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China's Drug Problem and Looming HIV Epidemic

Joshua Kurlantzick

Since Deng Xiaoping opened China's economy in 1979, many Chinese cities have developed a frenetic energy, the kind of 24-hour hubbub that comes with nonstop work and play. In Hangzhou, consumer electronics companies feeding China's massive telephone and computer markets work through the night. In Shanghai, wealthy merchants along Nanjing Road and other swank streets who have made the city China's retail center haggle with customers incessantly, the sounds of their jousting filtering up into the apartments above.

But in Kunming, capital of southwest China's Yunnan province and a city that has attracted little foreign investment, law enforcement officials believe the constant energy, late-model sedans, gaudy jewelry, and other signs of prosperity often come from another, less licit industry: narcotics. As China has developed close links with Southeast Asia, a change that has coincided with Beijing's loosening of social controls, the People's Republic has experienced an explosion of drug trafficking and abuse, much of it concentrated in Yunnan and several large coastal cities. Though China's current drug habit does not yet compare to the country's nineteenth-century addiction, today use of heroin, methamphetamines, and other drugs is skyrocketing, and Chinese gangs have aggressively entered the narcotics trade in Asia and the West. Just as important, this narcotics habit is pushing China toward an HIV catastrophe, as Chinese injectable drug users spread the deadly virus. Ultimately, unless Beijing changes its policies regarding narcotics and HIV, drug abuse could con-

tribute to the destruction of China's social fabric, a development that could cost China's leader, Jiang Zemin, and his cohort their jobs—or their heads—but would not necessarily lead to a democratic Middle Kingdom.

Supply

After coming to power in 1949, Mao Zedong cracked down on opium use, which had risen to epidemic levels in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a 1952 article, the *New York Times* noted that China was "probably the largest present source of three of the most potent addiction-producing narcotics [opium and two opium derivatives]." But by the late 1950s, Mao had utilized the Communist Party's strict social controls, as well as China's international isolation, to nearly eradicate drug use.

Yet over the past two decades, old scourges have reappeared, and new drugs such as methamphetamines and heroin have become popular as well. Running out of consumers in Thailand, where more than 2 million people are addicted to methamphetamines—small, pill-shaped tablets that can be eaten or smoked and provide intense surges of energy similar to a cocaine high—Burma-based drug traffickers have shifted their focus to China. Most notably, northeast Burma's United Wa State Army (UWSA), a narco-militia composed of Wa troops, members of a fierce ethnic minority known in the past for head hunting, has clearly targeted China, which borders UWSA territory. As Beijing has boosted trade links with Southeast Asia, the frontiers between

Yunnan, Burma, and Laos have become porous—in some places, the border is just a low fence used primarily by heroin addicts, who lean on it as they shoot up with some of the most potent “China White” smack in the world.²

Consequently, the UWSA has been able to effectively target the China market. Drug control experts believe that the majority of heroin and methamphetamines trafficked into China come from Burma. Last year, Chinese authorities made several massive seizures of Burmese heroin, including one 672 kilogram haul in July. Meanwhile, the UWSA reportedly has set up numerous new methamphetamine labs in the past year, and the Wa are pressuring local villagers to step up poppy production. Satellite photos taken this past winter show villagers in the Burmese highlands growing poppies out of season. Thailand worries that opium production in the Golden Triangle, the poppy-growing area of Thailand, Laos, and Burma that in 2001 was the second-largest source of poppy in the world, could double in 2002. Making matters worse, the UWSA has formed an alliance with the 14K triad, a leading Chinese organized crime group, in order to facilitate distribution of the UWSA’s products.

In some cases, drug carriers move the Wa/14K narcotics, often hidden in such innocuous containers as stuffed animals and durian, a foul-smelling fruit that can camouflage scents, through China and into other Asian countries and the West. Manila police believe that Chinese gangs now distribute most of the methamphetamines in the Philippines, and in the past year, there have been many seizures of Burma-made methamphetamine tablets in Europe and Australia. Indeed, at night, the streets of Manila are crowded with child methamphetamine addicts, who wander amid the traffic like frail zombies, begging for change. Washington has become so concerned about the Wa that in March a U.S. official called the UWSA “a terrorist group

with known links to drug trafficking,” the first time that America had labeled the Wa terrorists, a term the official probably used because UWSA traffickers have been known to cross into Thailand and terrorize border villages.³

