taxation and regulation of export of goods, minerals or timber into China. There were staging of festivals and events, regular biannual work plan meetings and reports. Discussions of policies and government were respectful and cautious, mindful airing grievances, weaknesses, or dissent only behind closed doors or circles. The Wa news media – which broadcast the evening news in Chinese, Shan, and Wa – would recount meetings by officials and publish achievements in a positive light, which was curiously not due to a propagandist imperative, but rather a modular imitation of the language and registers of the Chinese news. Ministers and officials present at meetings would be introduced by rank and title, in order of rank.

**Patronage: Respect and Reverence**

Despite the simplistic portrayals of Chairman Bao as a dictatorial figure, it was hard to characterize the relationship between elites and people simply as one of fear and coercion. Foreign observers begrudgingly acknowledged his charisma and popularity amongst the people. There was undoubtedly a threat of violence and sanction, but more importantly a form of *respect and reverence*
for positions of authority (Hamilton 1984; Pye 1985). The great disparity between people and their leaders was enabled and amplified through these norms of hierarchy, and sensibilities displayed through embodied deference shown when speaking to and about leaders, a bodily comportment when in their presence, and a willingness to comply or provide. Here, Mbembe’s intimacies of tyranny were “reproduced... in all the minor circumstances of daily life” (1992:23). This reverence is central to situating external concerns over “good governance” – why stark inequalities are tolerated, why respect for leaders is maintained despite hardship, and why descriptions of the Wa leadership as authoritarian do not render the full portrait of political culture in Wa Region. In the place of the neoliberal metrics of “good governance” was a local logic of authority that determined what a “good leader” was.

A reverence for the “leader” appears all over Burma, with “lugyi” (Burmese, lit. big person), “tak” (Wa, honorific for elders), “laoda” (Chinese, elder brother, senior or boss), and “laoguai” (Yunnanese, honorific similar to laoda but used mainly for older men, refers also to husband). Scholars writing in the English language use the term “Wa leaders” in general to refer to officials in the Wa government and military, as clumsy as it sounds. “Wa leader” is a direct translation of the widely used Chinese term wabang lingdao, which refers broadly to Wa officials at the township levels and above (district and central). The term is also used frequently in Chin Kolin’s book on drug production in Wa Region (2009) and NGOs’ English language reports. In practice, leaders are largely addressed by their official titles – buzhang (minister), fusilin (deputy commander), xianzhang (district leader), shuji (secretary), or quzhang (township leader) – but lingdao is used when unsure of the official title. Alternatively, the more informal and personal terms laoguai or laoda are also used to refer to a senior respected person in the community. Ganbu, or cadres, adopted from the Chinese Communist nomenclature, is less commonly used, referring generally to “civil servants”, and dangyuan to members of the UWSP.
Intimacy operated through patronage, protection, and an ethic of generosity. I often asked people what made a good leader in their minds, and received a collection of answers such as: “One who takes care of the people below him”, “one who is generous and not petty”, “one who has the wealth to do things”, or “one who has the capability to handle tasks”. All these utterances were naturally vague; it took some time to develop an understanding of the actual attributes and acts that were seen as hallmarks of good leadership, or appropriate conduct in positions of power. This echoed Chang Wen-Chin’s study of the patron-client relations that sustained the KMT forces in Burma and Northern Thailand under the Third and Fifth armies of Generals Li and Duan, finding a familial bond of kinship, loyalty, discipline, and gratitude amongst these communities (2002).

A leader had an entourage of younger men, women, and children under his household for whom he was expected to provide. With widespread poverty and the average household size at 6.3 persons\(^{179}\), large families in such a poor region often had little option but to send children to work in the household of richer families. Some children were adopted as cooks and cleaners, others became soldiers or drivers, and all expected to help out with farming where available. In the Wa government, there were rules and stipulations as to how many soldiers a leader could adopt under his household, which increased according to his rank. The metaphors of familial relations also extended to the parallel responsibilities leaders also had to those below in their work units. A good leader, then, was responsible for keeping his own house in order, ensuring that all were protected and compliant. A friend in a government department grumbled that his Lexus GX 370 Landcruiser was old and battered, but that the minister would frown upon it if he bought the latest model, which would have been a sign of unbecoming extravagance, not “knowing his place”. Everywhere

\(^{179}\) Figure derived from the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, calculated by aggregating UWSA-controlled township data and omitting government-controlled townships.
else I heard sympathetic stories about leaders of whose children were said to be disobedient (*butinghua*). Moral reprimand and the upkeep of appropriate appearances were essential to the leader’s corporate unit.

Stinginess (*xiaqi*) was perhaps one of the worst attributes a leader could be accused of. I often heard gossip about which leaders were constantly making purchases and embarking on construction projects without paying the right tips and “introduction fees” (*jieshaofei*) to middlemen who had brokered the deals, or forgetting those who had helped them along the way. Others conveniently overlooked debts incurred, most reprehensible for those who were wealthy and powerful. Leaders were expected to foot the bill at events, an obligation to provide for others around him; they often hosted entertainment sessions or dinners where guests and friends would arrive and leave without seeing any money changing hands or bills being paid, such discreetness part of the sense that these costs were trivial and irrelevant to a truly magnanimous leader. The powerful needed no acknowledgement of their provision, gratitude and obligation was implicit.

I was told many cautionary tales about leaders who were too stingy to provide for their own people. “Who would want to go with [follow] that guy?”, friends asked, having described a leader who only offered his driver a pig upon his proposed marriage out of the household, refusing to contribute money to the driver’s new household. Given that the driver had grown up in his family, and had no chance to work outside, it was expected that the leader then provide for his marriage at the appointed time. The driver, unable to provide for a family, remained unmarried into his thirties. Such oversights of leaders were often whispered and gossiped about disparagingly.

A leader granted an audience to people he accepted, and they were protected by mere association with him. A good leader followed up to “take care” of his associates. Name dropping was commonplace, and one-upmanship a competition amongst subordinates. Authority took the form
of pronouncements. Permission granted by a big leader was license to operate, a vouching-for anointed by his power. “Tell him I sent you” or “tell him you are a friend, and he will help you”. On the flip side, not receiving the hospitality or acknowledgement of a leader could be a cause of consternation for an individual, a falling out of favor, or a sense that one had to be on their toes with no security. With the most powerful, there was a feeling of coming before the Emperor, who lay latent and reserved, reclined on his bed ready to pass judgment. Visitors and petitioners often arrived anxious about the mood the leader was in at that moment. Leaders often bore a stern or grave disposition, a way of concealing their true thoughts to always leave the subordinate or petitioner guessing. This was part of the suspended threat of violence that lingered over interactions with the extremely powerful.

A potential for brutality and spectacle was part of a Foucauldian economy of power around leaders. A strong leader conducted himself with a grave ruthlessness and pragmatism where necessary, demonstrating the capacity to enforce discipline and shield those who were under his protection. Gossip and rumor added to the auras, sculpting the reputation of particular leaders and their capacity for violence, with few retributive acts actually made public. Phone calls were made to military units or to the police to have them “reconsider” arrests; others sent men or soldiers to threaten adversaries or those who had wronged them or their people. Another reportedly killed a subordinate who slept with one of his wives, and then divorced the unfaithful wife. Armed robbers who broke into a leader’s house were put on trial and executed publicly for their crime. Yet with the possibility of the display of harsh spectacular sovereignty, inhabitants of Wa Region generally felt safe from physical harm; homicide and assault rates were low, with petty thievery and scams being the main criminal scourge.
There were, naturally, limits to the behavior of most leaders, being kept in check by those above them in the pecking order. Occasionally, people would literally run to the house of a leader to seek protection from another. Leaders were also limited by peoples’ assessments of their power, and to be seen as behaving inappropriately would lead to a loss of respect. “How dare this person behave like this, who does he think he is, he’s only a secretary”, or “he has a lot of guts, to think that he can buy this business without asking for the permission of the minister”, or “he speaks as if he is a big boss, but he is nothing”.

**Mapping Authority: Navigating Contested Fields**

Yet while the top echelons of the Wa Politburo have almost unchallenged authority through their historical legacies, wealth, and political appointments, authority becomes more diffuse and contested the further one travels downward from ministers and deputies, to military commanders, to district heads, and township leaders. These contestations, strategies, and tactics of everyday political life amongst leaders, officials and ordinary people, have been a ubiquitous theme amongst political anthropologists (Barth 1959; Bailey 1969; Bayart 2009; Gupta 2012), unfolding within local social and political norms. Contests for authority, influence, and accumulation were founded on what Bailey distinguished as the “normative” and “pragmatic” rules in the “competitive game” of politics (1969). The normative rules were “ultimately and publicly acceptable values” and shared (if not fully conscious) “general guides to conduct”, while pragmatic rules were “private wisdom”, or tactics of manipulation and maneuvers of shifting loyalties and reciprocities (Bailey 1969:4-6).

Public festivals and events, social gatherings, ritualized settings, and government meetings formed arenas where officials, leaders, and ordinary people interacted, creating windows into the logic of authority and the state of political relationships. In these borderlands of highland Burma and China,
a set of social rules, etiquette and obligations, and a distinct sensibility of power and hierarchy were understood and embodied by borderlanders. At the same time, these rules were being contested and re-negotiated by individual personalities as they drifted in and out of positions of power. And visitors brought different regional understandings of etiquette to local contexts, making sense of the local political terrain. As Mbembe puts it: “what defines the postcolonised subject is his/her ability to engage in baroque practices which are fundamentally ambiguous, mobile, and ‘revisable,’ even in instances where there are clear, written, and precise rules” (1992:23). Agency, then, was enacted within theatres of play and performance, social dramas with real consequences (Turner 1982), amongst leaders and commoners alike.

Like Barth’s Pathan chiefs (1959), the competition between Wa leaders for personal influence and prestige was mediated or tempered by a parallel structure of authority (in Barth’s case the “holy men”), the institutional set up of the military-administrative UWSA itself. There was a clear official party hierarchy and political ranking of leaders, which imposed normative restrictions on how leaders might behave in public, and determined the theatrics of power such as seating arrangements and protocol. Though strategic objectives and the institutional unity of the UWSA prevented the chaos of factionalism and political entrepreneurship seen in Bayart’s “politics of the belly” (2009), metaphors of commensality and accumulation surely resonated with many forms of patronage in Wa Region. Contests, then, were less visible, muted by decorum and a veneer of unity. Yet, there remained a separate informal but widely whispered pecking order, generally understood but sometimes subjective, depending on who an observer asked. Leaders’ public appearances together revealed the ongoing tensions between them, who was in or out of favor, simply by noting how centrally they were positioned on rows or tables.
On one occasion, the wedding of a Politburo member’s daughter gathered hundreds of guests and a huge celebration that closed off an entire main road in Pang Kham – rows of cars on one side, tents and tables on the other, confetti and rose petals littering the entire street, and the sharp smell of smoke from firecrackers lingering in the air. There must have been 200 tables outside and another 40 inside the venue. Guests signed in at the registration table, listing the amounts of their cash gifts in the guestbook. The table was covered with offerings of sweets, sunflower seeds, and cigarettes; here guests received the door gift – red paper bag with two face towels and two bars of overbearingly fragrant Chinese-made laundry soap. Important guests were received by the Politburo member and his family themselves, ushered to tables in the centre of the courtyard or his
large house, where an emcee cheered on performers, accosted by loudspeakers blaring contemporary Chinese electronic tunes.

Leaders and officials occupied the 4 or 5 center tables under the main tent with the key government ministers and deputies spread between two tables. It was at this moment that a high ranking minister, walking in alone, entered the tent. He was ushered to an empty seat at one of the central tables, but there was no longer any room at the table where the host and another Politburo member were sitting. Nor had the host stood up to come and greet him. Instead, he had been ushered to the table where some military commanders, the health department head, and myself were seated. We were of lower rank by some distance. The Politburo member fumbled about, claimed that it was too hot and that he had already eaten, got up and walked straight out.

I pressed my companion to figure out if the Politburo member had been offended by being ushered to sit at a “smaller” table. After all, he was technically the second most important leader in Wa region. Several others present were a little uncomfortable at his departure, though furtive glances were exchanged, and nothing spoken out loud. My companion, slightly embarrassed, replied that sometimes things were done “too carelessly” (taishuibian), by which he meant that a failure to properly respect the rank of that leader, should not have happened. Conversely, the seemingly “informal” and celebratory nature of the wedding meant that the Politburo member could not show himself to be really perturbed without coming across as petty himself. Yet it was ostensibly undiplomatic of him to leave, and made a statement to those present.

It was also rumored that he had recently been falling out of favor, with the rest of the committee unhappy with his work for certain reasons. Not having any booming businesses of his own, he did not have the finances to fund programs, spend lavishly, or support subordinates. In fact, other leaders had had to cover the costs of banquets hosted for visitors, and often had to send cars to pick
him up, seeing he did not have a suitable-typed vehicle worthy of his title. It was apparent that authority did not necessarily map onto political rank, rather that actions and responses were contingently orchestrated according to the audience present.

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Early on in my stay in Wa Region, a friend summed up the state of relations most succinctly, “if I want to hit a dog, I must first know whose dog it is.” By this he meant that a web of relationships governed the distribution of authority throughout society. A sense of security in Wa Region derived from having close ties to big leaders, those who were responsive and would look out for their people, a feeling that protection was literally a phone call away. The friend, who was contracted to build a barracks and several halls for a certain military commander described how nobody dared to “touch” him, contrasting this new protected status with his previous fears and vulnerability as a nobody (meishenfen, or without status). He bragged how he could have asked for dozens of soldiers to “smash” a competitor’s shop should they try to cheat or “mess” with him. A hint, here, that one vector of this authority was expressed through sovereignty over body and property. Yet this protection would sometimes only work in retrospect, a redress for transgression, but did not necessarily serve as protection from harm in the present, which then called for a vigilance.

