Hiking through the Ruili mountains on the China-Burmese border is meeting the devil in heaven. Heaven is all around as you walk through bamboo groves, under the canopy of huge teak trees, and pass wild orchids that dot the sides of mountain paths. Heaven continues into a Jingpo mountain village when you sit near the hearth of a Jingpo bamboo, wood and straw built home. I was stunned to find there, in the tropical forest and under the thatched roofs, the devil, a two headed monster. One head was heroin, the other the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). This devil was living in all the seven villages I spent time in and in the many villages I walked through for four weeks in August of 2004.

What I witnessed was an HIV/AIDS epidemic of cataclysmic proportions fueled by intravenous heroin addiction. Not only could I envision the end of the Jingpo culture and people in China, but also the steep decline of the ethnic group the Jingpo are one part: the Kachin people of Burma. The entire population of Jingpo people in Yunnan, China, 120,000, are in serious jeopardy. The fastest rates of HIV/AIDS infections in the world today are likely occurring among the Jingpo people in China and among Jingpo and all the other Kachin tribes in Burma (a.k.a. Myanmar). My experience with the Jingpo took
place in and around a city called Ruili, known as the wild west of China because of its lawlessness, prostitution, drugs and gambling.

The city of Ruili is located near the Chinese-Burmese border in Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province. It is an area that is the home to many of China’s minority peoples. The two most populous minority groups in Dehong are the Dai and the Jingpo people. The Dai people traditionally occupy the valley regions; the Jingpo and other mountain minority peoples occupy the mountain areas. It is in Dehong that the majority of the Jingpo people lives.

Manau said when we were climbing the mountains of Ruili: “the Dai occupy the valleys; the Jingpo own the mountains.”

We met by chance in a fruit juice bar in Ruili city. Law Manau is one of a growing number of Jingpo that are born in the mountains but whose family move to the city in the hope of a better life and education for their children. I mentioned to Manau that I was interested in visiting Jingpo mountain villages. He was going the next day with his family and his friends to a village in the western mountains and invited me to come. He owned his own bus and was taking the day off.

I knew it was the monsoon season and that in the prefecture of Dehong approximately a hundred people had already lost their lives in mudslides and floods caused by torrential rains during the previous month. Nevertheless, I was determined to climb the mountains of the Jingpo people and assess their exposure to the HIV/AIDS. The mountains I had initially chosen to climb in Longchuan County, due east of the city of Ruili, were seemingly easy to climb at 6,000 feet. They would have been—in the dry season. Manau persuaded me to go with him to visit villages in the western mountains where he had relatives and friends. That change of plans from climbing the eastern mountains to climbing the western mountains made all the difference.

Manau’s introductions to Jingpo villages where he had friends and family allowed me to learn the extent of heroin addiction among young men 18 to 30 years of age and the probable rate of HIV infections among this age group. He also enabled me to witness how the purest form of heroin, number 4, gushes out of Burma to Ruili. Ruili then acts as a conduit to funnel the number 4 out to heroin addicts all over China.
Even with Manau’s help finding accessible routes to Jingpo villages, my fitness and endurance were tested to their fullest. And the mountains we climbed outside Ruili to the west were only 4,000 feet at their peaks!

Our last hike up Big Dragon Mountain (Nong Long Shan), near the city of Wanding was typical. I was covered with mud after we crossed over the mountain; Manau was spotless except for some flecks of mud on his sneakers.

Not far from the top of Big Dragon Mountain I marked out a position of N 24° 06. 381’ E 098° 07. 381’ I read the elevation at 3, 237 feet. I had lost my footing innumerable times and slid, not so gently, down several muddy embankments. I might have spent the entire day sliding down Big Dragon mountain had Manau not caught me at times and pulled me up or showed me alternative ways to scale difficult places where the path had been washed away.

The sheer beauty and bounty of the forest was entrancing. During our hikes, Manau would point out the sacredness of the giant banyan trees. Suddenly he would pull me away from plants that would produce terrible skin lesions if touched. We would come upon a tree with green balls that looked like Christmas ornaments hung over the path.
“Take a couple of bites”, Manau urged.

I would take a bite and the sourness of the fruit would pucker my mouth.

“Now drink some water” Manua demanded. The water, magically, became as sweet as lemonade.

The lords of the forest trees were the blue incense cedar and the towering teak trees. We walked through many bamboo groves too. There are over forty varieties in Dehong.

Suddenly, along a narrow path a large totem pole blocked our way.

“What the blazes is that structure?” I asked Manau. It rose right smack in the middle of the narrow path. We had to slide around the pole to pass.