Demand

Young Chinese, many of whom have little hope for the future, are lapping up the UWSA’s products. Though the Western press has focused on China’s rapid growth as Beijing has liberalized its economy, millions of farmers and laborers have lost their jobs, and today roughly 160 million Chinese—many young, newly sexually active, and uneducated, with little chance of finding stable employment—are unemployed. As the Chinese government has loosened restrictions on travel over the past 20 years, many of these unemployed workers have migrated to Yunnan, a center for short-term jobs, particularly in narcotics and in the province’s thriving sex industry. Indeed, Yunnan has become one of China’s major commercial sex markets. In Kunming, young girls from Burma and Yunnan stand in the doorways of flashy “nightclubs,” waiting to accompany local businessmen through the door—and perhaps to a hotel later in the evening. In smaller towns throughout the province, local brothels cater to truckers traveling the busy Burma-Yunnan highways.

In Yunnan, the first stop for UWSA narcotics, these migrants, many of whom are looking for an escape from their uprooted lives, often get hooked on drugs. Heroin and methamphetamines are relatively cheap in most Chinese cities, with *bingdu* (methamphetamines) selling for less than \$1.50 per pill and heroin available for less than \$10 per hit—affordable prices for young Chinese with few dependents and a willingness to make money by any means possible. Reports from China’s drug rehabilitation centers suggest that most methamphetamine and heroin users are not employed in the formal economy.

From Yunnan and Gansu, another western province, migrants often bring heroin and methamphetamines back to their home provinces, usually hidden inside cars' gas tanks or ingested in condoms. Back home, many people already have learned about narcotics from satellite television and other sources of information, and have more disposable income to spend on drugs. Though the southwest was the first area to be hit by a narcotics epidemic, drug usage is soaring in Shanghai, Beijing, and other cities; drug arrests in Shanghai rose by over 80 percent in 2001.⁴ In these East Coast cities, drug users tend to fall into two categories: young low-income migrant workers and middle-class youths who have more disposable income and have learned about *bingdu*, heroin, and other drugs from the media and older friends. Indeed, the government estimates that three-quarters of Chinese drug abusers are less than 35 years old.

Their numbers are growing fast. Last December, Beijing estimated that there were more than 900,000 drug addicts in the People's Republic—compared to 70,000 in 1990—but independent reports put the number at between 6 and 7 million, more than 50 percent of whom are injecting drugs. Many narcotics experts estimate that within five years China will have the most heroin addicts of any country in the world.

The Looming HIV Epidemic

Along with narcotics comes AIDS. Extremely dangerous blood donation practices—in some provinces where people make money selling their blood, donors give blood and then have other donors' blood cells pumped back into their veins—have contributed to China's rising HIV infection rates (HIV is the human immunovirus that, untreated, leads to AIDS). But injectable drugs are responsible for the majority of cases of infection: the U.N. Drug Control Program estimates that 70 percent of all HIV cases in 2001 were due to intravenous drug use.⁵ Heroin and injectable methamphetamine users frequently

resort to unsanitary practices to get their fixes. Throughout southwestern China, "shooting galleries," where cash-strapped users buy one injection of heroin and then pass the needle on, have become common. Some Chinese drug users inject themselves with a mixture of heroin and blood.

From Yunnan, which was one of the first provinces to report high rates of HIV, the virus has spread throughout China, as addicts return to their home provinces and share needles or engage in unprotected sex, and as truck drivers who had passed through Yunnan travel around the country. In some provinces, HIV cases have risen from virtually none into the hundreds in the past two years, and in 2001 reported cases of HIV infection nationwide rose by over 60 percent; in some parts of Yunnan, more than 75 percent of intravenous drug users now are infected with HIV. The United Nations recently estimated that China would have 10 million people infected with HIV by 2010, the most in the world, and noted that the country "is on the verge of a catastrophe that could result in unimaginable human suffering, economic loss, and social devastation."⁶

Despite this looming epidemic, public awareness of the virus or safe sex practices remains extremely low. Surveys have shown that fewer than 15 percent of Chinese know how HIV is spread. In one example of this ignorance, when a volunteer health worker showed Yunnan villagers a photograph of a red condom on a white background, the village residents were sure they recognized the object and confidently told the volunteer that it was a picture of the Japanese flag.⁷

