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# THINKING ABOUT OPIUM AND THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE: QUESTIONS AND INSIGHTS FROM GLOBAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

Opium has a complex history. The consumption of opium throughout history ranges from medicinal and ritual practice; to recreational and mass-production proportions. Opium cultivation, consequently, has also undergone shifts from being 'legal' to illegal, encouraged to banned. The illicit trade of opium, however, remains to be a global phenomenon. The ebbs and flows of the relationship between this intoxicant and human society, therefore, promise various vantage points to further nuance its complex history not only in terms of related policies, but to more ambitious projects of further thinking about global capitalism, globalization, and global governance. This paper reflects about the Golden Triangle, a region at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, considered to be one of the major sources of opium in the global drug market. The discussion underscores the value of looking at the Golden Triangle from global studies perspectives. Here, the Golden Triangle is presented as a site of production (pertaining to the site opium poppy cultivation and in a sense pertaining to how it has been produced as a space), interaction (how the Golden Triangle could be seen as a commodity frontier where global capitalism asserts and exerts), negotiation (how the Golden Triangle figures in how ideas and discourses are encountered, contested); and also a window to see local-global dynamics as in the case of Myanmar. These reflections ultimately aim to ask how we can locate illicit commodities and illegal/criminal activities within and from the broader discussions of global studies.

**Keywords:** Golden Triangle, Opium, Global Studies, Southeast Asia, Drug Trade

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## **Introduction**

In 2020, before a global pandemic, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report stated that there were about 7,610 tons of opium produced globally in some 50 countries. The global area cultivating opium poppy (from where opium is derived, and opioids and opiates are made) is estimated to spread 240,800 hectares. Although declining, this number still pegged higher compared to figures 10 years ago. The global opium trafficking routes are identified to have major loci: the Golden Crescent in West Asia and the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia. The report also mentioned that an estimated 58 million people worldwide use opium or opioids (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). This trend in the continued production, consumption, and circulation of opium persisted in despite the world halting amid the global Covid-19 pandemic. The persistence of opium cultivation, consumption, and circulation had impacted the world, especially the regions and countries of its concentration. With this comes the importance of continuing the reflections and research about the complexity of the politics of opium as it impacts local and global contexts.

This paper intends to reflect about opium as an illicit commodity and opium poppy as a crop from a global studies perspective. As a piece that aims to ruminate on the ways we could further advance the studies on the Golden Triangle and the politics of opium, I mainly situate the discussion by building on earlier works on the politics of opium and the Golden Triangle while also arguing for the value of adopting global studies perspectives. With this in mind, I frame the reflections around four themes and suggestions: (1) looking at the Golden Triangle from a global history approach in order to situate the region and the politics of opium within larger contexts; (2) framing the discussion on the Golden Triangle and opium within larger global processes such as those related to globalization and global capitalism; (3) delving deeper into the lives of people affected by the politics of opium; and (4) highlighting the local-global approach by integrating studies on opium and dynamics of local politics. Before delving into the themes that this paper presents, the next section provides a brief literature review is presented. This section covers two main topics: first, global studies as an approach and perspective; and second, the Golden triangle and the politics of opium.

## **Literature Review**

### **Global Studies as an Approach and Perspective**

In recent decades, the field of global studies had seen a steady rise in terms of interest among social scientists and marked by the establishment of academic and research programs across the world. In many ways, “Global studies is the product of sustained efforts to understand the complex, dynamic realities of globalization, from changes in the structure and distribution of political and economic power to changes in the creation and circulation of cultural forms and social practices” (Stoddard & Collins, 2017). One basic way of understanding the scope of global studies relate to its goal of looking into and maintaining the view that the world had increasingly become interconnected and the bridges that were built by many interdisciplinary research pursuits and academic collaborations among fields in the social sciences including, but not limited to, international relations, history, anthropology, sociology, area studies, have allowed more eclectic and in some ways, adventurous and provocative lines of inquiry (Anderson & Holmsten, 2019). The interconnectedness is framed here to have been brought by a long history and development of the globalized world. Thus, many scholars engaged in what could be called ‘global studies’ have almost invariably and commonly engaged in unpacking the intricacies and complexity of historical and contemporary globalization.