Given the centrality of authority to protection and business, most town inhabitants of Wa Region had a keen assessment of who was and wasn’t powerful – a mental map, if you like, of key leaders and their kin and relations. There was a need to locate people they had dealings with within a social map of relationships – who they knew, who they were close with, who their patrons or relatives were, and conversely, who their adversaries were. These webs of authority were widely known to anyone who was anyone – even ordinary people had some grasp of these relations of patronage. Histories of relationships and connections followed individuals around – “for some reason Minister
so-and-so really dislikes this guy”, friends would say, and vaguely allude to some family dispute or personal failure (e.g. an unsuccessful businesses) that was the cause for the disfavor. This would then be a mental note not to namedrop this individual as a possible connection or intermediary.

Boasting, exaggeration, and attempts to associate oneself with a particular leader were commonplace. Many constantly bragged about spending time with a leader, or being good friends or familiar (shu) with the leader’s relatives and children, attempting what Mayfair Yang, in her study of guanxi, describes as transformation (establishing familiarity) and symbolic incorporation (breaking down of boundaries between people) (1989:40-2). The inverse also happened in competitive fashion, with people disparaging one another’s connections in oblique and indirect ways without sounding too brash. For instance, if one were to boast of being close to a particular minister or deputy, another interlocutor might point out that “he actually has very little power, there is no use asking him for permission” or “it doesn’t matter what he says, there is no meaning to it (or it holds no weight)”. Sometimes I would ask friends if they were acquainted or knew (renshi, with a sense of being familiar with) a particular leader. Perhaps embarrassed that they did not, or finding it ridiculous that they might possibly be familiar with someone so high ranked, they would jokingly reply, “[of course] I know him but he doesn’t know me!”

Naturally, there were actual discrepancies between people’s assessments of others’ authority. While largely self-evident amongst the top tier of leaders (“whatever he says goes” or “as long as he says it is fine”), it was contested amongst everyone else, including mid-level leaders, full of disparagement and dismissal. These assessments of authority were often made negatively, such as “he doesn’t have any power at all” (meiquanli), or “he has no position”, or in correcting a misperception, “he actually has a lot of power”. The aforementioned individual who was constructing buildings for a military commander naturally argued that the military commanders were more powerful than the district
leaders, despite their shared jurisdictional areas. This I found to be true in that particular instance, corroborated by other friends. But in other cases, I often retrospectively learned that people’s boasts about their connections were misjudged, either in self-interested exaggeration or a simple lack of understanding of the wider political scene, and a patron might be revealed to be a big fish in a small pond. Being able to accurately judge the relative power of leaders was a form of social capital in its own right.

A simple story here will suffice. In the little block of apartments in which I lived, parking space in the driveway and courtyard was very limited and residents had begun to park along the little road that led to the block. A neighboring resident, whose house was along the small access road, had difficulty driving his own car out of his front gate. This led to several angry confrontations early in the mornings, and several vehicles had their tires deliberately punctured by this resident and the young men of his household. Inquiring as to who he was and why he was so bold and antagonistic (zhuai), the caretaker of my apartment block spoke dismissively of him – “he’s a nobody, he used to be a village tract leader in a nearby township, I don’t understand why he thinks he can behave like this”. A village tract leader was a pretty low position, but perhaps his sense of authority had never left him. His aggressive behavior however, which no attempts at reason could quell, only stopped when one of the residents of my block, a mining investor from Zhejiang province in China, called his business partner, who happened to be closely related to Chairman Bao himself. She showed up early one morning, and resolved the issue with a couple of choice words. “What a fool, he did not know who he was messing with!” the caretaker reported. This was a lesson in the uncertainty of power relationships – while being aggressive and assertive was important to having

\textsuperscript{180} Similarly, Chin tells a story of a woman who threatened the police to leave her drug business alone: “don’t you know who my husband is?” (2009:39). She was jailed briefly.
one’s way, one never knew whose path he might cross. An individual might also act out of sync with his actual position, and might ultimately be put in his place, sometimes after having first benefited.

Mastering Connections: Hospitality and Visitation

Joanne laughed, “Yes, I see, here it’s all about who you know”. “Well yes, but it’s not just that”, I replied glumly to her truism, searching for more nuance to what exactly it was I objected to about that statement. Something bothered me about the manner in which she dismissed relationships as mere nepotism or successful sycophancy. She was in the obvious sense, spot on that the primary *modus operandi* in Wa Region was connections, or *guanxi*. Joanne was the newly appointed head of a world-renowned NGO who had just arrived in Wa Region, and we were having a discussion about the best way to get access to certain townships and areas, an issue that she resented having difficulties with.

The casual reduction of social relations and power in the East Asian and Southeast Asian world to *guanxi* or *mianzi* (face) seems patronizing and arrogant, laden with normative judgements. It suggests a uni-dimensionality to the nature of these relations, and builds on discourses of corruption and nepotism, and a failure of governance. Implicitly contrasted with the supposed egalitarian meritocracy of the West, it is often deployed in “sour grapes” fashion when individuals are excluded from or unable to nurture these relations themselves. Such flippant dismissals reduce success to luck and birth right (kinship), rather than the skill and capital it takes to sustain and nurture these relationships, and the contingency of such performances, as writers on *guanxi* in China have detailed ethnographically (Kipnis 1997; Yan 1996; Yang 1994). A flat sociological network
analysis of *guanxi* and connections\(^{181}\) does not give a true sense of the Bourdieuvian mastery with which people build, navigate, and maintain these relations using the careful deployment of their social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capital (See Smart 1993).

For instance, Mayfair Yang describes how the art of *guanxi* in China has an ambivalent status in popular discourse – its role in corruption condemned, and yet its mastery admired at the same time\(^{182}\) (1989). She focuses on gift-giving in *guanxi*, and how the gift economy challenges official power but “also subverts the dominant mode of economy” (1989:36), suggesting that it is in the “space of personal relationship established by the gift that the art of *guanxi* unleashes its counter techniques of power” (1989:39). *Guanxi* is exactly that – an art – and the debates and ethnographic detail of Kipnis, Yan, and Yang make clear that there are no fixed rules, such as Yan’s differentiation of prestige between giving and receiving (1996:174); that art and mastery depend on particular contexts and social hierarchies.

In Wa Region, mastery involves both cultural competence and knowledge of the range of connections between leaders and people (“mental maps”). Part of such cultural competence involves an embodied sensibility, dealing with and acting appropriately around authority figures, internalizing the rules of behavior. Through bodily presence in public settings, hearsay and

\(^{181}\) An argument made too by Chi-Mao Wang (2013) who draws on similar criticisms of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) approaches as leading to the “death of the subject”. He notes how rational processes of “translation” described by Latour (1987), which “enrol” others into networks whilst leaving room for its transformation and negotiation, have been oversimplified by ANT scholars through a neglect of social and cultural practices (C. Wang 2013:800-4). He shows instead how *guanxi* as a “sophisticated gift economy that involves morality, calculation, and ritualized conduct” becomes a micro-technique of power through which people interact collectively with rural governance policy (C. Wang 2013:812).

\(^{182}\) In India, Gupta similarly suggests that actors supposedly engaged in practices of corruption require a cultural competence to successfully negotiate the field (1995).
utterances about leaders and people, and by observing subtle contestations between leaders and people for prestige, one begins to appreciate the complexity of power – who knows whom, what shouldn't be said, what is acceptable, what should not be done, what doesn't look right – an embodied sense of propriety.

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Near the start of my fieldwork, I went on a series of visits to key Wa leaders to be introduced and vouched for by my predecessor, in order to preserve the personal relationship our organization had with them. I met one of these Ministers in his home, a mansion perched on the sides of the largest mountain in Wa region, a compound grand with polished marble floors, and palatial central staircase, yet surprisingly modest by Wa leaders’ standards. A basketball court served as a carpark for the dozens of visitors, over and above the leader's personal fleet of about twenty cars right next to the entrance. Humvees, Landcruisers, pickups, and Lexus SUVs all at the ready.

He had just woken up from his afternoon nap, and walked slowly out to the veranda with the help of a soldier. An entourage quickly materialized, staffed by young soldiers from his household. One brought the herbal medicines, another a lighter and cigarettes, another helped him into his long coat. This was a daily routine – waking from an afternoon nap, greeting visitors and friends who were waiting for him, playing cards, snacking and smoking, and proceeding to dinner just as dusk arrived. With him that day were a series of Chinese visitors, some of whom I would later learn were regular fixtures, and others who were passing through. One was a businessman trying to get permission to work a mine, another was a financial aide of the leader's, others were “ex-military” or ran businesses on behalf of the leader. They were all here to accompany, not necessarily to discuss any specific business, but to be with.
Hosting and dining were all-male affairs, with women eating at smaller tables outside the dining room. Officials, Wa and Chinese businessmen, older relatives, and the larger entourage of soldiers would turn up to dinner, occupying 3-4 full round tables. Seating arrangements were an indicator of who was the main guest of the day. It was a contest of knowing one’s position, ushering others to the main table and not oneself, until beckoned or instructed by others. Deference to others and shows of humility were central, social status was at play throughout. To my relief it always appeared that the expectations for my being able to perform the required etiquette were somewhat lowered.

In the middle of the Wa hills, a plate of raw sashimi materialized in astonishing fashion. It was brought in from China, I was reassuringly informed. Sitting on the leader’s right, he would reach across to usher some sumptuous raw prawn or pork bone into my bowl, triggering all nearby to spring to their feet and assist him in this enterprise. Part of the care and attention he required was due to his illness and unease of movement, but an even larger part was the sense of reverence for leaders. It did not become him to serve food, even as it was a show of acceptance and familiarity. Soldiers were in close attendance standing around the table, providing sheets of tissue, filling rice bowls, pouring rice wine, and changing plates. Toasting also formed a key part of dinner, and guests from the other tables would constantly approach the main table, toasting the leader first, and then the other occupants at the table, in order of perceived rank. Toasting practices were a complicated domain through which respect for one another could be given or denied.  

Fiskesjo describes the ethic of hospitality and generosity in Wa rice beer drinking rules and rituals, where drinking forms an arena of social interaction in which mutual recognition, inclusion and exclusion are signalled (2010b). The practices he describes however, are now absent from more formalised visitations with Wa leaders, especially where Chinese guests are present, and liquor and rice wine are consumed instead of rice beer. Instead, toasting takes the forms of politeness and manners found in Chinese practice (See Osburg 2013), and the ethic of generosity prevails yet. Fiskesjo (writing on the Chinese side of the border) notes, “many Chinese-trained Wa cadres in county towns see the lei [bamboo cup] offered them as the epitome of native backwardness and the contents as bacteria-infested
Sashimi and prawns safely tucked away, the leader retired to another pavilion where a lounge area complete with flatscreen TV and sofas were set up. More visitors would arrive, mainly Wa friends but also Chinese businessmen and officials. They sat on the sofas or stools, smoking cigarettes. The Chinese news was always on, or a program about military innovations and comparisons between American and Chinese weaponry. I was not the most regular visitor, and when I did show up, I was beckoned to sit near the leader, where I would hand him a program report, one he looked over with polite interest and handed to a nearby soldier, taking great care to place it back in the plastic folder. There was a further lounge area on an adjacent mattress, and when the leader relocated himself, soldiers and guests jumped to their feet, helping him remove his black leather shoes, or Nike sneakers on one occasion. Again, it was all about attentiveness and deference to his every need, a most kingly affair. Friends and visitors around him jostled for room to crack jokes or run commentary, and rowdy competitions of masculinity and familiarity often ensued. By contrast, the leader himself spoke little and always softly.

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In Wa region, local dynamics of hospitality and visitations are a social practice through which political culture can be examined – paying attention to the material practices of feasting and the forms of etiquette that arise around commensality (See Hayden and Villenueve 2011); tracing the reciprocity and exchange of gifts and obligations, the spectacles of excess and consumption; and the fluid networks of patronage and power relations. Here, writings from the literature on hospitality (See Candea and Da Col 2012) since the early days of Pitt-Rivers’ work amongst the Sierra

filth... sometimes the new local elites are barely able to control their feelings of disgust as they turn down offers of blai [rice beer]” (2010b:120). I participated however, in variants of his described drinking rituals at more intimate township or village gatherings, in areas closer to the Chinese border.
(1954; 1968), raise themes of reciprocity, debt, morality, calculation, unpredictability, and ambivalence at play within arenas of hosting (Herzfeld 1987; Marsden 2012; Shryock 2012; Swancutt 2012).

I discussed the practices of hospitality with a deputy minister in the Wa government, as we reflected on the New Harvest Festival celebrations in Mong Pawk, the groups of dignitaries or respected guests who were about to show up from China and Burma. He was perturbed that the accommodation and hotel rooms had not of the highest standards – some were dirty and not well-maintained prior to the festival. He offered that the Wa, while generous, were sometimes poor hosts.
with their inability to “accompany” (pei), or “receive\textsuperscript{184}” (jiedai), to sit with their guests personally and to make sure they were entertained or “given face” by having someone reasonably high ranking present. Nor were they carefully attendant to detail in hosting. This burden often ended up falling on the ethnic Chinese amongst their ranks (he was Wa himself), who he claimed were better with the small talk, gossiping, and dining. The bigger Wa leaders were men of fewer words (huashao). Yet this could have had other explanations; perhaps it was a demonstrating their self-assuredness by modulating the amount of “face” and respect given to their less high-ranking guests, or to signal unhappiness, by having some but not all the leaders present. Or perhaps it was a reticence towards being drawn into uncomfortable conversations with the sometimes patronizing and more loquacious Chinese officials.

I undertook a handful of visits on a weekly basis – different leaders from various ministries, sitting, talking, rarely with any particular request. This visiting was a care for relationships, what Julia Elyachar might call the “phatic labor” (2010) of maintaining channels and keeping connections open. It was also part of local sociability, obligations, and reciprocity – a “communal enactment of the values of hospitality and the gracious receipt of it”, as Meneley writes of “tournaments of value” in visitation practices amongst women in Yemen (1996:35), through which status and reputation are enacted and challenged. This was complemented by an etiquette of checking in or greeting whenever entering a new jurisdiction – if I were visiting a particular village, I would “report” (bao) with my staff at the township office, then later at the village tract and village heads. All these were

\textsuperscript{184} Elanah Uretsky studies these practices of hosting (yingchou) amongst Chinese businessmen and officials in Yunnan, describing their banqueting and entertainment activities as a domain of social and commercial action (2008, 2016). She details practices of consumption, toasting, and prostitution as part of hospitality. Osburg writes about hosting and entertainment practices amongst “new elites” in Chengdu, with vivid ethnographic descriptions of the micro-practices of interaction (2013).
accompanied with exchanges of drinks and cigarettes and a brief sitting together depending on our
schedule. I recognized most township and district officials by the time I left the field, even if we
were not necessarily “familiar”.

