

# CARAVAN

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**KHUN SA**  
Unmasked

**THE MUZZLE**  
by Suchart Sawatsee

**CONFESSIONS**  
of a Hired Killer

plus  
Body Art  
Electro-pollution  
Boxer Boys

**ONE FLEW OVER THE COOCH**

The Mysterious Origins of a Sci-fi Classic



# Lord *of*

How does it feel to be the most wanted man in the world?

## *the* Golden

Caravan sends Bertil Lintner to talk to tycoon-druglord

# Triangle

Khun Sa at his sub-tropical kingdom in Homöng, Burma.

Photographed by Philip Blenkinsop.

He is the most wanted man in the world. For the past ten years, he has been living with a bounty on his head and on 15 January 1990, then US Attorney-General Richard Thornburgh announced that a federal grand jury in Brooklyn, New York, had filed a sealed indictment against him the previous December for shipping heroin to America. To the American Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA, he is the Prince of Darkness, the Pablo Escobar of Southeast Asia.

"He is a fugitive from the law; he controls most of the heroin trade from the Golden Triangle to the West," growls an anti-narcotics agent in Bangkok. Former US Ambassador to Thailand, William

Brown, once branded him "the worst enemy the world has".

"They're just farting with their mouths," chuckles Khun Sa. "I'm not the monster people make me out to be. Look here: no horns." He grins as he mimes horns above his head.

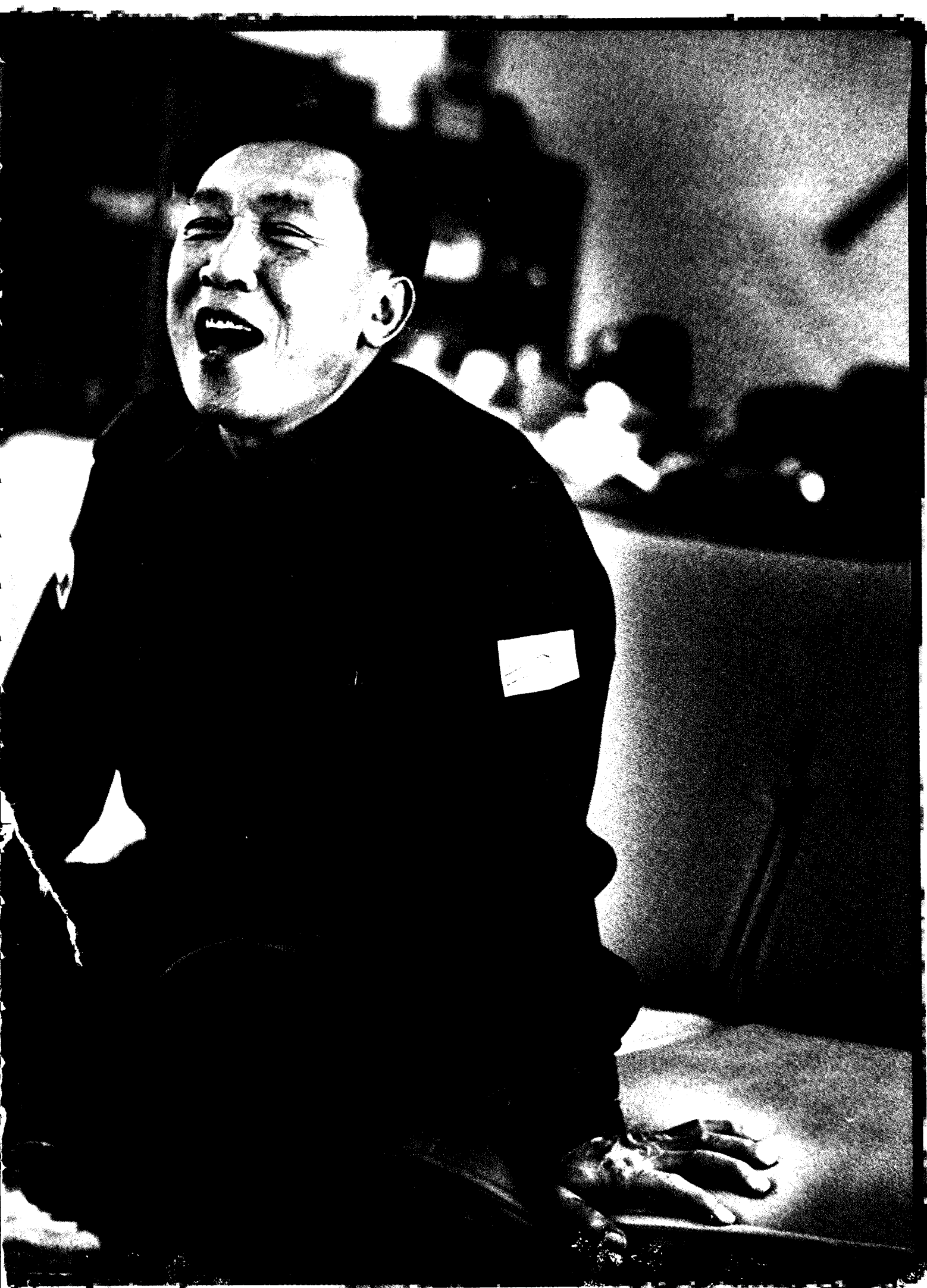
The way Khun Sa describes it, he is only taxing the drug trade to finance his political aim: independence for the Shan, or Thai