Manau explained: “This means there’s a bee grove near here with lots of honey—someone has claimed it. No one else can enter.”

While climbing or descending a mountain, I would shout: “Did you see the tiger?” This never failed to make him laugh. At one point I asked him if there were any tigers left.

“The tigers are all gone here. There are still some in Burma. There were still some tigers in these mountains when I was a 5 year old, thirty years ago. No, they are gone now.”

We started that last climb on Big Dragon Mountain on a red dirt road after getting off a public bus that we had caught in the border town of Wanding. We reached the Jingpo village of Gong Tum Cum after only a forty minute walk. The coordinates of the village were N 24 00.09 E 097 51.454. The village was typical of the previous six villages I had visited: a group of scattered homes, some built partially with concrete block, most of wood and bamboo with a thatched roof.

N Cum Souila was out in the corn field working when we arrived at his house. Some children went out to tell Souila that he had visitors. It was obvious from the use of cinder block in the construction that Souila’s house was one of the most prosperous in the village of fifty families with a population of two hundred. The other indication was that the downstairs area had a cement floor instead of packed dirt. The upstairs was the sleeping area.

Souila’s wife greeted us. She was dressed in a tattered, olive green shirt and brown cotton pants. She was barefoot. We were given tea to drink. Manau said we had just eaten and not to prepare food.

Souila entered the house with a shy grin. Manau told me he had not seen his friend for years. Souila had no idea that Manau would be visiting. Yet, Souila showed no surprise
at seeing his old friend. The two fell into talking and laughing as if it was perfectly naturally to just drop by. The Jingpo are like that. Hospitality at the spur of the moment is commonplace.

Souila is a wiry, slender man of about 36 years. Like many Jingpo he is not sure exactly how old he is. Manau was admiring Souila’s bamboo bow and murmured he wished he had a bow like Souila’s:

“If I had a bow like that, I would take it with us over Big Dragon Mountain and shoot some birds.”

Without a word Souila took a machete from the corner of the house and started creating a bamboo bow. He worked quickly and precisely, shaving here, notching there. In an hour the bow had been crafted. Souila then turned to making the bow string out of hemp. The final touch was a small pad woven into the middle of the bow string where a clay pellet can be placed for firing. The Jingpo bow thus works like a sling shot.
All the time Souila was making the bow, his wife had surreptitiously been cooking for all of us. We had insisted all along that we did not want to eat. Useless. As a guest of a Jingpo we had to eat. Jingpo hospitality is not to be denied.

I had been accustomed by now to ask questions about heroin use in the Jingpo villages. I had learned not to be shy. Drug use is talked about openly and without shame. The Jingpo had used opium for a century as a medicinal aid and for relaxation. Now heroin had taken opium’s place. Incredibly, heroin, number 4, is cheaper to buy than opium that takes far less processing. While we were eating I asked Souila if there were a lot of heroin use in Gong Tum Cun. “Lots.” Souila replied laconically.

“Are the heroin users mostly young men?” I asked.

“Yes, almost all the young men in our village use heroin,” Souila said wearily.

“Where do the young men get the heroin” , I asked.

“I’ll show you when I walk you to the trail leading over the mountain” , Souila said.

“What made you decide not to inject the heroin?” I asked Souila.

“I have a lot of responsibilities. I have my parents to take care of. I have my three sons to take care of. I want my sons to be responsible people too. When you take heroin you cannot work as well. Most of the work is left, then for the women.”

I sensed that he wanted the conversation finished. I turned and took some pictures of Souila and Manau with Manau’s new bow. Then, Souila aging parents asked if I could take a picture of them together. I promised to send copies of the pictures back to Manau in Ruili once I returned to Bangkok. Manau in turn promised to come visit Souila again and bring the pictures with him.
After finishing a meal of various vegetable dishes, we all went outside to watch Manau practice with his new bow. Souila had also given Manau a plastic bag of clay pellets. They decided on a huge banana leaf as a target about fifty yards away.

Manau whispered to me: “We will be aiming at the center of that banana leaf.”

Souila let fly a pellet he had placed in the small pad he had woven in the center of the bow string. “Twang” went the string, and “pooff” was the sound of the pellet puncturing the center of the banana leaf. Souila launched two more pellets which tore new holes near the center of the deep green leaf. Souila smiled sheepishly and said: “You have a good bow.”

Manau grabbed the bow, took aim, fired. The large banana leaf did not move. Manau laughed and said: “I need practice.” He tried three more times. Still the banana leaf refused to move. Souila joked that when Manau saw a bird to shoot, he should aim in the opposite direction.