One never made appointments to visit big men once they were acquainted; intimacy hinged on the
possibility of showing up unannounced in the evenings to sit with them, never calling ahead or
making appointments. Visiting times were often in the late afternoons or early evenings, before and
after dinner. On certain occasions, visitors came with specific petitions for the leader, raising them
over cigarettes, home-brewed alcohol, and groundnuts, with the full audience of those present.
Outsiders were sometimes jeered or mocked, with disparaging remarks made about their petitions.
This was precisely why connections were important, the necessity of being introduced or framed
by someone already familiar and trusted by the leader. This spontaneity was in contrast with the
planned and curated events such as festivals and weddings, and a demonstration to others of one’s
“closeness” to the leader, not requiring introductions or appointments – “I dropped by minister so-
and-so’s house yesterday evening”, or “would you like me to bring you to visit this leader tonight?”
Such namedropping was common practice, and a great source of pride (albeit concealed by a veneer
of considerateness in making such offers) amongst those who had such ties.

Visiting and accompanying a big leader was an embodied sensibility. It was a bodily comportment
of deference, a blend of seriousness and casual intimacy. People bowed and bent their bodies when
approaching leaders, nods of the head, ushering others to sit, receiving gifts and glasses with both
hands, seated with closed bodies. Some moved calmly and with grace, others smiling and bowing
exaggeratedly, an overt willingness to please. Others were deliberately boisterous amongst
themselves, the possibility of being rowdy demonstrated familiarity and ease in the presence of the
leader.
Norms of behavior were often expressed through aesthetics, and one quickly developed a visual sensibility and even a visceral response to inappropriate acts or gestures, which were both described and felt as unpleasant. For instance, one might be told by a friend that walking instead of driving to a meeting was below one’s status and “ugly” (buhaoqiao, lit. not good to see), or a loss of face (diulian). Certain topics were sensitive and beyond the limits of proper conversation (buhaotan, lit. not good to speak about or buyongtan, lit. no need to speak about). Or someone’s comments or criticisms were taken to be unpleasant (hennanting, lit. terrible to hear). It was a sensibility of propriety that was embodied as shame or embarrassment (buhaoisi), conversely, others might criticize a person for having the audacity or lacking shame (haoyisi) in acting in a certain way.

Before long I too had embodied these sensibilities and responses after countless visits. Not accepting a drink is ugly. Not finishing it in one gulp if you meet a person for the first time is ugly. Not clearing your glass with a fresh full toast of alcohol for a superior with whom one is not familiar, is ugly. Not accepting a gift, or staying for dinner, all have a variety of meanings, many not explicit, manipulated to send signals to another. Qualities of stinginess, or a lack of generosity and excess were registered as aesthetically unpleasant, often connoting a lack of respect, intended or otherwise.

Along with visiting were the practices of gift-giving and toasting. One often brought gifts to a leader when meeting them for the first time, usually alcohol or cigarettes. The top cigarette brands had cartons ranging from 50 CNY to 1,000 CNY, and the variety selected was an indication of one’s wealth or respect for the leader – the Chinese tobacco industry conveniently set up for such distinctions. Much like tribute, the gift-giving I witnessed was mainly a grunt or two of appreciation from a leader, after which the gift was removed to the stashes behind the scenes.

Gifts to peers, or to officials of similar or slightly higher rank, were treated with more overt shows of appreciation, where the recipient took more interest in the substance of the gift, where it was
from, perhaps even taking pictures of it to be uploaded onto WeChat. Others would insist that the gift was so generous as to not be acceptable, as was the polite reaction. By contrast, it was an indifference, ambivalent and unimpressed, that was a demonstration of the real power of a leader, leaving doubt in the giver's mind as to whether the leader had really incurred an obligation or not. While Mayfair Yang suggests that gift-giving creates obligations by a moral subordination of the recipient (1989:42-4), the sheer disparity of rank meant that the Wa leader largely stood outside such circles of moral subordination, and obligations were not compulsory.

Like the Bourdieuvian gift (1979), mastery of the rules of patronage involved knowing whether and when to ask for something. Asking for something another could give might cause them to lose face. It might not be appropriate where one's capital is insufficient. It might be an abuse and misuse of one's position to ask for something trivial; or a card played only when desperate. Alternatively, it was also a sign of intimacy to be willing to approach another for help.

**Intimacies of Politics: Dissent and “Resistance”**

Central then to intimacy in Wa Region, and no different from many other cultural contexts, are a series of factors which comprise the manner in which subjects have “internalized the authoritarian epistemology” (Mbembe 1992:23). First, the care for relationships, maintaining them through regular visitation, or the phatic labor described by Elyachar (2010), not aimed at any immediate instrumental purpose beyond the preservation of these ties. Second, and related, a sense of bodily presence, distinct in terms of hospitality – pei, to accompany, and jie, to receive in person. This bodily presence goes beyond “being there” but rather, a sense of being with, the act of cultivating (yang) relationships. Third, the excess that characterized festivals and meals, the brands of cigarettes and alcohol provided, the monetary gifts furnished (quali, lit. to hang “ritual/manners”)

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by guests. Excess was an indicator of one’s wealth and success, as well as an index of the respect one showed to hosts. Fourth, an implicit sense of protection and generosity, one that extended to any guest under the roof or affiliation of a big man or leader. Finally, a reciprocal deference and appropriate behavior, acknowledgement of the prestige of the leader, in return for the generosity and hospitality he provided. One could not hope to reciprocate gifts of equal value to the hospitality to provided, for what could one possibly bring to the wealthiest leaders of the golden triangle?

These principles – care, presence, excess, generosity, and deference – were the very bases of intimacies between leaders and everyday people in Wa Region. Connections and social practices that foreign observers depicted as corruption, nepotism, pronounced inequalities, and the failure of “good governance” (Chin 2009:37-8; Kramer 2007; Renard 2013a), were at the same time norms central to the production and navigation of authority and social hierarchies, as scholars of guanxi networks have long noted (e.g. Yang 1994; Kipnis 1997; Yan 1996). This intimacy went a great way to contextualize what most shocked and concerned outsiders – why everyday Wa people seemed to adore Chairman Bao and retained respect and reverence for their leaders (see chapter 4) despite such stark inequalities and seemingly oppressive authoritarianism, or why dissent did not boil over into resistance or revolt.

I argue then, that rather than framing the lack of overt dissent or rebellion against the presence of stark inequalities, or seeing authoritarianism and “bad governance” through theories of peasant resistance and rebellion (Scott 1976, 1985, 1990; Popkin 1979), an attention to these intimacies does more to texture everyday political culture. It is too easy to look at the presence of Hummers, bowling alleys, and driving ranges as indications that the leaders are “hopelessly corrupt” (Lintner and Black 2009:111), and publish lurid details of their sins from afar, but much harder to depict the moral world of living in Wa Region. It also makes a fool of local people’s genuine respect for their
leaders through premature conjecture such as – “the people are used to hardship”, “they lack education and awareness”, “the costs of revolt are too high”, “this is a hierarchical society” – the inevitable rejoinders of false consciousness and unsophistication. Instead, a lens of intimacy reframes supposed antagonisms of power and resistance (and acquiescence) as a wider project and region-making, attending empirically to how authority is exercised and unfolds within Wa Region.

Intimacy refracts dissent through a reverence and respect for authority. Chin Kolin describes the inability to speak out against inequality and unfavorable policies: “even though many Wa villagers live in extreme poverty, they are afraid to speak out. If they want to express their dissatisfaction, there are no outlets for them to do so” (2009:38). Yet it was apparent that they were unafraid to share their views with his interviewers and assistants, and it is unclear what sort of “outlets” the average Wa villagers would want to seek out for the expression of such dissatisfaction. Tom Kramer too, writes that the UWSA is hierarchical and leaves little room for participation in decision making (2007:xvi). None of this of course, is to trivialize poverty and powerlessness of the rural poor, but to note instead the intimacies through which grievances and unhappiness are manifest.

Few openly criticize their leaders, and when asked they often dismiss such conversation with a placatory line about it not being good or right to speak of it (buhaotan or buyongtan, see above). Dissent occurs through the appropriate channels and networks, deferring to authority and bringing petitions before leaders through intermediaries. I was told how local township leaders might be kept in check through appeals made to Central Committee leaders who were originally from that township – when such a leader returned home for the New Harvest Festival or the New Year, he would receive a host of complaints or grievances to be adjudicated. Nor were leaders unaware of problems at hand. Another mid-level official told of how ashamed he was when visiting villages, where hosts would slaughter chickens to welcome him. “I wouldn’t have any appetite”, he added,
the hospitality of villagers putting him to shame at the disparity between their living conditions. Others often sought to emphasize the disparity of authority by using the trope of the “commoner” (laobaixing) in their appeals. In one particular exchange, a low level official played down his position in exhorting a deputy minister to intervene on his behalf in a dispute “we are just commoners (laobaixing), and you are the leaders (lingdao), we need your help in this regard, to help us solve this problem”. This was meant to be a thinly veiled reminder of the deputy minister’s moral obligation to protect and provide for his subordinates.

A healthy dose of cynicism was incubated amongst people and leaders alike, about themselves and the very basis of the own positions, and the absurdity of some of the foundations of authority in Wa Region. This was not just “weapons of the weak”-styled form of resistance but rather a pragmatic lament at power and economic inequalities, and the seeming lack of progress or solutions. Reputations of leaders suffered (though often without political consequence) if they were unjust, petulant, or stingy. Rumors were spread about their personal lives, claims to power abounded, or actions, which would inevitably circulate and precede them. Certain leaders who had committed crimes themselves (mainly drugs-related) and been sent to prison in Myanmar, returned straight to their posts upon release (being connected to ruling families). Another had pretended to be mentally ill to avoid being killed by a superior, “but the moment the superior passed away, he re-emerged and started building hotels,” a friend put it, “even someone like this can be a district leader, what a joke!” A military commander tried to punish another official for petty acts of disrespect, leading him to seek refuge in the house of another leader for months. Then there are stories about mid-level officials who could neither read nor write, earning their titles solely for historical roles in the uprising against the CPB, who were then duped into selling off prime land by unscrupulous Chinese businessmen in the early days of property sales in Pang Kham.
This self-introspection and sense of the bizarre amongst many of my friends, officials and people alike, described certain Wa leaders as frogs in the well (jingdizhiwa), or big fishes in a small pond, lacking exposure to the world outside. They are acutely aware of the ways in which a lack of travel and political interaction with other leaders and administrations would limit the governing tools available to them. This being said, many ministers, bureau heads, and members of the Politburo not only visited with Chinese and Burmese government officials, but also owned businesses and properties all over China and Myanmar. This meant that they had experience of dealings with outside interests.

I found that criticisms of inequalities and corruption in China were a means of talking obliquely about the social problems within Wa Region. People scoffed at stories of corruption and nepotism that circulated through Chinese social media, or on news events in Chinese politics. “Ah, the leaders have no considerations for the people that work for them, in China they have a billion people to exploit!” “Leaders never give money back to the people, if they have some, they simply keep it within their household and build houses for their children!” “Look at where the leaders children are – all overseas in the US and UK, enjoying their wealth.” “Why are they bothered to improve life for the people, they just want to live out their lives in luxury and pass the time (guorizi)!” These statements were made often by mid-level officials amongst themselves, and occasionally with ministers or deputies around. The same issues of inequality and authoritarian politics were roundly critiqued, yet always with the sense that there was little that would change, and that the imperative of unity against the Burmese state was of paramount strategic importance. And so it was, that widening disparities prevailed, and people struggled in poverty, resigned to the vicissitudes of life in an economically and politically marginal region of the Myanmar periphery.
Chapter 6 Frontier

“Frontiers are not just edges; they are particular kinds of edges where the expansive nature of extraction comes into its own. Built from historical models of European conquest, frontiers create wildness so that some – and not others – may reap its rewards. Frontiers are deregulated because they arise in the interstitial spaces made by collaborations among legitimate and illegitimate partners: armies and bandits, gangsters and corporations, builders and despoilers. They confuse the boundaries of law and theft, governance and violence, use and destruction.” (Tsing 2005:27)

One mild summer morning, as I sat with officials in a Wa government department office, gossiping and drinking tea, a Chinese businesswoman came by on motorbike with a local guide. Sporting frizzy permed hair with two necklaces of semi-precious stones, the businesswoman was from Changsha, Hunan province in China, in her mid-50s, and interested in gathering information on various mining prospects across Wa Region and Shan State. She had previously travelled around the borderlands with some other mining investors, and gained access through the Burmese checkpoints from Taunggyi, in the government-controlled areas of Southern Shan State. She seemed initially nervous, but bold and determined. Whereas friends and familiar officials would sit on the “home” side with the department staff, the deputies beckoned for her to sit at the opposite corner of the room, where most visitors sat.

There had been something of a mining boom a several years before, when Chinese investors would gather capital from their friends, set off for Wa region, buy the rights to land and register with local authorities, before renting mining equipment and selling tin ore into China by the truckloads. By 2014, the extraction of tin from an area close to the Salween River had been largely taken over by Wa leaders, military units, and their investment conglomerates, hiring Chinese companies to perform the technical tasks of blasting, transporting, and processing. There were still Chinese
mining bosses, but only the extremely wealthy and well-connected. There were very few, if any, ordinary Chinese investors attempting to start out on their own with a group of friends.

This woman was seeking help in travelling to a part of Myanmar south of Wa Region, in Eastern Shan State. She had come across the Chinese border and was looking to pass into the Burmese areas of Kengtung and then Mong Ping. No one enquired as to whether she had crossed the border with a valid permit or not. She was edgy about her presence and not willing to reveal who she knew and who her contacts were. It soon transpired that she had been invited by a deputy commander in the Wa army (a member of the Politburo) and was looking for introductions to other leaders. A deputy seated next to me whispered that this commander had a “bad reputation”. I didn’t press further.