Furthermore, the “global turn” in the social sciences also seeks to underscore the importance that scholars need “to be flexible thinkers and interrogate our taken-for-granted assumptions about the workings of power and related social, legal, economic, and political concepts. In short, we need to decolonize the basic building blocks that have dominated the past three

centuries of Western thought” (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017). Thus, global studies also, in many ways, champion the plurality of approaches and perspectives cognizant of the diverse cultural contexts in the world. In “embracing the global” or in conducting research from and in global studies demands a holistic frame of mind, taking into account the big picture questions, but not forgetting the global-local continuum or the ways in which local realities are embedded in larger interconnected and interdependent contexts. To think globally does not also mean to always look at macro issues but rather to have a frame of mind that seeks to understand the local dynamics from a holistic perspective (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017).

### **The Golden Triangle and the Politics of Opium**

As a psychoactive substance, opium has been a major illicit commodity that circulates in a global narcotics market. As mentioned, a known site of opium poppy cultivation and source of opium in the global market rests at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, in the mountains and communities nestled at the nexus of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Dubbed as the Golden Triangle, this region remains to be the source of almost 11% of opium that is circulating worldwide (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). It was the epicenter of the opium drug market before Afghanistan took its place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With such a character, the Golden Triangle is a place of controversy. Its long history of being seen as a source of opium has also made it a subject of discussions not only among policy makers that seek to curb the flows of drugs in a global scale, but also of scholars and academics that aspire to make sense and unpack the intricate dynamics of social, economic, cultural, and political forces that come into play in defining and redefining the region.

Numerous scholarly works have tackled the politics of opium and the regions of its cultivation. One major strand of this literature relates to the ways we can view opium within the broader international drug control regime and its evolution. Within this, we see how the Golden Triangle have been regarded as a major site of conversation in the development of global policies on opium and illicit drugs. Kim (2020) had noted about the important role that bureaucrats in the colonial government played a role in defining the scope of the problem of opium in colonial areas in Indochina and Burma, then under the French and the British. These regions also largely encompass what would be the Golden Triangle. The height of the Cold War would be an important context within which the politics of opium in the Golden Triangle would take shape. As argued by McCoy (2000), the ways in which the United States had to navigate the complexity of Cold War Politics in mainland Southeast Asia played a role in the ways opium economies emerged. In the contemporary world, amid the international drug control regime, the Golden Triangle remains to be a major site of contention as it is identified as a major source of illicit opium.

### **Approach and Method**

While the preceding discussion outlined the basic nuances of global studies and the politics of opium and the Golden Triangle, this section provides some notes on the ways we can ground the reflections and questions raised in this paper.

In this paper, frame the discussion around the themes of production, interaction, and negotiation. The first theme aims to reflect on the Golden Triangle as a spatial and temporal fix in terms of attempting to think about the global movement of illicit commodities and how the Golden Triangle has been pictured as a hotbed of opium cultivation and an important node in the global drug market. In a way, the thoughts in this section seek to present the history of opium and the Golden Triangle from a global perspective and see how the global ‘produced’ the Golden Triangle and how in turn the Global Triangle plays a role in shaping the global. The second dimension is inextricably linked to the first as I intend to extend the reflection by looking at the interactions in the Golden Triangle. This is done by reflecting from the nuance of commodity frontiers and how the spaces in the region have been changed—first by the large-scale cultivation of opium poppy and then how it has also been changing in the face of

continuing campaigns to arrest this industry. In the third aspect of the discussion, I then consider the Golden Triangle not just as a site of interaction, quite literally, but also discursively, in an attempt to appraise the region as a space where various perspectives meet, collide, or even clash. With the interventions coming from various sectors of the global governance architecture, how do we meaningfully make sense of the encounters, negotiations and contestations of meanings that these could reveal. Before ending this essay with some thoughts on the relevance of thinking about illicit commodities and illegal/criminal activities in discussing the global, the paper will provide a cursory discussion of how opium figures in the politics of Myanmar as a way to demonstrate the ways in which the local intersects with the global when we deal with topics from a global studies approach.

As a way to organize the discussion, each section in the discussion part of the paper opens with the context of the theme being tackled. This is then followed with some suggestions of works that deal with broad fields of global studies approaches and perspectives. This is then followed by the ways in which we can deepen our conversations on opium and the Golden Triangle from these approaches and then each section ends with some questions for further reflections.