Yai, the national minority in northeastern Burma, long enslaved by successive regimes in Rangoon.

At his Homöng headquarters across the border from Mae Hong Son in northwestern Thailand there is also precious little evidence of the supposed hunt



Lintner and Blenkinsop



for "the notorious warlord" Khun Sa. By no stretch of the imagination can the place be described as a jungle hide-out. On the contrary, Homöng is a bustling town boasting well-stocked shops, spacious market places, a well laid-out grid of roads with street lights at night.

More than 10,000 inhabitants live in wooden and concrete houses amidst fruit trees, manicured hedges and gardens adorned with bougainvillea and marigolds. Huge sign-boards indicate where you can have your travel permits issued, or the name of the village, or suburb, you are passing through.

There are schools, a Buddhist monastery, a well-equipped hospital with operating theatre and X-ray facilities, video halls, karaoke bars, two hotels, a disco and even a small public park complete with pathways, benches and a Chinese-style pavilion. Overseas calls can be placed from two commercially-run telephone booths. Local artifacts, historical paintings and photographs are on display in a newly opened cultural museum. A hydroelectric power station is under construction which will replace the old diesel-powered generators currently providing Homöng with electricity.

Other unusual construction projects include an 18-hole golf course intended for the many visiting Thai, Taiwanese, Singaporean, Hong Kong, Malaysian, South Korean and Japanese businessmen flocking to buy precious stones at his new gem centre in Homöng. As a young man, Khun Sa himself was an avid golfer. Over the years, he has made many influential friends over a game of golf.

The most wanted man in the world is, in fact, pursued by no one. He lives in a one-storey concrete building surrounded by a well-tended garden featuring orchids, Norfolk pines and strawberry fields. But his house is also ringed by bunkers housing 50-calibre anti-aircraft machine-guns and swarms of heavily armed soldiers.

"You never know," he snickers. "I have an army, so I'm free. Look at poor Aung San Suu Kyi. She's got no army so she's under house arrest." That, however, does not appear to be the only difference between Khun Sa, the Lord of the Golden Triangle, and the incarcerated, highly intellectual leader of Burma's pro-democracy movement.

Garrulous and social, the man his followers simply call "The General" enjoys entertaining his dinner guests with karaoke renditions of Taiwanese pop songs. Before dinner, that is. Nobody touches the food until the General has performed his numbers and had a morsel of rice and curry himself. Only then do the others dig in. Sometimes several thousand dinner guests attend his karaoke dinner parties: faithful followers, soldiers in uniform and specially invited "foreign guests", who usually prefer to remain anonymous.

In person, Khun Sa is a charismatic figure, feared and admired at the same time. He can be extremely charming and generous, but he is also known to have shown little mercy when people have come in his way. About a year ago, more than a hundred villagers were gunned down north of Homöng for being audacious enough to sell their opium to another warlord.

When he's not singing, he punctuates his talk with guffaws of laughter. Secure and almost unchallenged, he has absolute control of an enterprise that totals, by American estimates, US\$200 million a year. General Khun Sa, whose name means "Prince Prosperous", can afford to laugh and sing.