One of the deputies quipped that it was much harder now to travel freely out of Wa into Shan State, since the Myanmar government had now tightened controls on the movement of Chinese nationals entering Myanmar through unofficial crossing points such as those on the Wa-China border (see chapter 3).

Her story began – she had just lost 530,000 CNY (USD 90,000) on a joint venture on a mine, in Myanmar areas just outside Wa Region. The Minister turned serious and told her that doing business in Burma outside Wa Region was difficult, seeing she did not have any local knowledge of the legal arrangements. Even traveling there from Wa, let alone beginning extraction, was technically illegal. The Wa could not protect her, and would face trouble if too many Chinese were traveling through Wa into Burma. He told her to return to Kunming and fly directly to Mandalay or Yangon and travel through the official routes. She looked terribly disappointed, as she was hopeful that he would grant passage. She brandished her Chinese passport, but he remained unmoved, telling her to go through Kunming. She seemed to have a somewhat patronizing and privileged attitude towards the border regions, believing that all she needed was to buy the right
patrons, and then expecting unfettered access. At one point she had the audacity to describe how she expected that local Wa wore straw shoes, to which the Minister retorted: “the Wa actually wear suits with leather shoes, perhaps the ones you saw had already removed their jackets”.

She started sipping from her already empty glass of tea, her nerves showing through, and there was a sense of pity (though with reservations) in the room towards her. The Minister commended her bravery as a “strong woman” (qiang nüren) and asked how her husband would allow her to travel alone to the region. She claimed to have “fellow villagers” (laoxiang) now living in Kengtung, and other parts of Wa region and Shan State. He then told her that 530,000 CNY was the price of a lesson (maige jiaoxun), and that she should cut her losses and not try to invest anymore in unfamiliar parts. He added that he was not pouring cold water on her plans, but pitied her as an older woman, and cited the example of the official present in the room, who was based in Dangyan and despite being a local Burmese-speaking ethnic Han, had still been unable to close a deal for timber after payment.

She tried to get the Minister to write his name down for her on a piece of paper. He refused and said just called me “old man Liu”, a joke-name, to which the others guffawed loudly. He did not want to become another name for her drop, someone he did not trust nor feel much support for. She looked foolish retrieving her passport and the scrap of paper rummaged from her bag. I felt sorry for her, her desperation now palpable and a sharp contrast with the self-assured air with which she had first arrived. For anyone whose freedom of movement and status hangs in the balance, such moments are anxious and desperate. She left riding pillion on the motorbike, headed to another leader’s house. The Minister turned to me, explaining that these Chinese come to Wa only for themselves, and “come to us when they have any problems, as if we are obliged to help. When we don’t, they run back to China, badmouthing Wa region as they leave”.

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The Minister had spoken eloquently, using grave and paternal language – a mix of irritation at the potential trouble caused by a profit-seeking businesswoman, combined with pity and topped with a small dose of admiration for her daring or stupidity. It was hard to miss her condescending attitude towards locals and how the perceived “lawlessness” of Wa Region had led to her expectation of freedom of travel, rounded off with the irony of appearing as a petitioner seeking help once she had run into trouble. I spotted her several months later, travelling in a rented pickup around the main mining areas in Wa Region.

Figure 30: Small copper mine shaft near Wein Kao, August 2014
The In-Between: Liminality of the Frontier

The field of border studies has consistently struggled with differing definitions of “frontiers”, “boundaries”, “borders”, and “borderlands”, words so commonly used in different disciplines and vernaculars that theoretical precision is difficult to attain. For instance, Kearney saw boundaries as legal or spatial delimitations, while borders were geographic or cultural zones (1991:53). On the other hand, Baud and van Schendel (1997) saw boundaries as referring to both the demarcating lines and ethnic divides, and borders as zones and regions surrounding the boundary line, and to “psychological differences” between nations (1997:213). Others had precisely the opposite definitions, stemming from Barth’s famous text (1998), where boundaries were divides between ethnic groups and nations (Lamont and Molnar 2002), and borders were the territorial limits of nation-states. These confounding sets of definitions point towards questions within larger border theory, which provoked themes of identity, nationalism, statehood, political economy, and transnational flows (Michaelsen and Johnson 1997; Donnan and Wilson 1998; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

The frontier hypothesis however, laid out in Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay “Significance of the Frontier in American History” of 1920, posited a supposed European “civilization” expanding into “wildness” of America, the formation of a collective ethos of rugged individualism, and the shaping of an American identity of democracy and freedom. This sparked decades of debates about culture, assimilation, and multiculturalism in history and area studies185 (Limerick 1987; White 1991; Klein

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185 Needless to say, while the “ritual flagellation of Frederick Jackson Turner has become a popular scholarly pastime” (Klein 1996:183), scholars such as Klein have produced thoughtful analysis of the criticisms levelled at Turner, and the consequent debates stemming from his work, which Klein describes as leading in two directions: 1) the conquest of nature and wilderness; 2) debates around the culture concept within frontier contact, assimilation, and acculturation (1996:187). Klein rejects attempts to strip frontier writing of its historical baggage of racism and ethnocentricism, suggesting that
By the 1980s, the “frontier” was being re-appropriated as process by writers to interrogate notions of “culture” at zones of contact, driven mainly by examinations of migration, cultural hybridities, and border identities at the US-Mexico border (Alavarez 1995; Vila 2000; Anzaldua 1987; Rosaldo 1993).

Decades later, in Western Kalimantan, Anna Tsing’s “Friction” reworked Turner’s frontier hypothesis through the lens of capitalism, not a terra nullis ripe for the fulfilment of “manifest destiny”, but a frontier produced through “resourcefulness” – the turning of nature and landscape into resources for extraction, plantations, and the transformation of people into subjects. The frontier is shifting, proliferating, and unstable, a “travelling theory, a foreign form requiring translation” (2005:31) and “an imaginative project capable of molding both places and processes” (2005:32), rather than a spatial zone of contact.

For Tsing, frontier culture was characterized by the potentiality of commerce, “in which the rights of previous rural residents could be wiped out entirely to create a Wild West scene of rapid and lawless resource extraction: quick profits, quick exits” (Tsing 2005:57). She recounts the functioning of the “economy of appearances”, a story of Bre-X, a North American mining company that attracted capital on speculation of the existence of a large gold deposit in Busang in Kalimantan in the late-1990s. Finance capital was based on “spectacular accumulation”, where “dramatic performance is the prerequisite of their economic performance” (2005:57). Bre-X relied on “conjuring” images of intrepid explorers seeking out mineral deposits in hostile untouched jungle frontiers. When a chief

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the term provides fertile ground for re-examining the legacy of conquest and multiculturalism. See also Deloria (2006) who pays particular attention to the abuses of Richard White’s metaphorical use of the concept of the “Middle Ground”, arguing that the “in-betweenness” of the concept is precisely its most important definitional aspect.
Filipino geologist fell to his death from a helicopter in the rainforest, he became face of this precarious speculative endeavor. Investments in Bre-X rocketed, even small Canadian towns bought stock. Journalists produced articles lauding the riches of Busang and the amounts of gold it possibly held. Stockholders generated online chatter and a collective effervescence of anticipation.

As it turned out, Busang was completely empty. The “magical vision” of the frontier was a fraud. Tsing writes that in spectacular accumulation, “investors speculate on a product that may or may not exist... looking for the appearance of success. They cannot afford to find out if the product is solid; by then their chances for profit will be gone” (2005:75). Her “economy of appearances” and “spectacular accumulation”, then, elucidated a series of frontier significations and representations that create a master narrative of limitless potential, ruthless profit and gain, and daring masculine exploits in the quest for wealth, drawing together an unholy alliance of loggers, transnational corporations, miners, robbers, government officials, students, traders, immigrants, and conservationists who cross paths in the interstices of the frontier, a veritable friction of enterprise and project-making. Indeed, the complex social and moral logics of border political economies have been the topic of riveting histories and ethnographies that bring together contested sovereignties, creativity, contingency, accumulation, and moral economies elsewhere on the Lao-Thailand border (Walker 1999), Southeast Asian maritime frontiers (Tagliacozzo 2005), the Southwestern edges of Qing China (Giersch 2006), the Triple frontier of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil (Jusionyte 2015), the Zambian copperbelt (Ferguson 1999), and the Chad Basin (Roitman 2005).

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In this chapter I examine two key events in the production of Wa Region as a frontier space, events of which significance only fully came to light after I had left the field. These events were experienced by people in Wa Region (myself included) with much uncertainty and partial understanding even
as they were unfolding. I also look at the politics of extraction and circulation as people and commodities produce value from the landscape or from movement across boundaries, and examine the forces of extraction and entrepreneurship that make the frontier, exploiting disparities of economic and legal regimes to create profit.

In line with the notion of liminality, I argue that these commercial and economic activities constitute a key domain of political practice – practices through which connection and rupture between ethnic minority areas and the Myanmar nation-state are produced and maintained. Janet Roitman’s work on regulatory authority in the Chad Basin is instructive here – she treats economic practices such as taxes, prices, and appropriation (as well as discourses about them) as forms of political technologies, where “the economy is apprehended as a political terrain” (2005:6). Roitman sees the Chad Basin as a space of competing regulatory authority between national, transnational and subnational figures of authority. While they undermine state authority, they also enable it to exercise power over wealth and people, complicating understandings of “informal” or unregulated economic activity that stands outside the official state economy (2005:19). Her distinction between state power and state regulatory authority makes clear that contested private or “non-state” forms of authority, such as campaigns of civil disobedience, criminal networks, smugglers, businessmen, and traditional leaders, do not necessarily herald the weakening of the state apparatus.

Wa Region’s frontier economy becomes part of the political technologies and practices of regulation (or the lack of it) that both incorporate it into the Myanmar state, and prompt its autonomy through accumulation. The relative economic autonomy of Wa Region, negotiated by Khin Nyunt in the 1990s, has made the UWSA willing to remain within the Union of Myanmar. Ties to Chinese markets and currency foster affinity and reliance across the border, but it is its position outside Chinese and international regulatory regimes (and within Myanmar’s relatively permissive
regulations) that allow it the freedom to profit from the illicit trade so central to its political economy. In short, both autonomy from and dependence on Myanmar and China produces and reproduces Wa Region’s liminal status, in a historically contingent and capricious manner.

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Wa Region is a frontier space in three interrelated senses: first, it is a zone of contested sovereignties at the edges of China and Myanmar, where practices of capitalist accumulation were central to its incorporation into surrounding states. Entrepreneurs sought new markets, resources, and opportunity for profit-making. Tin ore, timber, and rubber were extracted in Wa Region, then carted away into neighboring markets. Through these economic ties of profit and industry, public and private alliances and networks were built, drawing Wa Region into the wider regional political economy. Political events and market forces exposed the Wa economy to the caprice of its neighbors – prices rose and fell, the flows of goods and commodities were halted, diverted, or facilitated – vicissitudes, which while in no way exceptional to Wa Region, took particular forms in the context of this frontier.

Concomitant with the news media’s labelling of Myanmar as the new frontier market for investment (Yueh 2013) in the late 2000s, businessmen and laborers travelled to the borders to eke out livelihoods and profit, encouraged by the Chinese governments campaigns for the West Development in 1999 (xibu dakaifa) and the One Belt One Road initiative in 2013\(^{186}\) (yidai yilu), as

well as Khin Nyunt’s ceasefire concessions of the 1990s. “Resourcefulness” referred to one’s ability to seek out potential markets, convert the landscape into valued commodities, exploit social capital and connections for rent-extraction, and source contracts for construction and development. There was much profit to be made from expanding into novel spaces, etched routes, or faint networks.

Second, frontier opportunism in Wa Region exploits value through the manipulation of differing legal and economic regimes across the Chinese and Myanmar borders. Differences and disparities between legal, political, and economic regimes of value on either side create potential for profit through price fluctuations and differentials. Cows, cars, exotic wildlife parts, timber, rubber, ore, household or luxury items, and drugs bridged and transgressed economic and moral boundaries, responding to local market demands and latent capital. Goods banned on one side of a boundary were legal on the other, imported products deemed luxurious or of high quality, and demands and gaps sought for the penetration of regional markets. Agents, traders, entrepreneurs, and everyday people crafted livelihoods within the interstices and crevices of regulation and avoidance that the frontier enabled.

Third, a type of frontier sensibility emerged which allowed for the navigation of a market in which one had to be very careful of scams and trickery. Vigilance and a “rugged individualism” were central to this sensibility. The frontier is a zone of risk, a caveat emptor, a masculine space of ruthless toughness, of fraud, and shady business deals. The blurred boundaries between legal and illegal, licit and illicit, real and the fake, insider and outsider, meant that an entire set of social logics and norms guided transactions and interactions, building on reputations, conviviality, and intimacies of various types. They also lent room for manipulation and maneuver. The very reliance on networks and the mastery of local practices to do business, meant that who were inept at these practices often failed.
Frontier Extraction: Autonomy and Incorporation

The economic domain is central to the consolidation of the Myanmar state’s hold over its peripheries, an arena in which integration and autonomy are constantly negotiated, its liminality produced. At state margins, legibility projects are challenged (Das and Poole 2004), sovereignties overlapping and disorderly, a space of potentiality much like Tsing’s frontier – “made in the shifting terrain between legality and illegality, public and private ownership, brutal rape and passionate charisma, ethnic collaboration and hostility, violence and law, restoration and extermination” (2005:33). Various types of licit and illicit opportunities arise for profit-making amidst the disorderly and overlapping sovereignties of the China-Myanmar-Wa boundaries (See Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Mbembe 2001; Roitman 2005).