### **Productions: The Golden Triangle in the World**

Opium has a long, complicated history. Accounts suggest that the first use and cultivation of opium poppy date as far back to the second millennium BCE in the Mediterranean. Research inquiries have noted opium as an article of trade as early as this time appearing in Egypt and Cyprus. Entries about opium in Greek pharmacopoeia date back to the fifth century BCE and in Chinese texts, in the eighth century BCE. The uses for this psychoactive substance have been described to range from medicinal purposes to religious rituals. The substance had also been utilized for recreational purposes and this was noted to have started in 15<sup>th</sup> century Persia and India while widespread smoking of opium had seen a steady rise in China beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (McCoy, 2000). When the Europeans came into contact with Asia, opium also figured as the establishment of companies and eventually colonial states also introduced opium to the burgeoning trade. Opium had shifted to becoming a major trading commodity when colonial powers such as Britain imposed trade monopolies and taxes began to be levied. Soon, demand for opium rose and encouraged widescale cultivation. The psychoactive drug had been circulating in ever larger scales by the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries even reaching the United States. Opium had found its way at the crossroads and entanglements of colonial spheres and figured crucial even inciting conflicts between colonial powers and between these European powers and, for example, the Chinese (McCoy, 2000; Kim, 2020). Such realities speak of the importance ascribed to the substance as well as the scale of its production and circulation. As a commodity, therefore, the global characteristic of opium is undeniable.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the winds of change began altering the course of opium's place in Asia as strong anti-opium campaigns, based on religious grounds, started lobbying for the control of its spread and prohibition of its use and cultivation. The way it has been perceived has drastically shifted as discourses about the harmful and addictive effects of drugs gained considerable understanding owing to medical and scientific research. With this, then, came the widescale regard for opium as a dangerous commodity within the gamut of other drugs that threaten to affect societies across the modern world (Kim, 2020). The movement of opium and its use, therefore, became increasingly prohibited and eventually deemed illegal. As colonial states began imposing legal measures against its use, the effort to curb the flow and production of opium also gained an international character especially when the League of Nations advocated in beginning in the 1920s.

Appreciated in this light, the identification of epicenters of opium's cultivation became important in the efforts to address the concern regarding the drug. The term "Golden Triangle" then came to be owing to the United States concerted effort to fight drugs. The Central

Intelligence Agency and US journalists are often credited for the first wide usage of the term to refer to the region at the intersection of Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar where large scale cultivation of opium poppy has been present (Neilson, 2000; McCoy, 2003). However, historians have noted how the conflicts that brewed during the height of the Cold War actually had the United States complicit in pushing the rural communities in the Golden Triangle to large scale opium cultivation (McCoy, 2003). Within this conflicted history of US complicity and international efforts to curb the global drug trade came the construction of the Golden Triangle as a crucial node in the traffic of illicit opium. This inevitably led to the persistent identification of the Golden Triangle as a hotbed of illegal activity that warrants attention.

At this particular period in the history of opium and concomitantly the Golden Triangle, we find resonance of the ideas forwarded by Henri Lefebvre (1992) when he noted how space is socially constructed out of discourses and how these constructions are contingent to historical, political, economic, social, and cultural exigencies. Although probably more appropriate in discussing urban spaces, the heart of Lefebvre's ideas putting emphasis on the social in the production of space could perhaps be appropriated in the global construction of the Golden Triangle as a space, or more acutely as a point in the global narcotics circulation.

As the Global Triangle became identified as a source of most of the opium circulating worldwide, its place in global history also underscores how capitalism experiences crises and creates spatial fixes. As the distribution of opium grew worldwide, when the substance became (in)famous as a global commodity, the ways it is produced also speak of how capitalism exerts and asserts by finding ways to persist through moving and altering spaces across time. At present, the global production chain of illicit opium is said to have shifted to produce another important site in some regions in Afghanistan, called the Golden Crescent. As David Harvey posited, capitalism has an "insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring" (Harvey, 2001). The expansion of opium cultivation and the trade networks that came with the boom of sales of this commodity could also point us to how capitalism not only produces spatial fixes, but also temporal fixes. Thus, as much as other goods—those otherwise regarded as legal and accepted—circulate in the world and show the inner workings of the global capitalist order, so too are illicit commodities such as opium. If we are, therefore, to appreciate the Golden Triangle from a global vista as seen in how global dynamics defined the region, the Golden Triangle in turn serves as another testament to how global capitalism and globalization operates. In a way, the Golden Triangle plays a role in shaping the global in terms of serving as a gateway to understand flows of illicit commodities and how global capitalism and globalization also provides fertile ground for such underground industries to endure.