Born in 1934 of a Shan - or Thai Yai - mother and a Chinese father in Hpa-perng village on Loi Maw, a spectacular mountain overlooking the Salween river in the far north of Burma's Shan States, Khun Sa grew up as an orphan. His father died when he was three and his mother remarried the "myosa", or local tax collector, of the small town of Mong Tawam under the "saohpa", or prince, of the Shan State of Möng Yai. Two years later, she died as well.

# "They're just farting with their mouths," chuckles Khun Sa. "I'm not the monster people make me out to be. Look here: no horns."

Khun Sa was a neglected child. While his three stepbrothers - sons of the Mōng Tawm "myosa" and another of his many wives - went to missionary schools and were given the Christian names Oscar, Billy and Morgan, the young Khun Sa was raised by



his Chinese grandfather amid the poppy fields of Loi Maw mountain. His only education consisted of a few years as a "dek wat", a temple boy, in a local Buddhist monastery. Even today, all correspondence is read to him and his replies are dictated.

But he was popular with the girls in Loi Maw. He sang well and he was charming. "My grandfather never had to give me any pocket money," Khun Sa says, smiling at the memory. "The girls always took care of me."

Khun Sa gained his first military experience in skirmishes with Nationalist Chinese forces who had set up base at Loi Maw in the early 1950s. Following Mao Zedong's victory in China in 1949, thousands of Kuomintang soldiers came streaming south, away from the communists and into the Shan States of Burma.

By 1952, more than 10,000 Nationalist Chinese troops had taken refuge in these remote borderlands. There, they established a string of secret bases from which they tried with Taiwanese and American support to reconquer the mainland. It was the CIA's first secret war, long before the agency became involved in similar operations in Cuba, Laos, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Angola.

The Kuomintang claimed to be fighting for freedom. But for the people living along the Burma-Yunnan frontier, their invasion meant a reign of terror as the Nationalist Chinese started collecting taxes and recruits. At the age of 16, Khun Sa - obviously an enterprising young man - formed his own armed band to fight the intruders. In 1960, his small private army was even recognised officially as the "Loi Maw Ka Kwe Ye", a home guard unit under the Burmese army. "Ka Kwe Ye" (KKY), which literally meant "defence" in Burmese, was Rangoon's idea of a local militia to fight the Kuomintang as well as local rebels.

The plan was to rally as many local warlords as possible, mostly non-political brigands and private army commanders, behind the Burmese army in exchange for the right to use all government-controlled roads and towns in the Shan States for opium smuggling. By trading in opium, Rangoon hoped that the KKY militias would be self-supporting.

The warlords, who were supposed to fight the insurgents, strengthened their private armies and purchased with opium money all the military equipment available on the black market in Thailand and Laos: M-16 and Browning automatic rifles, M-79 grenade launchers and 57mm recoilless rifles. Some of them, including Khun Sa, were soon better equipped than the Burmese army itself.

When Khun Sa was only 33 years old, he decided to challenge the supremacy of the much more senior opium warlords, Kuomintang generals Li Wenhuan and Duan Xiwen.

In May 1967, he set out from the hills of the northern Shan States with a large contingent of soldiers and a massive, 16-ton opium convoy, destined for Ban Khwan, a small Laotian lumber village across the

He was placed in a lone cell with nobody to talk to, only a copy of Lo Kuan-Chung's famous Chinese work, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