The 1990s in Myanmar saw the occurrence of what Kevin Woods calls “ceasefire capitalism” (2011) – business deals and extraction concessions between the tatmadaw and EAG leaders as part of “military-state building”, where the tatmadaw took possession of previously contested territory through ceasefire agreements, then granted land and resource concessions (timber, mining, plantations) back to insurgent groups. This allowed the tatmadaw to gain increased political and territorial control in the “northern uplands” (Woods 2011, writing mainly in reference to Kachin state), creating military-private partnerships (mainly through Chinese middlemen), and ultimately co-opting insurgent leaders and ethnic minority elites as agents of governance and authority. In this fashion, ceasefire spaces are securitized through an “intricate interplay between military force, resource-rich peasant land, and (trans-)national finance capital” (Woods 2011:751). This gradual incorporation of groups into the state through economic incentives was reminiscent of indirect rule under the British, and afforded by the EAGs’ lack of access to markets without the permission of the tatmadaw.
Similarly, Patrick Meehan argues that while a flourishing drug trade has readily been taken as an indicator of a failed or weak state, the relationship between drugs and state-building in Myanmar lends pause to these arguments (2011). For Meehan, the combination of “liberal state-building perspectives and the greed-based analysis of contemporary conflict” (2015:259) leads to simplistic assumptions about the drug economies at the margins of the Myanmar, ignoring the “politics of production” (254) – local institutions, norms, and the diversity of experiences in these circles. His research reveals the close capital and business ties between the Myanmar state and insurgents which burgeoned post-ceasefires (1989-1991), concluding that the drug economy and related business ventures are in fact a conduit through which the Myanmar state includes and incorporates armed groups of the borderlands: “in reality control of the borderlands (where the drugs trade in Burma is located) is often constitutive of power at the centre” (Meehan 2011:380).

Yet the situation of the UWSA is somewhat different to that of most other armed groups, given their strong military and de facto territorial control, less susceptible to the bargaining tactics of ceasefire negotiations. Wa Region’s position and territories also allow it market access to China, Laos, and Thailand via carefully guarded routes. The UWSA negotiates concessions with Chinese companies directly, requiring no permission from the tatmadaw or Myanmar government. Here, one recalls Fiskesjø’s “predatory periphery” refusing to be marginal, preying actively on the surrounding states (2010a), a project-making enterprise of their own. But the balancing act between connection and rupture, or autonomy and integration, still holds. While economic development and capital accumulation buttress the UWSA’s autonomy, these very same business dealings and assets (mining, trade, hotels, airways, and other conglomerates), trade networks and infrastructure, draw and incorporate them into the Burmese state, as Meehan and Woods argue.
Minerals in the Hills/ Mining as Integration

In February 2016, the Irrawaddy reported that China had become a net exporter of tin in 2014, for the first time in six years, following the mining of ore in Wa Region (Martov 2016). It cited a paper from the journal Resources Policy that described production in Wa Region as a “black swan” event, surprising and highly impactful, with estimated production reaching nearly 30,000mt (Gardiner et al. 2015). Gardiner et al. claimed that “local fighting in the area has disrupted production” (2015:227) in 2015, but this was not so; there has been no fighting in Wa region, or any nearby instability that has had an impact on production. The Irrawaddy article noted the importance of Wa tin to China’s economy, but introduced the element of uncertainty: “it is far from clear how much metal there is left to mine”. Global tin prices fell from 2014-5, to their lowest at the start of 2016, but began recovering in 2016.

Six months later, the Financial Times published an article entitled “Mystery Myanmar mines shake up world tin market” (Peel and Sanderson 2016), pointing out how tin emerging from Wa Region had increased 10-fold over four years. It observed that “the tin story is just one example of how Myanmar’s international reintegration is uncovering resources that one long-time observer of the country says were previously ‘not known at all – or not known except to a select few’”. But sources interviewed were uncertain, some suggesting that the production in Wa was peaking, while others warned that large areas remained unexplored, and despite the shift from open-pit to underground mining, which generally meant lower-grade ore, surprise quantities might yet be produced.
But by October 2016, Reuters’ article declared that tin production in Wa Region was “slowing fast” (Lee and Slodkowski 2016b), though amounting to 33,000 tons\(^\text{187}\), 10% of global production in 2016. It went further In December 2016, publishing an infographic that singled out 7 companies and their leaders, all key UWSA leaders, and demonstrated how the tin from the “rebel-held mine” reached the global market to end users like Apple and Tiffany through Chinese tin-sourcing companies\(^\text{188}\) (Lee and Schectman 2016). The accompanying article was damning, and described the UWSA as an “insurgent army”, recalling the 2003 sanctions placed by the US on it for “alleged drug trafficking”,

\(^{187}\) I was told locally the figure of 50,000 tons annual production in 2015.

\(^{188}\) Yimou Lee and Joel Schectman. 2016. “For Apple and others, tin supply chain has ties to rebel-held Myanmar mine.” Reuters, 3 Dec 2016, link to graphic [here](#).
effectively implying that “conflict tin” was being funneled into the global supply chain through China. It argued that tin “provides revenue critical to the survival of the self-proclaimed Wa state and its rulers, who have refused to disarm or participate in Myanmar’s peace process”, projecting a veneer of illegality and belligerence onto the Wa tin industry. The entire reportage on tin from Wa was based on a week-long visit to Wa Region by a delegation of Reuters and BBC journalists, and it was curious to note how the focus turned immediately towards conflict resources with a condemnatory tone.

Tin was then the latest in the series of age-old rumors and legends of gold and silver emanating from the Wa hills (see chapter 1; Young 2014), themselves interspersed with actual periodic discoveries and extraction of these resources. Silver mines at Maolong (near present day Panglong), Munai (Gengman/Mengding) and Manglun (near present day Pangyang) (Fiskesjo 2010a) had been exploited intermittently from the 1600s up to the early 1900s, a track record offering periodic tinder for the anticipation of future profit. Chinese miners had been in this region for centuries – forming their own mining towns and communities in the 1700s, fighting off headhunting raids by local Wa, returning home if they made their fortune, or assimilating if defeated (Fiskesjo 2010a; Wang Ningsheng 2010). Wa Region had long been framed in Chinese imaginaries as a frontier space of potentiality, to be explored and exploited by the courageous explorers and entrepreneurs, much like in Tsing’s Kalimantan.

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I met Qing when I first arrived in Pang Kham in 2011 before my fieldwork proper – his business partner, a man I’d met on the bus to the border had arranged for him to pick me up and reserve a room for me in a cheap Chinese motel. Joining him and his friends late at dinner, the highlight of which was spicy cow brain soup, I was welcomed into the group with great hospitality and intrigue.
Within days, Qing had taken it upon himself to be my guide in Pang Kham. He had been living in Pang Kham for the past year and admitted that he was bored out of his wits. An assertive, tall and broad-shouldered man, he alternated between joviality and sternness. 41 years old and hailing from Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province on the East Coast, Qing was the oldest of three siblings. He previously ran a factory selling vegetable products, but left his wife and 16-year old daughter in Zhejiang in search of greater fortune.

Qing was neither skilled laborer nor mining tycoon − he was a speculator, prospecting in a region with neither established political control nor geological records. With partners, he set up a tin mine several hour’s drive into the hills, but at the time of my visit, was still waiting for official permission to begin mining. In one year he had found a site, rented equipment and hired 10 workers − all Han Chinese migrants. There were many payments to make − mining permits, fees for importing equipment, and wages for drivers, workers and surveyors. But the bureaucratic procedures were slow, and mining had not begun, and so Qing spent only one day every fortnight travelling out to visit his mine. The rest of the time, Qing alternated between the casino, markets, a friend’s house, and the hotel. investing in mining was a bitter job (ku), he said, because of the long waits and procedural uncertainty, and the risks of finding little to nothing. Like other precious stone mining in the region, such prospecting was articulated as gambling, a matter of both luck and skill.

Qing was a particular type of Chinese entrepreneur, forsaking the familiarity of an urban metropolis and investing in a foreign and unstable frontier region. From friends back in Zhejiang, he had heard that the border regions with Myanmar were a hotbed of mining opportunity. Within his social circles amongst the community of Han migrants, Qing seemed to have carved out a space for himself, a quest for respect shot through with masculinity and fraternal relations. He was a miniature version of the “big man”, always trying to provide for others, footing the bill, offering
cigarettes and alcohol, hosting others at restaurants. On our late afternoon strolls around town, he would stop to speak with Han shopkeepers, vendors, and acquaintances. The brotherly disposition, the show of concern for others’ businesses and well-being were part of this paternalistic practice. He took care to remind me how others respected him in the community, that none would dare mess with us.

Qing displayed a blasé attitude towards security, legality, and border crossings. He (and others) insisted that everyone crossed the border illegally, that it was no big deal, that the Wa government didn’t mind, that Chinese police were only concerned about drugs. It was business as usual. This measured bravado sustained him through what must have otherwise been a rather unnerving experience in dealing with brokers and officials without strong connections. “Don’t worry, you’re safe here as long as you’re with me. They [Wa government] don’t dare to touch Chinese nationals”, Qing asserted, after having described the periodic rounding up of loitering youth at night as forced labor for the construction of roads.

Qing recounted a story about an entrepreneur who bought over a mine in Myanmar, and dug for months before finally giving up. He sold the mine on to the next person, who then dug for another 10 feet before striking it rich. Similar narratives of luck and perseverance are at play in dupo (lit. gambling on breaking [of rock]), where buyers try their luck buying un-opened or partially opened rocks which are said to potentially have expensive jade deposits in them, gambling on the quantity and quality of jade that might be found inside. “You must keep going, even though it is difficult.”

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When I returned in 2014, Qing was nowhere to be found. Gone were the small-scale partners investing from China in groups of fives and sixes. Instead, large scale mining companies owned by Wa leaders and government work units had cropped up all over the hills where he had previously sought wealth. There were apparently 10 large companies now working in the Man Xiang area (Man Maw) close to the Salween. Mining in the Man Maw area began around 2005, but only ramped up heavily in the 2010s with a rise in the number of Chinese arrivals like Qing. The British had been here too, I was told, evidence of their residual mining slag had been found. Man Maw was now a

\[189\] The CPB seemed unaware of the extent of tin deposits during their control of Wa Region from 1973-1989; Bertil Lintner, using CPB testimony during his visit of their areas in 1985-6, wrote that there was almost no mineral wealth in the Wa Hills (1990:39).
large and dusty swathe of hills ravaged by open-pit mining. Large steps and roads cut through patches of remaining green and led down into the valley, where small openings covered by zinc roofs revealed some of the 50 or so mine shafts that had been bored into rock. Yellow diggers were perched on each of the rock steps, dwarfed by the enormity of the mountain. And grey rock of all sizes. Clouds of dust, plumes of fine particles suffocated plants and trees, creating a visual stupor that amplified the heat of day. Down in one of the barren valleys, large dump trucks, once red or yellow, now dirty grey, lined up patiently to receive ever more parts of the declining mountain.

Amidst the hills there was a shantytown of sorts, along a road that ran through the mining area. Rusted brown and blue zinc roofs marked out the living quarters or processing plants built into the valley, perched precariously on steep slopes. Makeshift houses and huts formed the “main street”, peppered with improvised billboards advertising hotels, clinics, and mining equipment for lease. Pickups and motorcycles parked haphazardly along the chaotic and narrow dirt road. These were the housing and living areas for a supposed 10-20,000 mine workers, a figure barely believable for an area so small and remote190. Since mining restarted in earnest, the Wa authorities had been quick to consolidate and scale up the process. They simply reclaimed the land from the small-scale Chinese partners for established department- and government-owned companies. Backed by large capital investment, the Wa companies rapidly hired and operationalized professional mining expertise, equipment, and labor from China.

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190 Yet not unbelievable, since Wang Ningsheng’s archival searches reports 20-30,000 Han miners working in silver mines at Maolong in the Wa hills in 1746 (2010). Fiskesjo also suggests 10,000 miners at the Bawdwin mines in 1855, west of Lashio (2010a:247).
It is several months into my stay in Wa Region, and Chen, my businessman friend from the Wa government (see chapter 1), is driving me and another official out to visit his copper mine and processing plant. The Toyota Vigo glides smoothly up into the hills along the winding new roads, and past the newly designated garbage dump, where all manner of waste is tipped into the valley below and set on fire. Children play amidst the garbage, while some teens and elderly rummage through debris for salvageable material. We round the corner where the barrels of tar are gathered, hundreds of abandoned dark brown cylinders rusting beneath the jet blue sky, remnants of a successful roadbuilding project. Wang, the other official travelling with us, remarks on the excellent precision job done by the Hong Pang company carving the roads into hillsides. A much better job than the road from Pang Kham to Mengmao, built by another company, which has seen precarious rock fall and disintegration at many points. The hills will stabilize in five years, he says.

We reach the fork in the road where a smaller dirt track runs down to the processing plant. A makeshift signboard shows that the mine is named after one of the government departments; Chen has ensured that he adopts the unit name (and reputation) of his Minister patron. It is a steep dusty trail down into the valley, a veritable nightmare for the truck drivers who bear large rocks down to the processing plant, where they are dumped into large metal drums along with iron balls the size of large baseballs. These ball mills follow after the coarse crusher, and rotate like a cement mixer, after which the smaller rocks are funneled into spiral separators. They wind up in a trough and are mixed with liquid chemicals, the mush then dried out to leave fine powder. In this particular plant, the ore is refined to a 6-8% purity from the roughly 0.5% purity of the original rock brought in from the mines. The laboratory retains a daily log where purity of processed ore samples are tested with chemical reagents to determine whether the batch is worth refining further. For a batch to be profitable, the purity level must be at least 0.3%, and the numbers in the logbook have been hovering suspiciously just above this figure all month.
Late 2014 and Chen’s copper mine is not doing well. The copper ore found there is simply not valuable enough, with purities around a mere 0.2-0.5%. With 80 employees, both locals and specialists from China, his operational costs are high. Finding the right skilled labor is costly and difficult – wages for a digger operator is around 7-8,000 CNY a month, machine operators at 3-4,000 CNY, and lab technicians at 5-6,000 CNY. These have all been adding up. We step out of the pickup and are welcomed by the plant manager, a uniformed middle-aged man in full crisp military uniform, pocket-sized revolver holstered at his hip. The manager shows off the ambitious facilities – mill, laboratory, dining area, and living quarters equipped with electricity and television. The conditions at his mine are far better than in Man Maw, our other companion points out encouragingly. The workers are back in for lunch, bedraggled and arriving on the backs of pickups. There are digger operators, blasting specialists, mill operators, chemical specialists, and other odd
laborers who dig or spray water on the sorting machines. There might be as much as 2,000,000 tons of usable rock here, the engineer says, they just have to locate and excavate it. The operation could run for ten years, he says.