Fighting Back

Though the Chinese government likes to discuss drugs about as much as it enjoys a good Falun Gong demonstration, over the past two years Beijing has launched several anti-drug programs and has increased cooperation with other nations on multilateral interdiction, intelligence sharing, cross-border prosecution, and law enforcement

training. Along with Thailand, China has launched a plan to study how drug traffickers use the Mekong River to avoid police. This coordination has led to several small successes: in January, Thai narcotics officers, acting on a tip-off, seized 14 kilograms of heroin near Thailand's northern border, and since then the Thai army has repeatedly engaged in shootouts with drug traffickers crossing into Thailand. China also has begun exchanging more information on drug threats with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, and has sent its top police officers to the International Law Enforcement Academy, a U.S.-run institution in Bangkok that trains police. IEA officials report that Chinese police who attend the academy are among the toughest cops they have seen; unfortunately, these elite men in blue do not represent the majority of China's anti-narcotics agents. Meanwhile, in January, Beijing signed a mutual extradition treaty with Manila designed primarily to deter Chinese drug traffickers from operating in the Philippines.

At home, the government has enacted harsh zero-tolerance laws regarding trafficking and possession of narcotics, laws that punish many drug-related crimes with execution. The People's Republic celebrated this year's United Nations anti-drug day by executing 64 people for drug-related offenses and by staging large drug-burning rallies. Chinese officials have said they intend to "strike hard" against narcotics this year. Previous "strike hard" campaigns against corruption were known for massive numbers of arrests and executions.

Unfortunately, China's drug-control policies are unlikely to be effective, since many Chinese police are involved in the drug trade and Beijing is unwilling to pressure Burma to crack down on poppy and methamphetamine production. In central China, villagers say that wealthy drug dealers easily escape arrest by paying off the police, while many anti-narcotics officers make showy "busts" by arresting small-time

junkies and planting heroin on them in order to meet arrest quotas set by the central government. Beijing has dedicated some funds to training Burmese anti-narcotics police, and Jiang has become increasingly outspoken about the dangers posed by the UWSA. Yet China is unwilling to push Burma too hard, since the Rangoon regime is one of the only governments in the region that favors Beijing over Washington. Consequently, the cash-strapped Burmese government, which allegedly takes huge kickbacks from the UWSA, remains a close ally of the Wa. Though Rangoon has made a few token drug busts and last year unveiled an anti-narcotics museum—paid for, ironically, by Lo Hsing-han, a former drug kingpin—it still rarely intercepts large narcotics shipments.⁸

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has dedicated pitifully little time or money to funding drug or HIV education, effective rehabilitation centers, or other demand reduction and public health measures. Beijing's unwillingness to allow an open discussion about narcotics use or AIDS was evident in the furor over author Wei Hui's novel, *Shanghai Baby*, which depicted scenes of drug abuse and graphic sex. Calling Wei "decadent," "debauched," and "a slave of foreign culture," the Chinese government banned *Shanghai Baby* in April 2000 and publicly burned 40,000 copies of the book.⁹ One year later, Beijing prevented a doctor who had diligently battled HIV in central China from traveling to the United States to receive a humanitarian award; in December 2001, Beijing's leading state-run newspaper celebrated World AIDS Day by running two stories about HIV, neither of which focused on China. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong media frequently reports on the horrors of China's few drug rehabilitation centers, where oversight is minimal and addicts receive little counseling, are often beaten, and easily obtain heroin from crooked detox guards who push drugs to the recovering addicts. Relapse rates for addicts entering these

mandatory rehabilitation centers are extremely high, and in some cases junkies have refused to leave the detox centers because they have found it so easy to obtain heroin while inside.

It is hardly surprising, then, that law enforcement sources expect drug production to grow exponentially in Southeast Asia and drug abuse to continue rising precipitously in China, adding to the unrest bubbling just under the surface of Chinese society. In the next ten years, greater social mobility and rising incomes will allow more Chinese to experiment with narcotics and to traffic drugs, while the government's unwillingness to fund treatment or education programs—last year, it pledged a laughable \$12 million toward HIV awareness—could come back to haunt it. China's recent accession to the World Trade Organization, which included lowering tariffs on foreign agriculture, will be an important factor in liberalizing China's economy, but it won't help slow the drug crisis: accession is likely to push millions more farmers out of work and into the spiral of drug use and HIV associated with migrant labor.