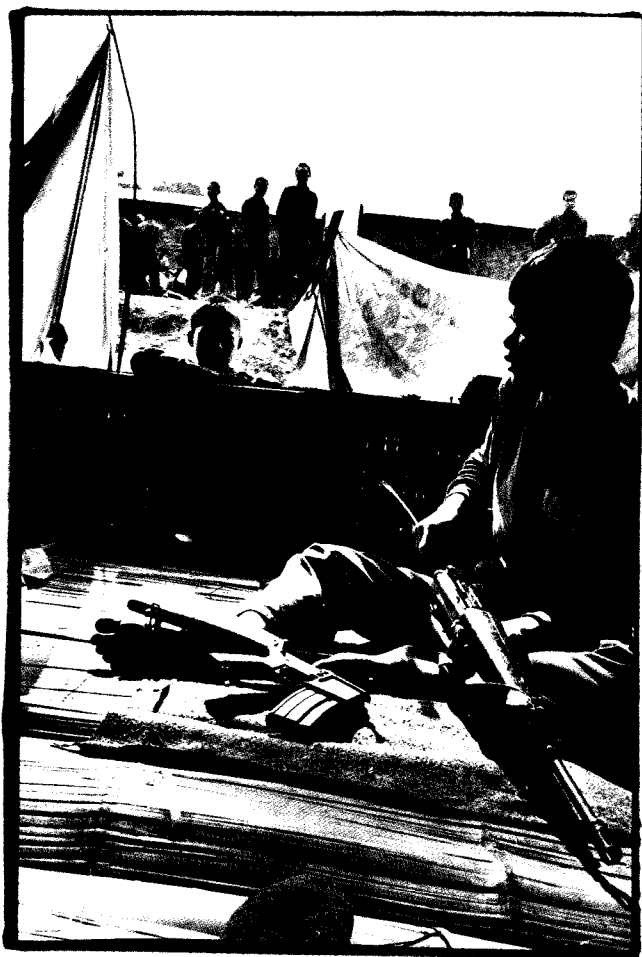
Mekong river from Chiang Saen. More traders joined his convoy, so by the time it reached the city of Kengtung in the eastern Shan States, its single-file column of five hundred men and three hundred mules stretched along the ridgesides for over a mile.

The convoy crossed the Mekong river on 14 and 15 July - and the Kuomintang rushed to intercept it. Hundreds of fighters came down from Tam Ngob and Mae Salong on the Thai-Burma border. On the 29th, they attacked. Fierce fighting ranged for several days, and wounded soldiers from both sides were treated at hospitals in Chiang Rai, where they often ended up in the same wards, chatting with each other and sharing cigarettes.

The outcome of the battle is still somewhat obscure. General Ouane Rattikone, the commander-in-chief of Royal Lao Army, ran several heroin refineries in the nearby Ban Houey Sai area at this time, and he sent the Lao air force to bomb the battle site. Officially, he cheated both Khun Sa and the Kuomintang, and made off with the opium. Other sources say the opium had already been sold, and that Khun Sa subsequently made his first significant investment in Thailand.

Khun Sa was growing stronger and more powerful by the day. In September 1969, two delegates from the rebel Shan State Army travelled in disguise up to Khun Sa's base in the town of Tang-yan to persuade him to switch sides. Unlike most other powerful home guard commanders, who were ethnic Chinese, Khun Sa was at least half-Shan. But news of the meeting leaked out: On 29 October, Khun Sa was arrested in the Shan States' capital of Taunggyi as he was returning from a business trip to Tachilek on the Thai border.

He was imprisoned in Mandalay and charged with high treason for the contacts with the rebels. He was placed in a lone cell with nobody to talk to, only a copy of Lo Kuan-Chung's famous Chinese work, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The days of the swashbuckling Khun Sa were over - or, at least, that was what almost everyone believed at the time.



On 16 April 1973, Charlie Win, a young Sino-Burmese, entered Taunggyi in broad daylight with a section of soldiers from the ex-Loi Maw KKY and kidnapped two Caucasian men as hostages. The rebels half-ran, pushing their Caucasian captives in front of them, until they reached the outskirts of Taunggyi, where a car was waiting. Charlie Win's demand was the release of the imprisoned Khun Sa.

The accidental captives turned out to be two Russian doctors inspecting a Soviet-built hospital in Taunggyi. An entire division of government troops was thrown in to rescue the Russians. The operation was unsuccessful. It was not until August 1974 that the hostages were eventually released - through Thailand. Khun Sa's men agreed to set them free, supposedly unconditionally, but by strange coincidence, Khun Sa was released from jail in Mandalay on 9 September. What actually happened is no longer any secret: General Kriangsak Chomanan, the commander of the northern Thai forces, had been called in by Rangoon to negotiate with Khun Hseng, Khun Sa's uncle, for an exchange of prisoners.

Today, Khun Sa is quite proud of that exploit: "I've never heard of anyone snatching Soviet citizens. But my men have done it."

Charlie Win was rewarded by Khun Sa with a trading house in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. Located around the corner from Moon Muang Road,

Chiang Mai's tourist strip, it is conspicuous by its solid iron gate and forbidding high wall.