Chen unveils his new prize – a handheld XRF spectrometer gun manufactured in Massachusetts, able to determine the mineral composition of a particular rock. A group of well-dressed Chinese merchants showed up at his office one morning to demonstrate its capabilities, handling it with some reverence as they removed it from its casing. Capital, it seemed, had its own way of travelling through rocky crevices, such cutting-edge technology having wound up in the far-flung reaches of the borderlands. Chen now presses the gun against the samples, and asks me to confirm the English elements of the periodic table. The figures are disappointing, and so too with the following samples. The conversation shifts to the weather and its effects on transportation.

Shortly, Chen’s engineer emerges from another pickup truck – we are about to embark on an inspection tour of the mines. Chen has two mine shafts in operation here, both copper, but the yields have not been good thus far. The mine shaft entrance is a further 2km downhill from the plant, where a large valley 50m wide has been blasted into the hillside. Quaint wooden logs frame the entrance of the shaft, 100m deep and 560m long; one almost expects dwarves to emerge at any moment. Two workers in rudimentary safety gear are drilling a new vent for explosives with a pneumatic hammer. A digger ambles noisily across the upper echelon of the slopes. The engineer, sporting a yellow helmet and brandishing a trusty small hammer which establishes his geological authority, points to small rocks on the ground. He and Chen are bent over in hopeful conversation, discussing the potential locations of further deposits. All around us in the valley are strata of exposed rock – orange, red, stone, metallic, and even the sharp blue-green of oxidized copper. If
only the traitorous laboratory numbers were as colorful. Chen is disappointed. We drive in silence back up the hill for lunch.

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Mid-2015 and Chen tells me he now has a new engineer – the previous one came highly rated but soon left, unsuccessful in his search for ore. “They are liars, all full of talk, who can tell what is really in the ground? The engineers from China are from all over, it is hard to know who to believe, and who to hire. Their rates are so expensive,” he laments. A far cry from a year before, when he praised that very same engineer, a graduate from an affiliate school of Beijing University, paid a handsome 200,000 CNY (33,000 USD) per year. It seemed Chen had given up on paying for such expertise with low returns, preferring to spend only 84,000 CNY (14,000 USD) for the new engineer. A Karen laborer of Chen’s, whom I knew through other circles, had recently disparaged the quality of the ore at Chen’s mine, saying that he had left after a couple of months, a veritable sinking ship.

Perhaps it is the stress of the venture, Chen has now shaved his head, and lost weight. His skinny arms emerge abruptly from the baggy sleeves of his polo T-shirt. He smiles less, his eyes no longer sparkle amidst the wrinkles, and the cynicism remains. He rarely sits around for tea anymore after lunch, instead heading home to his apartment where he is mostly on the phone, checking for updates on mineral prices, and speaking to buyers and contractors. He gambles more at cards in the office, despite clearly being one of the weaker players at the table. Our conversations have turned philosophical – on inequality and unfairness – though the political musings continue. Chen

191 Perhaps, as ethnographers of gambling in Chinese have written, to get a sense of whether his luck is changing (Chu 2010). Chu sees aspiration as linked with gambling through the “villager’s struggles for practical mastery over those elusive yet powerfully pervasive forces of credit-making that exceed the visible threshold of their daily lives” (2010:260).
is cynical about governance, perpetually comparing the situation in Wa with that of China – he is an ardent admirer of the Chinese government, whom he says has a billion people to work for it, that will never change. We talk about nepotism, about the vicissitudes of life, about a friend who has recently contracted stomach cancer while his healthy 80-year old mother continues to weed the fields. Chen is nostalgic, proud that he has sent his children for education in Australia and the UK, that he has given them a chance at a bright future. He now owes more than 1 million USD to one of the Ministers, for his mining enterprise. He thinks about selling some of the several houses he has in China and Myanmar. “Qihunanxia,” he says drily, citing a Chinese idiom that literally means, “it is difficult to dismount the tiger you are riding”. We laugh at the imagery. He has invested so much and must keep going.

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Prices for tin have fallen even further. Blasting and digging at his copper mine has now ceased, the ore no longer present in viable quantities, and Chen now leases out the operations of his processing plant to other mining companies at the Man Maw areas. His work now primarily consists of convincing other mining bosses to use his processing plant for processing, since it is halfway between there and Pang Kham. He has also bought over a mine shaft there, but it seems a sad and desperate venture, a far cry from his previous optimism over the copper prospecting. Chen’s son is now managing parts of the operation, and rattles off the prices of tin per ton: 2014 – 160,000 CNY; May 2015 – 116,000 CNY; Sept 2015 – 100,000+ CNY; Oct 2015 – 98,000 CNY. He makes a pitch for their new operation, carefully describing the various costs per ton of transport, processing, and profit. It makes much sense for the companies to send their rocks to our plant, he says, they save

192 Prices recovered in 2016 after I left, see Fig 28 above, but during 2015 were on a constant decline.
100 CNY per ton to process it to 20% purity. He sounds confident, but there still is the issue of the debts they owe.

Tin stocks were said to be limited and winding down, and by the time I left in December 2015, I was already hearing complaints from mining bosses about how quality ore had become significantly harder to find. It was unclear how much more wealth was present, and intensive tunneling was required to find lower grade ore deposits. Cognizant of the capriciousness of the industry and the lack of reliability of data, Reuters concluded in a video report: “in the meantime, and without proper geo-exploration of the secretive and restricted region, metal analysts and the world market face uncertainty”.

The mining hills are littered with rock, some debris, some with mineral content too low (less than 2%) to be yet worth the costs of processing. The miners are waiting for the prices to rise again, which will turn all this waste rock into value. At other times they have no choice but to process the rock at a loss, simply to recover the sunk operating costs. Chen tells me that there are more than 1,000,000 metric tons of such rock lying around in the Man Maw area. Much latent potential in these rocks, in these hills, yet all of it dependent on forces beyond the control of the region. Perhaps Chen words were once too bold: “I am a fool if I cannot succeed in this place.” Perhaps not for want of connections, or knowledge, or acumen.

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**Frontier Opportunism: Exploiting Disparities across Boundaries**

Boundary disparities across legal and economic regimes produced potential for profit in several ways, shot through with the uncertainty and contingency of the borderlands. The first and most obvious was the *legal status* of commodities. Parallel to the “economy of appearances” was the spectral nature of many capital flows and opportunities, lurking beneath the legal prohibitions of neighboring states. The most illicit of this being the drug trade, yet certain forms of timber, minerals, and wildlife trade, as well as other clandestine business, construction, and plantation investments stood awkwardly at the edges of China and Myanmar state regulations. The drugs and wildlife trade were prohibited on both sides of the border, though enforcement in Myanmar was patchy at best. Wa Region then, opened up a frontier space for the conduct of illicit business, subject to shifts in political will and legislation on either side of its boundaries.

Second, fluctuations in formal and informal *taxation* regimes added to the contingency of profit. Policies regarding taxation were established on the Chinese side, to which minerals, timber, and cows were exported, even as quantities crossed without being declared in order to avoid taxation or prohibitions. Myanmar banned the export of logs to China in April 2014. (See Forest Trends 2014; TNI 2013:33-4). On the Myanmar side, regulations were patchy – Myanmar military units had been de-funded since the policy of “living off the land” in the 1980s (See Maclean 2008), forcing brigades and battalions to raise their revenue through inconsistent taxation, property and land appropriation, and plantation economies (Woods 2011; TNI 2012, 2013). Armed groups and People’s Militias raised funds through commercial taxation, as did the UWSA. As a result, a patchwork of informal tax collectors cropped up across the peripheries, extracting surplus from entrepreneurs and traders as they moved their commodities. The whimsical nature of extraction was extremely damaging to the consistency of enterprise – checkpoints appeared and disappeared, officials were
replaced, taxes changed, and the policies and rules regarding the movement of people and commodities were perpetually in flux.

Third, risk from transportation and fluctuating market prices often made buying material from Wa Region cheaper. Commodities produced in Wa Region were reliant on the Chinese and Thai markets to reach regional and global markets. Its inaccessibility meant a limited number of brokers willing and able to bear the risks and form the conduits for trade, increasing the profits for those daring enough. Tin production, as we have seen, had affected the global market, and timber stripped in vast quantities from the Wa hills in the 2000s had been exported to China (Renard 2013a:144). Rubber plantations, which cropped up all over Wa Region at the beginning of the opium substitution programs circa 1998, had proven the largest disappointment – prices plummeted from a high of 526.40 USD per 100 kg in February 2011 to a low of 146.40 USD by January 2016194. Rubber prices hovered around the 200 USD mark in 2014-5. These dismal prices coincided with the maturation of most of the plantations that were established around 2007, since rubber has a 6-8 year maturation period195. Many were cut down in 2014 and land used for sugarcane. Changes in global market prices and international legal regimes subjected the marginal Wa economy to its vicissitudes; but it was also in these margins of risk where the potential for profit lay.

194 Data from Trading Economics, at https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/rubber

195 Renard reports that the first rubber projects were initiated in Mong Pawk areas in 1997 or 1998 (2013a:163). See Global Witness (2014) for more details on rubber industry and land grabs in Myanmar.
There were failures too. An example of the susceptibility of the Wa economy to external market forces was the Puer Tea bubble of 2008. Like many villages in neighboring Yunnan province, farmers attempted to exploit these rising popularity and demand for Puer Tea by growing tea of varying quality across the hillsides. Development projects by NGOs and the Wa authorities had seen the creation of various tea plantations and small scale growing of tea bushes across different districts in Wa Region. Much capital and effort was invested in this new cash crop, touted as another possibility for opium substitution. But from 2008 onwards, prices collapsed, partly because the market had been flooded by “fake” tea labelled as Puer tea. Some blamed this on the end of the Beijing Olympics, which had created an artificial spike in demand. Sai Lone quotes a villager from Mong Pawk describing how the price of tea dropped from 80 CNY per viss (1.6kg) to 10 CNY per
vis from 2007 to 2008 (2008:52). As ever, farmers and small-scale traders had their livelihoods destroyed by the price collapse.

Everyday prices in Pang Kham were higher than in China, due to the circulation and enclosure of capital from illicit economies. Local businessmen and leaders, as well as visitors came to town to gamble or invest. There was a large yet opaque sum of capital, often the profits of the drug trade, that was continually invested and re-invested in property, construction, cars, and other mobile items of value such as precious stones. Situated in small basin amidst hills, property prices in land-scarce Pang Kham were astronomical, with 1 mu (26m²) of land costing around 1,000,000 CNY (165,000 USD) in 2015. These absurdly high prices were reflected in the basic cost of living: a bowl of rice noodles could be sold for between 8 to 12 CNY (1.40-2 USD), whereas in Menglian, a town of similar size just an hour across the border in China, the same bowl of noodles would cost between 5-7 CNY (0.80-1.20 USD). Fruit, meat, and vegetables were mostly imported from China due to the lack of land in the hilly interior of Wa Region. Shopkeepers preferred to purchase quantities of meat or wholesale directly from contacts in China, rather than procure from the inflated market in Pang Kham. On this account, networks or relatives in China, or the appropriate documentation and IDs to cross back and forth was most beneficial to taking advantage of price differences.

Pelts and Bones

So too did the legal regimes of neighboring countries render great potential for profit in the border economy. The wildlife trade was a clear case in point – the Chinese thirst for exotic animal parts, the trade of which was illegal in China, created a border market for bear meat, pangolin skin, leopards, sloths, tiger paws and bones, elephant skin, porcupine quills, various unidentifiable fowl, and spotted deer. Much like timber, the late-2000s began to see an evident decline in their numbers
for sale in the 5-day market, found instead in the few specialty shops around Pang Kham. When I first visited Wa region in 2012, there was a vendor at the daily market who spent his entire day butchering a black bear (*ursus thibetanus*) on his cart stand and carving up the meat. Hungry customers could be seen leaving the market with a black bear paw (3,000 CNY for a pair, or 500 USD) protruding curiously from a red plastic bag. In makeshift cages around were a baby leopard, small monkeys, wood rats, deer, tortoises, and a porcupine. A Wa onlooker pointed at the pangolin and suggested, through animated gesticulation and broken Mandarin, that pangolins were somewhat resistant to being dragged by their tails out of the ground. By 2014, the vendor was out of business and bears rarely appeared in the 5-day market.
Many of these animals were not actually hunted in the Wa hills, but rather brought over from farms in Thailand or Laos, and placed strategically on the border markets for Chinese tourists and buyers. And they were merely the tip of the iceberg, since the truly wealthy who had an acquired taste for collecting exotic wildlife parts such as tiger teeth or leopard skins mainly did so through personal ties and brokers, an invisible market. A friend once casually recounted his ongoing struggle to procure a tiger tooth for an acquaintance of his. He showed me pictures of the desired relic on his iPhone – the base of the 10-cm tooth had been covered in ornamental gold, fitting it to be hung around one's neck like a pendant. His acquaintance had purchased this for 20,000 CNY, and was now searching for another to complement it. Amidst his grumbling about the difficulty, the friend claimed that the tooth had come from lower Myanmar, near the border with India.

The wildlife trade became a metaphor for the disorderly chaos and lawlessness of the borderlands, with countless media articles and amateur reportage focusing on the striking visuals of dismembered exotic animal parts laid out on mats for sale in the Pang Kham and Monglar markets of Special Regions 2 and 4 respectively (Ammann and Peterson 2014). Since Monglar was more accessible to foreign visitors, the majority of the reports focused on this region, with sensational headlines reading “Debauched Land of Drugs and Vice” (Finch 2014), “Mong La: Lawless Region where Anything Goes” (Fisher 2014), or “Border City on the Edge of the Law”. The BBC’s tiresome Jonah Fisher recounted getting to the casinos by travelling “into the Burmese jungle”, while the New York Times journalist Andrew Jacobs described bribing “Burmese insurgents”, “bedraggled prostitutes”, and labelled Monglar a “rebel-run jungle outpost” (Jacobs 2014). The focus of this spread of reporting was prostitution, casinos, and the wildlife trade, and the gaudy neon lights of
casino entrances, deliberately exaggerating the degree of danger and chaos to celebrate themselves.