I was getting worried about being caught in the rain at night if we didn’t make it over Big Dragon Mountain in time. It was already noon.
“How long will it take us to cross the mountain?” I asked Souila.

“How long will it take a Westerner?” I asked.

Manau smiled and said: “Let’s try to make it in five hours.”

I thought that if we should be held up with a downpour or a path that was washed away, we could easily get caught by nightfall on top of the mountain. We were not equipped for staying a night on the mountain.

Manau must have read the worried look on my face. He asked Souila to lead us up to the path that would take us over Dragon Mountain.

The three of us walked through the main part of the village and I stopped to watch some young men playing cards. It was noon and yet all the cards players could hardly hold their cards up. There was a syringe left in a metal cup. Two of the young men were not wearing any shirts. I saw needle tracks on the arm of one of them.

I looked at Manau and he whispered: “They have already shot up for the day.”

“Did they all share that needle” I asked Souila.

“Yes, it is fast and each can see what share of the powder they get.”

We came to a clearing and Souila pointed just beyond a stream about 500 yards away:

“Burma is right over there. That’s where Burmese villagers cross and sell the heroin to us. “

Souila said they used to grow opium right on the side of the hill we were looking at. When I asked what happened Manau interrupted and said that the Burmese police had come and just burned the crop and killed a lot of the villagers. It was a lesson, Manau said, a warning to others.

“But I thought the Burmese government supported opium growing or a least looked the other way?”

“It depends on which part of the government controls which territory. It’s very complicated. The Burmese government has given autonomy to the Kachin people to do whatever they want in exchange for a peace treaty. In the Shan state the situation is much more complicated. There are little wars going on all the time. All the villages we visited up to now were on the border with the Kachin State. Where we are looking now is the Shan State.”
The incline was step and slippery but Souila just walked up the incline as if he had four legs. I just stopped and watched him. I tried to inch my way up the muddy path but kept slipping. Finally, Minau gave me a hand and lifted me up past the most mucky area.

Souila continued to glide up the treacherous path. He finally looked around with a look of surprise that we were already so far behind him. So these were the Jing Po, the Lords of the Forest, I thought. No wonder they gave the Japanese fits as guerrilla forces in Burma during World War II. No wonder they were termed the gentle warriors by General Wingate. No wonder British and Americans that fought with the Jingpo still remember and honor their debt of gratitude to these fearless fighters. I had seen this agility, this magical oneness with the mountains when I walked with other Jingpo over the past four weeks. Were these people of the mountains really doomed to extinction?

Souila reached a plateau in the path and waited for me to reach him. I was breathless; Souila and Manau were breathing normally. A Sunday stroll for them, a hard climb for me. Souila then left us, descending the treacherous path skipping from one side to the other. The only way I could get down the mountain that fast I thought was jump.

I said to Manau: “It is amazing that Souila is able to keep his sons away from the heroin in the village.”
Manau look embarrassed and said: “Well his youngest and oldest sons are good boys, but the middle one is no good. He does not obey his father.”

I asked if the middle son used heroin. Manau replied: “He has tried it a few times.” Evidently, Manau and his old friend had discussed the problems of the village when they were alone and I was occupied with talking to Souila’s parents and brother and taking everyone’s pictures.

“Did he inject heroin with the fellows we just saw playing cards?” I asked.

“No, those guys are older, most of them are married already.”

“It’s a shame, let’s hope the situation gets better.”

“No,” Manau, shook his head, “it will get worse and worse. Almost all the young men in Jing Po villages have injected number 4 or at least chased the dragon.”

“Don’t they know about the dangers of contracting AIDS?”

“Peter, they don’t know anything about these things. They are uneducated. And it is impossible to tell them.”

I asked what chasing the dragon meant and he told me it is when the young men heroin light up the heroin and inhale the fumes. Some also smoke the heroin. But it is not too long before they start injecting Manau explained.

“Do you remember the village by the river we visited where the bridge had been bombed by the Japanese along the Burma Road? Well, then you remember, too that many of the households had already experienced people dying of AIDS. Come on, Peter, you know that many more of us will soon be dying of AIDS too.”