### **Interactions: The Golden Triangle and the World**

To further the reflections about the Golden Triangle and global capitalism, we can also situate the discussion within the frames of debates about how global capitalism actually operates. In these, we find importance in the works of Jason Moore and his notion of the Capitalocene. As opposed to the Anthropocene, Moore argues with the concept of Capitalocene describes "capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (Moore, 2016). This conception of the dynamic of global capitalism and the development of the idea of world-ecology (Moore, 2003; Moore, 2015) that draws and builds from several works including those of Braudel (2023) and Wallerstein (2004) on how the rise of capitalism is better understood with the perspective about the rise of a world economy. By nuancing these notions and adding the dimension of nature, Moore proposes world-ecology and web of life as conceptual handles in appropriating analyses of the global capitalist order. As Moore and his colleagues continue to develop the ideas about the trifecta of power-nature-capital, they have also nuanced the ways capitalism supposedly produced "cheap things"

(Moore & Patel, 2018). Here they regard how capitalism produced cheap nature, money, work, care, food, energy and lives. Drawing from the Marxist notion of cheap labor and building on Moore's earlier conceptualization of cheap nature, these cheap things supposedly are byproducts of capitalism's (insidious) tenacity in a global and interdependent way.

Within these frames of understanding, how do we locate drugs and illicit commodities as well as illegal cultivation and production of these drugs? Can we consider another cheap thing that capitalism produces: "cheap vice" as an entry point to discussing how global capitalism also changes the ways illegal networks and illicit flow of goods operate? Or can we further complicate the discussion about cheap nature and cheap food by considering further the place of illegal substances?

In relation to Moore's ideas on the world-ecological order and web of life, his works also highlighted the place of commodity frontiers. From these, scholars such as Beckert et al. (2021), proposed the idea about the significant place of rural frontier zones in understanding the history and development of capitalism as well as being fully aware of periodizing through what they called commodity frontiers. Beckert et al. (2021), explains commodity frontiers as sites and processes that allow the incorporation of resources to the capitalist world economy. These sites involve the integration of land, labor, and natural assets to propel the expansion and growth of capitalism. They reshape economies, landscapes, and communities in this process of expansion in order to exploit new sites in response to ever growing demands of global markets. Thus, it is argued that the conceptualization of commodity frontiers aid in further nuancing the ways in which capitalism interplays and changes rural areas, natural environments, and the communities situated therein while unpacking the processes of capitalist expansion and global interdependence.

As rural countryside are transformed by capitalist expansions, spatial fixes, and creations of multiple centers, how do we account for the Golden Triangle as a commodity frontier and the shifts in the view of opium within commodity regimes? Perhaps we can draw comparisons to how opium poppy as a crop could be seen in relation to, for example, sugar (See Moore, 2000) or cotton (See Beckert, 2014). One major difference that we can further interrogate pertains to how these crops changed the rural countryside since on the one hand, these are crops that are deemed legal and their cultivation is endorsed by the state. In the case of opium poppy, however, we can reflect on how this crop changed the Golden Triangle since the cultivation of opium had been discouraged, if not deemed illegal, by the state and other global entities. How then does this shift in policy complicate the discussion? How then does the nature of the crop, in terms of its place in the legal and moral architecture of the local and the global, affect how commodity frontiers ought to be nuanced?

### **Negotiations: The World of the Golden Triangle**

With regard to the preceding points, we can characterize the ways the Golden Triangle have been made and how it has been remade across time. These aspects highlight interactions within the Golden Triangle and between the Golden Triangle and the world. These interactions, however, could further be extended to also think about negotiations: thinking about how the Golden Triangle could be a site not just of confluence but also contestations.

Looking at how global capitalism shaped the dynamic history and character of the Golden Triangle, we can also say that this rural region of Southeast Asia presents a compelling site of encounters between ideas. As development paradigms sought to provide avenues to remedy the situation by providing solutions to curb the cultivation of opium poppy in the region, we also see the tension between paradigms. Along with development discourses, challenges to these perspectives like those that espouse ideas of alternative development (See Grosfoguel, 2020) as an approach has also been seen important to consider in addressing the situation in the Golden Triangle. Some observers and researchers have noted how the interventions to stop the

cultivation of opium poppies create tensions and conflicts in the region and bring problems to the local populations. The relative successes of the interventions also proved ineffective in the long run as some communities 'relapsed' into growing opium again (Kramer et al., 2009; Kramer et al., 2014).