*Tethers*

Groups of cows tethered in sixes with bamboo poles lumbered slowly along the roads, their heavy hooves kicking up dust amidst the gravel. Weary men trudged alongside their charges – the cows bearing loads of rice, pots, clothes and other supplies – stopping in the evenings to camp out along the road, on a journey which could take up to 2 weeks. They came from areas surrounding Dangyan, a town in Eastern Shan State across the Salween to the West of Wa Region, where the flatter lands of the Shan plateau offered more space for raising and grazing cattle. The cows (*huangniu*) were destined to be border-crossers, transported to China upon maturity, where market prices were considerably higher. Marched from Dangyan areas and floated on barges across the Salween into Wa territory, they trundled through Pang Yang before arriving on the outskirts of Pang Kham, there sold to Chinese businessmen. Large caged trucks then took them across and into China to be sold at cattle markets. At its endpoint in China, a single cow could fetch between 8–11,000 CNY (1,330–1,830 USD), the estimated profit once taxes had been deducted being about half the total sale price (i.e. 6-8 cows brought about 60-90,000 CNY, with profit of between 30-45,000 CNY [5,000–7,500 USD]), but from this one would have to deduct the costs of 1-2 years of rearing the cows as well as

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196 The wildlife trade in Monglar was tolerated by the local authorities, who saw little reason to adhere to international wildlife preservation standards. Yet I did hear rumours that the markets in Monglar were soon to close because of the unnecessary attention they were receiving in the media, and the benefit to the local government in the form of taxes was marginal. Nonetheless, the trade would clearly not stop, it would simply go through underground brokers and dealers.
other middlemen fees. By contrast, a cow sold locally in Wa Region might earn 4-6,000 CNY. Pigs, on the other hand, were banned from sale to China for fear of cross-border disease.

An acquaintance reported however, that the business of transporting cattle to China had become increasingly difficult in recent years. The cattle herders were under pressure from both Myanmar military and Shan militia units to pass through their own areas of control and checkpoints, paying them dues. This competitive taxation was destroying their profits, since they often had to pass through several checkpoints on any one journey. If they travelled through the Shan militia checkpoints, and ran into a Burmese checkpoint later on, they would be reprimanded or heavily fined for having avoided the previous Burmese checkpoints (when they could not show the receipt slips), and accused of giving support in the form of taxes to the Shan militia. This also applied vice versa when Shan militia pressured these often ethnically Shan herders to travel through their routes and areas. Similar cattle trade routes from Eastern Shan State to Thailand had completely ceased for these reasons by mid-2015, but the route to China was viable, albeit with greatly reduced profits. Nor were the checkpoints regular – sometimes manned, sometimes unmanned, it was difficult for traders to plan or estimate the total fees that might be levied. Taxes on the Wa side were more stable, there was a registration fee (dengjifei), a Salween river crossing fee, and then several road checkpoint levies, and finally the official government registration charges at the Cattle Trade Tax Bureau and vaccination charges at the Wa Cattle Immunization Station.

**Plates**

Vehicles were another form of mobile property that carried value as it was traded across boundaries. Cars first entered Wa Region around 1986 – produced and registered in Thailand (mainly Japanese models), traded into the government controlled areas of Myanmar at Tachilek or Kengtung in Shan
State, given fake or temporary Myanmar license plates before being driven up into Wa Region, and sold quickly through networks of buyers. The vehicle of choice in Wa Region was the Toyota Hilux Vigo pickup truck, powerful, hardy, maneuverable for the narrow paths, muddy roads, and steep climbs, and able to bear reasonable loads of around 1 ton. The wealthier drivers usually had the Lexus GX470 or GX570, and Toyota Mark 2s were known as the “widow car”, often purchased by businessmen for their wives or mistresses to drive around town. These cars were affordable because registering a vehicle cost a mere 800-1,000 CNY (130-160 USD) in Wa Region. By contrast, a license plate in Myanmar cost anywhere between two-thirds and the entire cost of the car. The downside to this was that cars with Wa licence plates could not be driven in the rest of Myanmar (with some exceptions to nearby Hopang, Kengtung, and Dangyan), while cars with Myanmar licence plates were allowed in Wa with the right paperwork. With the correct documents, Wa-registered cars could travel up to Puer in China, roughly a 6 to 8-hour drive away. The legal and physical limits to mobility then determined how valuable the vehicle was.

Cars produced in China were not purchased in Wa Region because of a lack of demand, often derided for their weak engines and inability to cope with the muddy roads and steep slopes found all over the Wa hills. I observed on occasions how Chinese made and registered pickups which crossed into Wa Region failed to pass muddy sections of road in the rainy season, leading to stuck traffic and general mockery. In fact, an older Han Chinese official in the Wa authorities told me how cars first arrived in Wa Region in 1986, whereupon the Wa authorities began importing hundreds of Japanese cars from Yangon in the early 1990s, bringing them into the hills to sell into the neighboring Chinese prefectures across the border. Having studied in Yangon before joining the CPB and coming to Wa Region, this official spoke Burmese fluently and relied on friends and contacts in Yangon to pay the right taxes and bribes to cross bridges and military command areas
on the way into Wa Region. This short-lived venture made large profits for the Wa government for
two or three years until the Chinese government quickly banned their sale into China.

Yet the prices of cars were constantly falling in Wa Region, as the market in Pang Kham especially
became increasingly saturated. The shadow economies and drug trade often relied on the barter of
valuable goods, because of buyers' limited cash supplies, the need to evade authorities, or to quickly
dispose of large amounts of product. Traders were often persuaded or forced to exchanged drugs
for cars instead of cash at the Thai or Laos borders, the cars then brought into Wa Region in the
dozens. In 2012, a brand new Vigo went for around 270,000 CNY (45,000 USD), in 2014 it had fallen
to 150,000 CNY (25,000 USD), and by late 2015 around 100,000 CNY (16,600 USD). Prices also fell as
newer models emerged from the Toyota factories in Thailand.

And the cars went even beyond Wa Region. Ko Maung, a young man I met at the football field, was
in the business of dealing secondhand cars from Wa Region back into Shan State. A Muslim Hui
from Dangyan in Shan State just outside Wa Region, Ko Maung was comparatively fair in
complexion, with teeth stained dark red from the perpetual chewing of betelnut. He spoke fluent
Burmese, Mandarin, and some Shan, and had married a Wa wife from the Wa township nearest to
Dangyan, just across the Tar Gaw Et bridge. Moving to Wa Region after marriage, he ran a
motorcycle repair shop, but then progressed on to the seemingly lucrative trade of dealing cars. He
arranged for the purchase of these cars from Thailand, brought up through Kengtung and Monglar,
then to Wa. Others were second-hand purchases from owners in Wa Region. Ko Maung used a
different crossing point on the Salween to float cars on barges across the river and back into
Myanmar areas of Shan State, paying bribes and duties to the Wa customs and Myanmar military
checkpoints on either side. The cars were given fake number plates – “you can choose YGN or MDY
or SHN”, referring to the registrations in Yangon, Mandalay, or Shan State – through a computer
database used to generate these fake numbers. The cars were then sold for significantly higher prices, especially the Toyotas and Lexuses, exploiting the disparity between car license plate prices in Myanmar and Wa Region.

**FrontierAppearances: Specters and Vigilance**

Despite the lack of a banking system and the entirely cash-based economy, the borderlands were replete with flows of capital and money laundering, with payments and transfers made in large amounts of physical cash Renminbi, portable goods of high value such as cars, stones, and jewelry. Clouds of dust indexed the constant roadbuilding and construction; the landscape of Pang Kham punctuated with scaffolding and several cranes. Piles of bricks, gravel, or rocks peppered the streets, some from construction, some from demolition. Scores of vacant or unfinished luxury homes and apartment buildings were inhabited instead by cautionary tales – the property developer who went bust, the businessman arrested before completion, or a falling out with partners.

At night, the gaudy lights of the casino and bars flickered across town, as groups of people gathered to eat at roadside stalls, sticks of barbecued meat and fish paired with bowls of spicy noodles. At the main entrance to the casino, motorcycles and three-wheelers waited to ferry patrons in and out of the gambling halls, accosted by the loud bass of techno music and laser lights emanating from its dark dens. The main road behind the casino was calmer, hued with the red lights of massage parlors, the shouts of boisterous youth. Yet the night always cavernous, concealing, enticing, the realm of the illicit, where deals were brokered over evenings of singing and drinking. Vehicles with tinted windows inconspicuously dispatched their high-net-worth occupants onto the steps of the casino’s arched doorways; they were received ceremoniously by hospitality representatives, vanishing into the private karaoke rooms, nodes in the shady circuits of capital.
Various Wa leaders were known to have big business interests and properties in China and Burma, ranging from hotels, domestic airlines, plantations, land, and other properties. Many of the jade mines in Kachin State were rumored to be at least partly owned by certain Wa companies. These were ever easy to confirm, even if they appeared so assertively in the reports of newspapers or think-tanks that investigated the jade industry (Global Witness 2015; ICG 2009; TNI 2012, 2013; Fuller 2015). Statistics and numbers were even harder to verify. Even from trusted friends, I received wildly varying figures – of the cost of a particular property for instance, or a kilometer of road, or the annual turnover of a particular silver mine. Reticence and secrecy was ubiquitous – a friend of mine who ran a hotel, was exceptionally unwilling to speak of his costs and profits. Another, having left the service of a top leader after marriage, recalled that many of his contemporaries had by now, 20 years on, become remarkably rich (for their positions). These friends of his were always guarded about where their wealth came from. It was commonplace to describe one’s work simply as “business” (shengyi) or “buying and selling” (maimai), and the products vaguely as “goods” (huo). While there was never a dearth of “public secrets” and “common knowledge”, they were inevitably subject to a blend of exaggeration, guesswork, or falsehoods.

**Specters and Counterfeit Landscapes**

The shadows of the frontier were spaces of opportunity for fraud and counterfeit, narratives of savvy cunning outsiders entering the Wa Region to exploit the ignorance of locals, unsophisticated “frogs in the well”, too trusting and too truthful to “do business”. Stories and warnings of the counterfeit, the scam, the fake, and the trickster, permeated Wa Region, as did fake medicines, money, herbs, alcohol, tea, electronics and mobile phones, luxury products and a range of other consumer goods. One story was recounted by a Wa official at his house, disgruntled with the exponentially high prices of land in Pang Kham. This official told of the early development of the town, and how a
group of Chinese businessmen purchased land in the centre of town in the early 2000s, simply by
buying cigarettes and beers for local Wa officials. Land pressure in the basin was not particularly
high then, and certain plots of land left undeveloped. These Wa officials were too trusting and
unsophisticated, he said, and were too easily charmed by the Chinese gifts. They ended up agreeing
to sell a large portion of land at a criminally undervalued price.

Laments about fakes and warnings to remain on one’s guard were ubiquitous across town. In one
particular scam, tricksters were said to blow smoke into a person’s face, inducing a type of hypnosis
that would allow them to instruct the individual to hand over assets or cash to them. A friend also
told me about how Chinese companies would come to Wa Region and invite Wa businessmen or
leaders to participate in a joint venture, hosting tours to their offices in China to display their
facilities and capabilities. As it turns out, these companies were complete fakes, with receptionists,
workers, and office space hired temporarily for the brief period of the “tour”. A successful scam
would see the fake company disappear with the initial capital investment. Yet another story told of
a conman who invited investors to visit a mine he claimed was his own. He brought the unwitting
businessmen into the mining areas of Man Xiang where hundreds of mining shafts were being
worked, and showed them a site, machinery, and workers, ultimately absconded with their capital
once the investments were made. These scams would have been conducted over a long process of
courting, dining, and entertaining the investors in order to convince them of his wealth and success.

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In one of the most remote and poorest Wa townships on the boundary with Myanmar, an
amateurish scenic poster hung outside the township office. It depicted an aspirational dam project
on the Salween river, complete with power station and pylons, roundabout gardens, a riverside
walkway, SUVs and luxurious homes. There was even a yacht on the river, and pagodas perched on
the sides of the gorge. The artist’s impression was a hydroelectric power station to be built by a large Wa company owned by one of the members of the Politburo. When I inquired about the progress, the township secretary laughed and said that the Wa company had been cheated of 1 million CNY by the architect, who after surveys and visits had left with nothing more than this monstrosity of a graphic. The Wa company had now begun preparations with another Chinese contractor, but discussions were currently tabled, with the Myanmar government facing stiff opposition to hydroelectric projects on the Irrawaddy River (Chan 2017; Kiik 2016). The painting was truly absurd – Chinese images of luxury and prosperity juxtaposed into the security landscape of a river boundary which separated Myanmar fortifications from their Wa counterparts across the river – revealing the incongruent nature of these spectacular aspirations to modernity. Appealing to infrastructural enchantment (Harvey and Knox 2012), a trickster artist had woven a visual narrative of prestige, a successful extravagance of appearances that had to be made in order to secure contracts197. The sorry picture now hung next to the township office calendar, covered with a layer of dust and traces of finger marks that once gestured excitedly at its promise.

“Rugged Individualism”: Masculinity, Mobility, and Vigilance

Despite the seemingly unregulated chaos of the frontier, it was not simply a free-for-all lawless zone of deceit and fraud either. A moral economy of pragmatism guided interactions – guanxi, connections, and trust, operated alongside a keen sense of vigilance, and the principle of caveat emptor or “buyer beware”. Individuals had to take care in their own transactions and dealings, seeking advice or help from others, performing their own due diligence by undertaking their own

197 Kramer corroborates this sense of enchantment by large infrastructural projects, interviewing an aid worker who stated that: “The Wa are very much influenced by China, they want to make big projects” (2007:32).
investigations into the legitimacy of investments and partners. Fraud and deception might result in resentment, but also a sense that one deserved the outcome for having being so foolish – “doing business is like this”. As Chang Wen Chin writes of the jade trade in Burma:

“one would assume that trust was a necessary foundation cooperation among partners and between traders in transaction. In fact, trust was a value rarely observed in practice, receiving only lip-service. Informants frequently talked of distrust between traders and told me in confidence stories of betrayal” (2006:278).