He was right, of course. Wu Zunyou, M.D., Ph.D. et al. had surveyed males 18 to 29 years old in 82 villages in the Longchuan mountains to the east of Ruili from 1991 to 1994. They found that already 28% of these young men were drug users, a third of whom were intravenous drug users (IDUs). They also found that the Jingpo had a higher rate of drug use than other groups. Other studies in the 1990’s produced even more alarming results. The Chinese Academy of Medicine carried out HIV blood testing in Ruili and Longchuan counties. Among intravenous drug users in Ruili county they found that 81% were HIV infected; in Longchuan country 44%. Infection rates were highest among the Jingpo. Abundant anecdotal information I collected from government officials NGO’s and Jingpo villagers and from personal observation, indicate strongly that a majority of Jingpo young men have become IDUs. Since they share drug paraphernalia,
the HIV infection rate among these IDU Jingop young men in Ruili country along the Burmese border could well be more than 90%.

After Souila left us, Manau and I climbed Big Dragon Mountain for an hour. My shirt was drenched with sweat. Manau looked fresh and his shirt was dry, his hair still neatly combed. For me it had been a rigorous climb and I wondered if I was going to make it to the other side of the mountain before nightfall. I took a reading of our position and marked it at N 24° 06.632' E 098° 07.381'.

The mountains around us were low and rolling and the path was getting easier. I took heart and quickened my pace.

Manau ran ahead and began stalking birds with his new bow. Twang, Twang, I would hear around a bend in the path. But it was always the same birdless result. Manau just could not gauge the angle that a Jingpo bow must aim to be accurate. He kept trying to shoot the pellet like an arrow and his pellet often hit the bow. I had noticed that Souila had shot off at an angle from the bow itself and then compensated for his aim. The Jingpo bow was not a weapon you could just pick up and use. But I am sure Manau knew this and was just having fun.

As the path became easier, I was beginning to enjoy the hike. Then the clouds burst open and the monsoon rains came down like a waterfall. The path became a mud patch
in five minutes. I had a rain protector that I shared with Manau. I had to plead with him to share it with me. I looked at my watch and saw it was already four o’clock. We had just reached the top of the mountain. There was a small Jingpo house at the side of a corn field. There was nobody there. I thought that this was a place we might get back to if we were unable to make it down the mountain. The path was no longer a path and I slogged through the mud, while Manau seemed to tip toe over the muck.

But, thankfully, the rain stopped as quickly as it had begun. The path suddenly turned into a rough road. We made it down the rest of Big Dragon mountain in two hours. It was 6 o’clock and the sun still had not set. We met some villagers along the road. Manau talked with them a few minutes then turned to me and said with a laugh:

“We have to turn back. We must have taken a wrong turn. We are in Burma!”

“Gee, Manau, we better get back. I don’t even have my passport with me.”

We walked quickly for about 10 minutes and got on a road where we could catch a bus back to Wanding. I noticed that when I was walking out of Burma I no longer felt tired. I had heard gruesome stories about Burmese prisons.

I had only an inkling that I would find while roaming the western mountains along the borders of Ruili would be a shotgun aimed at the heart of China, threatening the lives of 1.3 billion people. The shotgun was double barreled: heroin and HIV/AIDS. They work together to infect and then to kill. The intravenous heroin users share needles, and in the case of the Jingpo one finds all kinds of needle substitutes for getting heroin in into the veins. Puncturing, stabbing and injecting shared drug paraphernalia directly into the bloodstream is the surest way for the HIV to infect. The infected men in turn infect their wives and subsequently their newborn children become infected. Some of the heroin addicts who do not live right on the border with Burma drift into the city of Ruili to live in order to gain cheap and easy access to number 4 heroin. These addicts sometimes visit sex workers. The sex workers come from all over China and many parts of Burma. Some of the sex workers are also heroin addicts. They return to their hometowns and the infection cycle starts all over again.

Manau guided me to his home village and five other villages that stretched from south to north along the Ruili Chinese-Burmese border. Three of the Jingpo villages are located within a kilometer or two of the Kachin State southwest of Ruili city. Two villages were located in the mountains to the southeast of Ruili city. The other two villages were to the northwest, not far from the city of Wanding and mark the place where the Shan State the Kachin States of Burma touch the borders of China.

Yes, I had heard that Ruili was one of the birthplaces of HIV in China. There was deep concern on the Chinese government’s part. But the rate of infections reported by Chinese government authorities for the Dehong Prefecture, perhaps one per cent, perhaps one and a half percent according to the Deputy Governor I met with, was far, far less that what I surmised after walking along the streets of Ruili; spending time in seven Jingpo
villages; and hiking through a dozen other villages from one end to the other of the mountains along the Ruili Burmese border. I have every reason to believe that the majority of the Jingpo young men in Ruili are infected with HIV.

Was I witnessing the beginning of the end of the Jingpo people?

References and Reading Suggestions