We can also reflect about the Golden Triangle from a decolonial lens. Decoloniality as developed by scholars such as Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, María Lugones, etc., highlight the notion of how coloniality/modernity continue to impinge the Global South societies from achieving their liberating potential (Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo & Escobar, 2010; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This intellectual tradition, along with postcoloniality, aims to reflect and engage the outcomes of the (violent) cultural encounters between by the West and the rest, profoundly exemplified by colonialism. Decolonial thinking also gave way to the development of ideas such as border thinking which pushes for thinking from the outside; that is, using diverse and other knowledge systems, and recognizing other languages and modes of expression. This is important since Mignolo and the other decolonial thinkers also underline that ideas—the theoretical and epistemic—need to have a 'lived' aspect coming from those that were marginalized by modernity's matrices of power (Mignolo, 2000).

As decoloniality highlight the power of listening to other voices, how can we use this lens to also unpack how the efforts to address opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle play out on the ground? How do we bring back into the discussion the impact of European colonialism to the present conditions in the region? How do we also unpack the unintended consequences of reports from the West about the Golden Triangle that could potentially produce an image of the people from the regions in this part of Southeast Asia? Can a decolonial perspective provide better and more holistic approach to the situation?

### **From Local to Global: The Golden Triangle, Opium, and State in the Case of Myanmar**

As a region, the Golden Triangle traverses several states including Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar (Chouvy, 2021). Included within the sites of opium cultivating lands are the regions in Myanmar which for several years have been identified as among the top countries cultivating opium and from whence its derivative psychoactive substances come from to circulate in the illicit drug market. The volume of opium cultivation in Myanmar is only rivaled by Afghanistan throughout opium's long contemporary history since the entrenchment of the international drug control regime (Chouvy, 2021). When we think of the ways in which opium figures in the Golden Triangle from a global studies approach, we can look at one the major themes in the emergent field that pertains to the interconnection of the local and global. In doing so, we can look at Myanmar as an example to demonstrate how the local conditions in the country are also linked to larger global contexts and also how global contexts are influenced by what is happening within the context of the local.

Since the colonial period, when the then Burma was still under the control of the British colonial empire, the regions of the country where opium cultivation had developed had already been a subject of inquiry when the British empire started considering the prospect of prohibiting opium cultivation and production amid the changing conversations surrounding the psychoactive substance. When the British empire endeavored to launch the Royal Opium Commission in 1895 to study the state of opium cultivation in India, Burma, then under the control of the British Raj, became a site of inquiry (Kim, 2020). Here we see how the opium producing regions of Burma became part of the burgeoning conversations that would lead, eventually, to the rise of the international drug control regime.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the international drug control regime would begin being entrenched in international affairs (Gootenberg, 2021; Foster, 2000), Burma would gain independence and become among the sovereign countries in the world. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>

and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Myanmar (name changed in 1989) as a country had been plagued by political instability and struggled for democratization especially in the shadow of strong military rule under the Tatmadaw (McCarthy, 2010). As the international community watches and scrutinizes the political upheavals unfolding in Myanmar, included in the conversations is the continuing opium cultivation in the country. Some observers even lament that the presence of opium continue to haunt the quest for lasting peace in the nation (Bodetti, 2017).

The complexity of opium and the politics in Myanmar demonstrate how local conditions and international pressures interact. As mentioned, scholars have intimated that as early as the Cold War period, the involvement of international forces such as the US's Central Intelligence Agency had been linked to the persistence of opium production and cultivation in Myanmar and the larger Golden Triangle region (McCoy, 2003). Well into the period of the 1980s to the 2000s, when the Tatmadaw had been in power, the persistence of opium had been a topic of conversation and a source of international pressure.

When the international drug control regime took shape in the late 1960s to the 1970s, the Tatmadaw responded to the international call to eradicate drug cultivation. Included in these efforts was the passage of the New Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Law in 1974 which happened after interventions from the United Nations. The Tatmadaw designed a work plan in collaboration with the UN to deal with the opium situation (Sassaroli, 2022). These efforts, however, proved difficult to realize especially in light of insurgent groups emerging in opium cultivating areas of the country (Kramer, 2015). This is one key example that shows the complex interplay of local politics and the place of opium. The opium producing region of the Shan in Myanmar, noted by scholars, have the insurgent groups that held up a challenge to the Myanmar government. In order to navigate the situation and pursue peace with insurgent groups, there had been accounts that point to how the Tatmadaw would leverage opium policies in order to gain concessions among the insurgent groups (Meehan, 2011; 2015).