Appearance also needed to be backed up by what Chang describes as the “politics of knowledge” – in her case “the knowledge of languages, of trading routes, of evaluation, and of markets” (2006:280) required in the jade trade. Brokers and middlemen were central to the navigation of the commercial terrain.

In this context of uncertainty and the constant potential for betrayal, Tsing’s “economy of appearances”, where performing power and success, daring, and confidence, became central to doing business. It was a masculine environment, rules of propriety and politeness were underwritten by toughness and ruthlessness that was essential to success, not dissimilar to the entrepreneurial and business culture described in China, with strong tones of sexual consumption (Osburg 2013; Uretsky 2016; Zheng 2006). Because of the ubiquity of surface appearances and performance, there was a perpetual fear that business dealings and commerce were constantly perched on feet of clay, a sense of the hidden, the counterfeit, and the fake. One had to present a façade of toughness and capability to avoid being taken advantage of in an area where scams and swindles of varying scales abounded.

The tough demeanor was a rough manner of speaking, of beckoning, of chiding others and compelling them to do one’s will. A person who was polite and mild mannered, who did not have the requisite connections, was at risk of being taken advantage of and seen as an easy target. It was
the ordering of subordinates and service staff around, the dismissive wave of the hand telling another to leave, the frowns, the scowls, the raised voices of irritation and impatience. It was the constant explaining and the know-it-all condescension, an affected wisdom and passing of commentary. Hearty laughter and flattery (zuitian, paimā) at the right moments were markers of a capable, ruthless, no-nonsense, street-wise person who could not be bullied or manipulated, willing to confront others when needed. It balanced on both a careful calculation of profit, and at the same time shows of generosity through gifts, tipping and the dismissal of small monies. It was similar to the “guts” (danzi, polǐ) that Chang Wen-Chin describes in her work on the jade trade in Myanmar, a “wild temper and adventurous disposition... a fearless spirit of risk-taking” (Chang 2006:286-7).

Another key facet of this masculine demeanor was mobility, a key index of one’s status and capability. It was unseemly for anyone of decent standing to walk between places, as if they were poor, or had no companions to drive them, this was “not good to behold” (buhaoqiao). Friends would always offer to pick me up wherever I was, even if it was a mere five minute walk away. The sense of sending (song) or receiving (jie) a person was deeply embedded in understandings of hospitality and friendship in Wa Region. Further, the fact that almost all officials and businessmen owned cars meant that anybody who was anybody would be motoring around the town or hills in a Lexus Landcruiser.

The environmental conditions of travel played a part in this valuation. Poor road conditions in the rainy season mean that cars without four-wheel drives or powerful engines stand no chance in the thick orange mud and dirt or passing landslides. To walk around town is unthinkable – the roads are filthy, strewn with food wrappers, damp tissue, plastic bags, food waste, shells of groundnut and sunflower seeds. Walking also exposes one to the elements, the sun, dust, and rain, the muddy
water that flows downhill, bringing with it the filth of the roads. Cars by contrast, offer a refuge, elevated above the ground, insulated from the heat and dust, a regal feel stepping into comfort these large cars.

Economy of Appearances: The Yucheng Group

In July of 2015, a new bank opened its doors in Pang Kham. Smart white signboards touting the “Southeast Asia Union Bank” were foisted on the façade of a former hotel – newly painted in a sickly yellow with brown windowsills, yet air conditioning units at every window gave away its previous status as a run-of-the-mill hotel. Two ATMs were installed around the town, but no one was ever seen making withdrawals. Outside the bank stood two disheveled security guards, their oversized uniforms and lanyards covered with the dust. The grandiose “Southeast Asia Union Bank” had arrived in the Wa hills, yet a quick Google or Baidu search did not reveal any other branches.

Prior to this, there was only the Wa State bank run by the Wa Finance Department, which offered fixed deposits and safe boxes, but no widely available electronic banking system. Customers would have to wire money to a Chinese bank account across the river, and receive their money in cash in Pang Kham. Inspecting the physical currency notes was part and parcel of any large transaction, given the numbers of counterfeit banknotes in circulation. Even cars and construction costs were paid for in cash, the buyers toting black plastic bags filled with thick stacks of 100 CNY notes, automatic counting machines at the ready. The Myanmar Kyat could be exchanged for Chinese Yuan at reasonable rates, with money remitters (hondi) opening shops across town, using Myanmar bank accounts in Yangon or Mandalay.

The opening of the “Southeast Asia Union Bank” was part of a larger set of sudden changes across Wa Region. A few months earlier, a quixotic complex of country houses and facilities had sprung
up in the hills of Ai Cheng township, a two hour drive North of Pang Kham. Armed uniformed guards in desert fatigues patrolled the construction sites, shielded from the road by advertising hoarding. Advertisements proclaimed investment by the “Yucheng Group” from China, with photographs of luxurious hotel rooms, artists’ impressions of hospital complexes, and caring doctors and nurses covering them. A temporary arch was erected over the entrance declaring the opening of the “Ai Cheng Free Trade Zone”, and posters declared the net worth of the “Yucheng International Holdings Group” to be 80 billion CNY, or 13 billion USD. It claimed to offer financial services and “peer-to-peer” lending called “e-zubao”, a financial concept I would only make sense of after having left the field. These absurd and theatrical advertisements and publicity hoardings lined the highway running through one of Wa Region’s poorest townships.

**Rumors and Haunting**

Soon, rumors started spreading throughout Pang Kham about the group and what their motives really were. They were said to have purchased a fleet of nearly 80 vehicles, employed hundreds of workers, brought over employees from China, and taken over entire hotels to house staff. Alongside the bank, they purchased land and property developments that had lain empty for years. People gossiped about the huge sums of money they were investing – hundreds of millions, even billions of Chinese Yuan. I was told by friends that property belonging to Wa leaders had been purchased at prices 2-3 times the market rate in an attempt to curry favor. Clearly, they had the approval of the highest level of Wa leadership. A friend joked, “they have good knowledge, they have been introduced well – they knew who to curry favor, and where power really lies. Did they come to look for me? No. Did they come to look for [another member of the Politburo who was not wealthy]? No. Instead they went to the Chairman and his brother, and other Politburo members and military commanders.”
It was a bizarre moment to be in Wa Region. Why were they here, and what commercial potential could they possibly see in this area laden with political and security risks? Where did the money come from? What sort of trade had they in mind? Was it the mining that they ultimately intended to dominate? Who would buy the strange modern European-styled cabin homes they had built on a ridge line in the middle of nowhere? Were they indirect representatives of the Chinese government’s geostrategic interests, and what sort of ties did they have to the Chinese government?

In the borderlands setting, almost everyone suspected some form of money laundering, but surely it was impossible to bring so much capital across an unofficial border without the knowledge or tacit approval of the Chinese authorities. Some Wa officials even posited that this was a the nascent manifestations of the Chinese “One Belt One Road” (yidaiyilu) policy.

In August 2015, two women came to my office and requested a meeting, one claiming that she was the head of the SEA Union Bank and working for the Yucheng Group. She didn't have a namecard. They explained that they had just arrived in Pang Kham and were trying to get a sense of the region, and driving around had stumbled upon the signboards of a United Nations office. She spoke of the possibilities of “working together”, and boasted unabashedly of the hundreds of millions of CNY invested, vehicles purchased, and hundreds employees that the company had hired. She claimed that a development zone was starting up in the hills, with plans to build a 4000-bed hospital and luxury complex, as well as a zoo. Ironically, of all the boasts she made, it was the claim that they were already in possession of three tigers, that seemed the least implausible.

The woman wanted to borrow some maps of the area and claimed that the Wa authorities had been unable to provide her with one. Suspicious of her intentions, I made polite excuses about the complexity of our procedures, and suggested that we would speak about it in the future. Her presumptuous and unsettlingly arrogant manner was coupled with the absurdity that a company
with serious plans for large-scale investment did not even possess a reliable map of the region. My staff and I spent time searching the Internet for background information about the company, but found little beyond basic information on their headquarters and the peer to peer lending system.

Back at a government department days later, one of the deputy ministers was baffled about what the bank actually did. “It doesn’t allow people to create savings accounts, nor does it give out loans, this is a strange bank”, he mused. “They have their own motive”, was a commonly used and ominous phrase, one rarely elaborated upon. The minister himself, when I asked whether Yucheng was affiliated with the Chinese government, seemed unsure, “probably not”, he replied, “but it doesn’t seem they are here to earn much”. He had himself been to China to visit their offices a few months prior, and hinted that they had some approval from people within the Chinese government, and were helping the development of China’s western frontier, but did not go into further detail.

The manager of my apartment building, during our evening gossip sessions, told me of the tens of millions of Yuan they had paid certain leaders and ministers, and the exorbitant fees they had paid to purchase property. Other government officials I was close to gave completely different figures. Others said they were financing the road construction in town and across the region. A township leader was said to have been relieved of his duties after the central authorities found out that he had received tens of millions of Yuan in loans from Yucheng company. The rumors created an ambivalent picture of the Yucheng company, on the one hand contributing to public good with hospitals and road construction, on the other, having dubious motives whilst brandishing huge amounts of money to win favour with Wa leaders.
Months later, the Yucheng Group bought over the News Agency of the Wa government. They purchased a new plot of land upon which they were to build an eight-storey media tower which would headquarter the news agency. The format of the daily Wa News programme and the Wa Today monthly magazine was revamped, and several teams of journalists hired from China were constantly roaming the town desperate for stories to publish – shadowing street cleaners in Pang Kham, interviewing people taking evening walks around the main stadium.

People continued to gossip – apparently the head of the Yucheng Group was based in Anhui Province, and had ties that led straight to the top of the Chinese Communist Party ranks. Not long now, some thought, the bubble would burst, and the truth would be revealed. The Chinese police from the counties across the border in China were making their inquiries, suspicious of the large
flows of capital and people across the border, but unable to cross the border and really investigate. But the lines between legal and illegal were often blurred, since it was almost taken for granted that one would not be able to accrue such great sums of money without having protectors or patrons in the Chinese government, in other words, tacit approval from the top.

*The Fallout*

Right around the same period as I was preparing to leave Wa Region, the Yucheng project was gradually unravelling. The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported in December that Yucheng was under investigation and funds had been frozen (Mak 2015); arrests were being made in Anhui Province. Chinese secretaries, journalists, and other staff working for Yucheng and the Wa news agency were stealing back across the border into China by January 2016. It wasn’t until early February that reports of the largest Ponzi scheme in China hit Xinhua news and Western newspapers – and the sums were extraordinary. Xinhua news reported the astounding figures of 900,000 people cheated of more than 50 billion CNY (USD$ 7.6 billion), with about 95% of the investments being fake (Xinhua 2016). Several Chinese companies were been promoted on the E-zubao platform without their knowledge, the scheme falling apart when the company fell short of cash to pay out principals. The E-zubao company in Anhui was reported to have buried documents in a pit 20 feet underground, which was later retrieved by excavators.

Soon, further details emerged explaining how so many had been duped in China, despite a public already vigilant against scams and fraud. The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times reported how the Yucheng Group had advertised the E-zubao peer-to-peer lending services on the 7 o’clock China Central Television (CCTV) news and on bullet trains, lending it a veneer of government legitimacy (Rauhala 2016; Makinen 2016). Staff had a meeting at the Great Hall of the People in
Tiananmen square. The company had also participated in the 12th China-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Expo, where it appeared to have been affiliated with Xi Jinping’s “One Road One Belt” strategy. Little wonder that these rumors of government-backing and official connections filtered in to Wa Region. The LA Times also reported that “public wrath has rapidly shifted to toward the government”, and that the backlash in China was censored online, with protestors detained (Makinen 2016).

Figure 37: House constructed by Yucheng Group in "Ai Cheng Free Trade Zone", November 2015

Back in Wa Region, the Wa authorities were busy dividing up the properties and assets of the now-defunct Yucheng Group. Developments were unfinished, properties without legal owners. Some money was returned to the Chinese authorities, but the bulk of it was not easily liquidated – who would buy these assets at nearly the same prices they were purchased for? There were losses all
around, and some of the profits made by Wa leaders were returned into a central fund. A committee was put together to return monies to local contractors for work and labor that had been partially completed, or materials that had been ordered. The Wa authorities did not seem shocked, or at least concealed it well; “doing business is like this” was another common mantra. The cars and building remained in place even a year after, having been requisitioned by the Wa government.

Wa Region had been used as a frontier staging ground for an economy of appearances, where illicit gains were made material and manifest in the quest to generate more capital investment. Wealth was converted into property, buildings, vehicles, and tigers, which then served to recreate the potentiality. There was no real plan for Yucheng to make profit; Wa Region was certainly not a viable financial investment, even if there might have been wealthy buyers of hillside property in the remote, conflict-wrought ethnic minority margins of Burma. Top Wa leaders seized an opportunity to make licit profit for themselves, even if some was lost when monies were divvyed up and retuned. While wealthy Yucheng executives in Anhui province splurged their salaries and bonuses on property and designer goods, as subsequent media reports revealed, their employees in Wa Region had gained far less. The Yucheng director in Wa Region was said to have been arrested, but those below him went free.

By 2017, reports were being circulated that much of the capital had likely been laundered overseas via Thailand and Singapore (Sun 2017:9). This was the clear advantage of investment in Wa Region, where the UWSA’s autonomy and sovereignty stood beyond the regulatory reach of the Chinese state. Wa Region was clearly not a place to stash wealth in the long term, and while Chinese law made it difficult to move capital overseas, the Myanmar borderlands possessed well-established routes for moving money through Myanmar-registered companies out to the global circuits of capital.
By mid-2016, the hoardings and temporary screens walls surrounding “Ai Cheng Free Trade Zone”, with its luxury hillside homes and planned hospital, had been torn down. The specters of capital were gone, leaving behind small plateaus of rock and dirt, engraved into the hillsides, a monument to that which was given, and taken away.
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