Ultimately, if China fails to reduce demand, drug abuse, combined with unemployment and increased migration, could lead to more crime and more violent protests by desperate laid-off workers. Methamphetamines in particular have been linked to violence—methamphetamine users in China and Southeast Asia frequently commit brutal crimes, even knifing their families and associates to death. Already, protests are becoming a daily occurrence across China: in one gruesome demonstration in January, HIV sufferers in Tianjin, a city near Beijing, dramatized their suffering by threatening to attack pedestrians with blood-filled syringes. This wave of dissatisfaction may only need a spark to set off nationwide unrest over unpaid pensions, lack of political openness, labor conditions, or myriad other complaints—unrest that many China scholars believe

is as likely to lead to chaos or virulent nationalism as to democracy.

The Looming Crisis

All is not yet lost, however. China does not yet face an HIV epidemic as serious as in Botswana, where over 35 percent of the population is infected, and its drug problem, though severe, does not yet compare to Thailand's addiction to methamphetamines. Yet China's drug and HIV prevention strategies currently lag behind programs developed in both Thailand and Botswana, much smaller countries with fewer resources to devote to narcotics control and HIV prevention.

If China is to forestall its looming crisis, it must radically revamp its drug and HIV policies. Most important, the central government should promote a culture of open discussion about AIDS and narcotics. In Thailand, the government has supported condom distribution, drug and HIV education in schools, public-awareness campaigns, syringe-sharing programs, and other measures; Beijing would be wise to do likewise. Some provincial Chinese officials already have taken bold steps. In 1999, officials in Liangshan, a prefecture in Sichuan province, admitted that their region had a serious HIV problem and asked the international nongovernmental organization Doctors Without Borders to come to the prefecture and launch prevention programs. But many provincial officials are afraid to follow Liangshan's lead, since they fear that Beijing will punish them for any creative ideas they develop.

China also should expand its network of drug treatment centers. The centers that do exist often are akin to Dickensian labor camps funded by local and provincial governments and run by corrupt guards, though Shanghai has one pilot private project focused on treating heroin addicts. The central government should allow more private donors and nongovernmental organizations to set up centers. Privately run centers where users voluntarily enroll are more like-

ly to employ counseling, methadone substitution, and medical supervision rather than the harsh, counterproductive rehabilitation measures—beatings, forced labor—that many government-linked centers favor.

Finally, Beijing should work more closely with the United States and Thailand—two nations that it has historically distrusted—to crack down on the nasty Rangoon regime and their UWSA allies. Without abandoning its support for Rangoon, China could increase funding for crop substitution in northeast Burma, more explicitly tie its aid to progress made by Burma in combating narcotics production, and even send officers to Thai-U.S. military exercises designed to intimidate the UWSA and train troops in interdiction. Though many of Beijing's mandarins may grimace at the idea of Chinese soldiers training side-by-side with U.S. forces, the sheer magnitude of China's emerging drug crisis—and, more important to officials, the possibility that the consequences of this epidemic could destroy their power—may force them to consider such radical ideas. ●

Notes

1. Kathleen McLaughlin, "Traffic in Narcotics Is Flourishing," *New York Times*, May 11, 1952.
2. Bay Fang, "On the Trail of a Killer," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 3, 2001, p. 22.
3. "Myanmar Drug Gang: U.S. Anti-terror Target," *Straits Times*, March 19, 2002.
4. Gary Reid and Genevieve Costigan, "Revisiting 'The Hidden Epidemic': A Situation Assessment of Drug Use in Asia in the Context of HIV/AIDS" (Center for Harm Reduction, United Nations Drug Control Program, 2002).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Elisabeth Rosenthal, "With Ignorance as the Fuel, AIDS Spreads Across China," *New York Times*, December 30, 2001.
7. Fang, "On the Trail of a Killer," p. 22.
8. Matthew Pennington, "Propaganda Habit Hard to Quit as Drug Effort Showcased," Associated Press, January 11, 2002.
9. Tom Cox, "I Have Only Written a Love Story," *Daily Telegraph* (London), June 16, 2001.