Understanding the situation in the opium producing regions in Myanmar could also point to the reasons behind the difficulty of dealing with the cultivation in spite of international pressure and challenge of insurgent groups. One major issue is built around the reality that opium cultivation persists in these regions since it is a source of livelihood. The continuing cultivation of opium is undergirded by the issues of food security and poverty among the people in the opium-producing regions in the country (Chouvy, 2021). There have also been arguments that point to the situation that makes it difficult to address opium cultivation through prohibition since sudden drops in opium production could lead to increase in opium prices in the illicit world market, making it seductive for farmers to go back to it (Chouvy, 2021). Furthermore, as Luong (2022), showed, it is imperative to listen to the farmers voices if a genuine alternative development framework was to work in the country. It has been noted that among the many concerns of farmers and farming communities in opium producing regions in the country relate to land rights and access to land, alternative livelihoods should eradication be enforced, and sustainability, among others (Luong, 2022).

With this brief glimpse to the case of Myanmar, we see how the complexity of opium intersects with local politics within a country as well as the international forces at play. The case of opium in Myanmar relates to various issues and could be pursued for further inquiry. These include questions of state fragility and democratization especially with respect to the military government and its responses to the opium situation amid international pressure. It could also point to the ways the opium producing regions in Myanmar as it is located within the broader Golden Triangle regions brings forward questions of alternative development issues in light of the challenges of global capitalism and pervasive poverty among the people of these regions. Peace and conflict as a global issue also come into play when we see how opium and illicit markets exacerbate tense situations with the presence of insurgent groups. As a lens through

which to observe the local-global dynamics, opium and illicit commodities therefore could provide important vantage points for inquiry and reflection.

## Conclusion

The Golden Triangle continues to be a space of production, interaction, and contestation. As the history of opium production in the Golden Triangle suggests, the region has become a confluence not just of the entangled histories of various countries, but also the global dimension of the illicit movement of drugs. Thus, the region has been defined by the global perceptions about drugs and the dark undercurrents of global capitalism that fuel the movement of drugs. It also, in turn, has an important place in defining the global dimension of illicit drug trade. As such, as much as the global makes the Golden Triangle, the Golden Triangle also inevitably influences, if not, shapes the global.

As a region that could very well be considered rural by countries that meet and form it as a nexus, the Golden Triangle also affirms how global capitalism indeed shapes the rural frontiers. Seen as a commodity frontier, we can nuance the ways the lives of the populations within the Golden Triangle are forever changed by the wide cultivation of opium poppy. In the same vein, they are continuously being impacted by global efforts to stifle the illegal drug trade networks. As these worldviews and policies come together, the Golden Triangle is also a potent site of contestation of ideas. Questions about how to meaningfully engage the indigenous and local populations in efforts to change the region in the name of development, stir up postcolonial and decolonial necessities. The ways in which the domestic conditions in countries touched by the Golden Triangle progresses amid the challenge of global drug policy point to the importance of looking at the local-global dynamics as well.

Appreciating the intricacies of understanding the Golden Triangle from the various ideas in the tradition of Global Studies approaches brings in an important dimension that could also enrich the ways the global could be studied and appreciated. In this piece, I intend to underscore the relevance and value of looking at illicit commodities and illegal/criminal activities as a possible entry point to discuss themes in global studies. In a way, the discussion of illicit commodities and criminal activities highlight how dynamic societies are, both in terms of context defined by space but also across time. What could be deemed illegal now, could be accepted in the future—and vice versa. These dynamic changes across time and space also reveal the complexities of state-society relations, at local (in terms of nation-states) and global dimensions. These could also relate to further interrogation of perspectives and power dynamics that make one thing acceptable, and another not. Infractions of norms inscribed into codified laws or otherwise, are also moments of tensions and disruptions in social life. The result of the resolution that goes with dealing with law transgressions, in a sense, can only be fully understood if the infraction itself is also fully understood.

Therefore, in our continuing efforts to understand the global world order and the complexities of world-making, perhaps we can allot more attention to moments, events, people, and objects that stray away from that order, not only those deemed as activist, but also those that are outrightly seen as improper, illegal, and illicit. As numerous works on crime and criminality have revealed, much can be learned from these kinds of research pursuits. The enriching and integrative approaches of global studies could invite insightful questions that could then yield exciting and engaging research.

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