

The Incredible Journey of the Wa From 1949 to 2005

The Wa area of Shan State is a multi-ethnic region in northern Myanmar, bordering China's Yunnan Province. Besides Wa, there are Lahu, Akha, Lisu (also written as Lee Saw), and Shan in this region. There are also a small number of so-called Loi (also known as Loi Shan') who seem to be Mon-Khmer speaking people who have taken on various Shan characteristics. Mainly the area is composed of rolling hills surrounding some small valleys. Elevations range from 1,250-7,250 feet (about 400-2,200 meters).

Map 1. Project Location



The Wa were among the most remote people of British Burma. So forbidding was the area in which they lived that the border in the Wa region was left undemarcated until the 1960s. The Wa generally resisted the efforts by all central governments, both before and after independence, to control them. Many Wa did however cooperate with the Burmese Communist Party in its armed resistance movement starting in

1968. The Party established a “liberated zone” in the Wa hills, with party headquarters at Pang Sang. In 1989, ethnic Wa broke out of the Communist Party fold to establish their own resistance group. A ceasefire agreement subsequently brought hostilities to an end but allowed the Wa to retain a good measure of control over their own area.

By the twentieth century, opium poppies had come to be cultivated as a cash crop by the Wa and other groups in this region. In the absence of markets for other crops that could be grown in the region, opium was essentially the only source of cash income for the people, and is cultivated by 96 per cent of the population.

This income, however, is limited. The average yield is six kilograms a hectare. Because of a limited area on which opium can be cultivated, the average household area used to cultivate poppy is less than half a hectare. The average household produces slightly more than one kilogram which brings it, at the farmgate price of about \$100 a kilogram, an average income of \$107 from opium. This is much lower than what poppy cultivators in neighboring countries gain from selling their crop.

Opium is also consumed for various reasons, often medicinal, by someone in one out of every six families. Opium remains an important medicine for the people in the area. Many health problems are faced by the people. Malaria remains a problem as do intestinal disorders. For children under the age of 5, the crude death rate ranges from 11.4-14.1 a thousand with the major causes being malaria, diarrhea, and dysentery.

The people need the cash from opium because they are unable to produce enough rice on which to sustain themselves. Only a small portion of the total project area of 200,000 hectares is under rice cultivation. Despite upland and

Area Demographics*

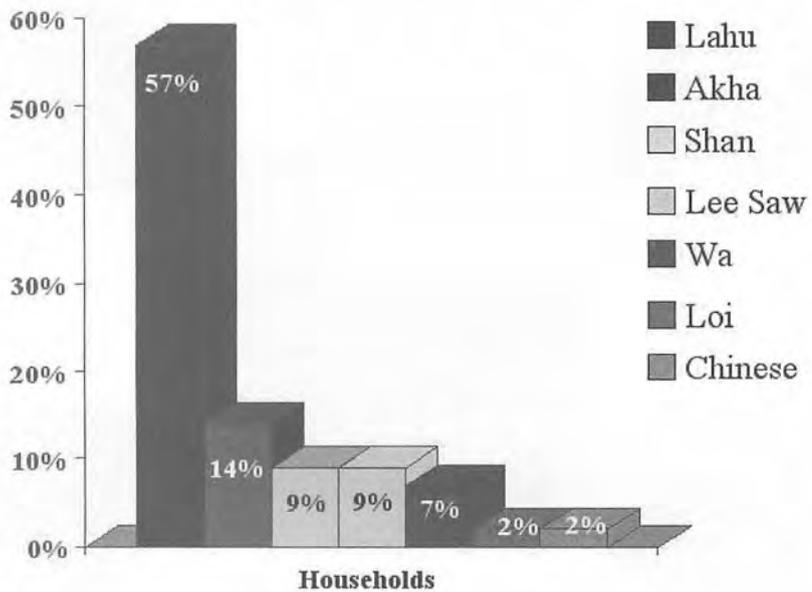


Townships:	5
Village Tracts:	23
Villages:	335
Households:	7,782
Population:	40,490
Females:	20,200
Males:	20,290



**Data Source: 1999 & 2000 WADP Socio-Economic Base Line Survey*

Ethnic Distribution



lowland rice together constituting 63 per cent of the total agricultural production, the area of rice production comprises only about 4,755 hectares or roughly 2 per cent of the total area. Not surprisingly many households suffer an annual rice deficit averaging from four to eight months.

Almost no outsiders ventured into the Wa area until recently. For much of their colonial rule, the British did not station officials there on a permanent basis. From 1949, aside from the Swedish journalist, Bertil Lintner, who spent several months there on his trek through the region in 1987, no Westerners are known to have visited the Wa in this part of the country. Little has been published on this area since the early-twentieth century when G.E. Harvey compiled the *Wa Precis*.

This began to change when the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) agreed with the government of Myanmar to establish a project run from 2000 to 2005 for Wa area in the late-1990s. This project was designed to replace opium cultivation with other forms of income-generating activities and to improve agriculture. The project's present scope covers about 200,000 hectares, 260 villages, 6,250 households, and a population totalling 30,000 in Special Region 2, in mountainous northeastern Mong Pawk District which is a part of Eastern Shan State. Kyaing Tong (Kengtung), the nearest major town in Myanmar, lies about 100 kilometers to the south (220 kilometers by road).

Across the border is Simao Prefecture of

Yunnan. The largest nearby town in China is Menglien which lies 50 kilometers north of the border. Many ethnic groups found in Myanmar are also present across the border in China.

Within the project area the ethnic distribution is uneven. Mong Pawk is predominately Lahu (85 per cent) while Mong Hpen is predominately Akha (45 per cent). Shan villages dominate lowland rice areas and the Chinese community dominates the towns. This distribution may change because the Wa authorities are developing the Mong Hpen town-site to settle some 20,000 people from less-endowed northern Wa region within two years.

During the time the author was in the Wa area, baseline surveys were conducted and a considerable amount of general information on the project area and the people there was collected. This represents the first organized collection of socio-cultural data on this region. The Editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society* suggested that some of this information be published in the *Journal* for the benefit of readers who might want to know more about the people and way of life of this remote region. More information may be included in future articles as it becomes available.

Notes

¹ *Loi* means mountain (and is cognate with the *Doi* of northern Thailand, as in *Doi Suthep*). *Loi Shan*, "mountain Shan," are also called *Tai Loi* in other areas of the country.