After Khun Sa was released, he was kept under surveillance in Mandalay for a while, but managed to slip away in early 1976 and return to his men in the jungle. They had already set up a new camp at Ban Hin Taek northwest of Chiang Rai, actually well inside Thailand, where a powerful new armed force emerged: the Shanland United Army, or the SUA. The force was dominated by Chinese opium merchants and ex-Kuomintang officers, but by adding "Shan" to the name of their army they evidently hoped to gain favours from the closely-related Thais, who refer to the Shans as "Thai Yai".

The new base was developing fast. Heroin refineries were established in the hills north of Ban Hin Taek, where uniformed SUA soldiers mingled with Border Patrol policemen and Thai paramilitary forces. The only connection with the rest of Thailand consisted of a rutted dirt track over the hills, but this only served to conceal what was at the end of the road: a booming settlement of two-storey, concrete merchant houses, sprawling market places, cinemas, brothels, army barracks, a Chinese temple and a Shan pagoda.

For a man like Khun Sa - virtually uneducated and raised by foster parents - this was quite an achievement. He proudly invited his stepbrothers to join him, and both Oscar and Billy came. Morgan was already well-established as a legitimate businessman in

Burma. Driven by a staunch anti-communist zeal - and by the desire to maintain a good relationship with his Thai hosts - Khun Sa sent his soldiers to help protect road construction crews in remote areas of Thailand where there was communist insurgency. He established a close, personal relationship with Colonel Sudsai Hasdin, a once powerful Thai colonel who was the "Godfather" of the extreme Right in the 1970s.

But even so, Khun Sa's open presence at Ban Hin Taek became a major international embarrassment. The Thai authorities had to move against him. So on 21 January 1982, about a thousand paramilitary forces, mainly from the border police in Tak but also including rangers from the special warfare camp at Pak Thong Chai near Nakorn Ratchasima, suddenly appeared in Ban Hin Taek. Supported by aeroplanes and helicopter gunships, they started shooting into the village. Fierce fighting raged for several days before Khun Sa retreated across the border to Burma.

Hardly by coincidence, high-ranking officials from the US Embassy in Bangkok were present at Chiang Mai throughout the campaign. The US Drug Enforcement Administration was flexing its muscles, and pressuring the Thai into moving against "the monster" in the northern hills.

However, within a year of the battle for Ban Hin Taek, the SUA had not only rebuilt its shattered forces; it had also extended its influence right along almost the entire border between Thailand and Burma's Shan State. Khun Sa built up his new headquarters at





Homöng, until then a small village of about a dozen ram-shackle bamboo huts.

Khun Sa still remembers his old rival Kuomintang general Li Wenhuan with bitterness: "I hate that man. He had me arrested in 1960 when I came down to his camp on the Thai border to buy guns. He evidently saw me as a potential rival although I was then only 26 years old. That's why I sent my men to blow up his house in Chiang Mai in March 1984."

The blast that destroyed General Li's residence on Faham Road in Chiang Mai on 11 March 1984 could be heard all over the city. Rooftops in the entire neighbourhood were blown off as well and over 40 other houses in the immediate vicinity were badly damaged.

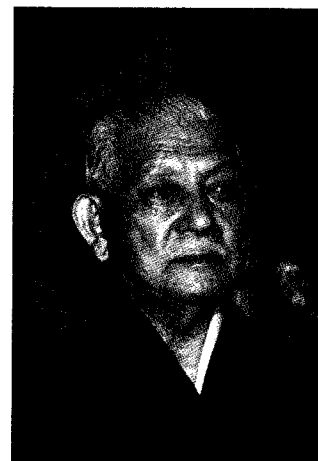
Since he merged his SUA in 1985 with another rebel army in Shan State, the Tai Revolutionary Council, he has trained thousands of new recruits and rapidly expanded his area of influence. Taking into account battle casualties, defections and desertions, his force - now called the Mōng Tai Army - may already total more than 20,000 men. This makes it the biggest rebel army in Asia today.

The weaponry he has assembled is also impressive. "It doesn't make sense to raise this kind of army if his only interest was to trade in narcotics," says Adrian Cowell, a veteran British documentary filmmaker who has followed the situation in the Golden Triangle since the 1960s.

So what is it then that motivates Khun Sa? Drugs and private karaoke parties may be two important factors, but not the only ones. Khun Sa obviously loves his new role as a political leader of the Shans. To strengthen his nationalist image, Khun Sa convened a Shan "parliament" at Homöng in December last year. Hundreds of delegates from villages across Shan State came down to attend the meetings and to listen to his separatist message.

It is also evident that Khun Sa in his own way really appreciates the fact that he is famous - the DEA would say infamous - all over the world. The Unification Church of the Korean religious maverick Moon Sun Myung has been in touch with Khun Sa to establish churches inside his territory. "But we're Buddhists, not Christians," one of Khun Sa's aides complained.

The Moonies first contacted the Shans in 1985 - to hire "stringers" for their newspaper, *The Washington Times*. Nothing came out of that (the guy they were in touch with was assassinated in an unrelated incident), but "missionaries" from the Rev. Moon's Unifica-



Ryoichi Sasakawa



tion Church have visited Homöng several times, most recently last year.

The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, founded by Ryoichi Sasakawa, a former Japanese war criminal who now aspires to the Nobel Peace Prize, has also expressed interest in Khun Sa's activities, maybe with the prospect of supporting educational projects in the area under Khun Sa's control. "Rich people" in Taiwan already support a Chinese language school at Homöng. His own organisation pays annually for dozens of promising young people to be sent abroad to study, most of them to Taiwan but some to Japan, Europe and America. For a man who was denied education, schooling is important.

And, despite all the anti-drug bravado in the US, Khun Sa has some influential American friends, too. James "Bo" Gritz, a highly decorated Vietnam War hero who now spends much of his time searching for American POWs and MIAs in Indochina, belongs to Khun Sa's most ardent admirers in the US. He has travelled several times up to Homöng to discuss MIA issues with "The General." These trips have been financed by Texas oil tycoon Ross Perot, the 1992 US presidential candidate.

Another American acquaintance is Shirley D. Sac, a New York gem dealer and socialite who at one stage said she was going to sponsor a Shan human rights foundation. On the wall in his house hangs a framed photograph of American model turned British socialite, Lady Brockett, sporting a pair of ruby-studded shoes which Khun Sa sent her as a present.

"I designed those shoes myself," Khun Sa says with evident pride. His artistic skills are obvious also from the appearance of his residence: the neat garden, the fish ponds, the flower beds. He appreciates beauty, and even when he had to hide in the jungle after the attack on Ban Hin Taek in 1982, visitors to his secret camp were astonished to see the lush and luxurious oasis he had managed to create under the canopy of trees.

Khun Sa's artistic skills - as well as his musical talent - are some of the most bewildering aspects of his complex personality. He designs not only shoes, houses and gardens but also everything from his organisation's flags to ceremonial swords and even sports wear. "Look here," he

## **The Unification Church of the Korean religious maverick Moon Sun Myung has been in touch with Khun Sa to establish churches inside his territory.**

smiles holding a pair of boxer shorts in front of him. "My own design."

At the same time, he is no refined aristocrat. His rustic background and tough childhood are especially apparent when he eats. His meals are almost frugal, consisting of simple Shan curries made from edible forest flowers, strips of fried chicken or pork, fermented cabbage, and pounded soy-bean cakes with hot chillies. He occasionally spits out a chicken bone on the floor and often lets off a burp after finishing his meal.

There is also, in a corner of his sitting room - or "office", as he prefers to call it - a collection of weapons which reflect the different, conflicting sides of his unique personality: crude, home-made Shan rifles are placed in a rack beside a US-made M-16, brand-new, hi-tech Uzi machine guns from Israel - and an Olympic-class bow. "I love archery," he says. "The



# Until her death from cancer only five months ago, Khun Sa's wife, Nang Ying, lived in a rented villa in Sukhumvit Soi 71 in Bangkok.

precision. I love to ride my horse and shoot arrows at a target. I love horses and all sorts of weapons."

He dashes off into his bedroom - to reappear wearing an American Smith and Wesson revolver in a gleaming leather holster attached to a belt full of bullets. "Like a cowboy, don't you think?" he chuckles.

His bar also reveals a taste for a good life which no ordinary Shan farmers would be able to afford. "I love brandy. But it should be Thai brandy," Khun Sa says, adding with his usual giggle, "Thai Regency, that's great stuff." That statement may be meant to please his "cousins", as he calls the Thais across the border, relatives of Shan people. But there is also a wide selection of French Napoleon cognac. Some of the most expensive bottles are presents from business contacts in Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Others have been given to him by powerful military officers in the Far East, reputedly including generals in both the Thai and Burmese armies - officially his enemies.

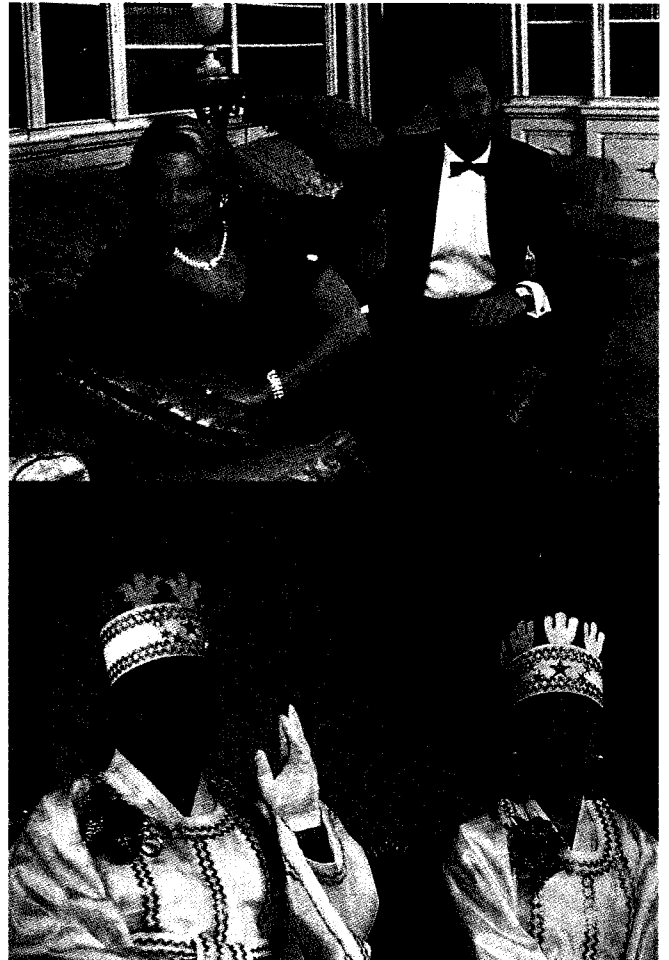
"Khun Sa is actually the most unwanted of wanted men in the world," admits a narcotics official in Bangkok. "The US indictment against him is ludicrous. He's not only extremely well-connected. He's also a master survivor."

Until her death from cancer only five months ago, Khun Sa's wife, Nang Ying, lived in a rented villa in Sukhumvit Soi 71 in Bangkok. Like Khun Sa, she was also a half-Shan, half-Chinese orphan, and they were married in 1954 when both of them were twenty. She bore him three daughters and five sons, all of whom were educated abroad.

His favourite son, Sam Hōng, went to the prestigious Ping Tung military academy in Taiwan and now heads Khun Sa's military training school in Homōng. Another son studied business administration at a college in the United States and looks after the family fortune.

He was perhaps married to the same woman for forty years, but he likes to talk about the many other female "friends" who weave in and out of his life. The US indictment has had only little effect on Khun Sa's life in Homōng, but an important outcome of it is that he can no longer travel to Thailand as freely as before - and he obviously misses the joie de vivre which he enjoyed in the past.

Drugs seldom come up in conversations with Khun Sa, but nightclubs and women do. So what is he: a ruthless drug baron, a misunderstood freedom fighter, or a fairly ordinary man who happens to have made his fortune in a rather unorthodox way?



FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Above : Lord and Lady Brockett at home.

Below : The Reverend Moon Sun Myung of the "Moonies".

"The outside world says I'm bad. But my people accept me as a leader because they can't find anyone else who has the same ability to face the problems of the Shans," says Khun Sa. "If my death would be a solution to the drug problem, then I deserve to die. But the drug problem existed before I was born and will continue to exist after I die. Why don't these people come here and talk to me instead of trying to hunt me down? I'm willing to cooperate with them to find a solution to the drug problem in the Golden Triangle."

Seen in a different light, Khun Sa is the ultimate success story: the gangster who made it. Where other warlords have failed - that is, been killed or, if they were lucky, forced out of business - Khun Sa has survived and prospered. Not bad for an almost illiterate orphan from Hpa-perng village on the opium mountain of Loi Maw.