

Return of the dragon

A QIANG was only 14 when he began taking drugs. He ran away from home in Lufeng county in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong after his parents got divorced. Depressed, hungry and alone in the teeming boomtown of Guangzhou, he turned to heroin to forget his troubles and was addicted for three years.

In neighbouring Guangxi province, Xiaohua was also in her teens when she got hooked. Xiaohua vomited after her first sniff of heroin but quickly became addicted. At one point even her boyfriend, a businessman seven years her senior, got hooked and together they spent 600,000 renminbi (38,500 GBP) on drugs. And in Yunnan province scores of people belonging to ethnic minorities are also succumbing to heroin addiction. "If I don't use drugs, I feel pain from head to toe. I can't sleep or eat," said one 15-year-old boy, a member of the Dai minority who injects heroin four or five times a day. Their stories, reported recently in foreign and official state media, are not uncommon in today's China.

The Middle Kingdom, which for nearly half a century endured an isolation that also kept out modern problems, is now faced with an upsurge of drug use that threatens the country's cherished stability. China's booming economy has brought rapid gains in wealth and new freedom of movement to its people, but it has also given rise to a growing drug problem.

HEROIN PROBLEM

The country is the main trans-shipment point for narcotics from the Golden Triangle to the West and it is also a key source of chemicals for the production of synthetic stimulants. The biggest problem is heroin, a drug that has bedevilled China before. In the nineteenth century, Britain was buying tea, silk and other goods from China and selling Indian opium to its people, resulting in an estimated 100 million drug users. China's battle to keep the drug out culminated in the Opium War of 1840.

The number of people using illegal drugs in China is rocketing. China had 1.05 million registered drug addicts in 2003; 740,000 used heroin. That, according to the United Nations World Drug Report 2004, represents a 15-fold increase in 10 years. Drug addicts are found in four-fifths of the country and three quarters are "youngsters". But in China, official numbers don't always reflect reality. The United States Drug Enforcement Agency cites unofficial estimates that put the number of addicts as high as 12 million and says the Chinese government itself recognises that the number is an underestimate.

Indeed, the problem today has become too big to ignore. China's secretive leadership, which usually shies away from dealing with social problems, seems to be waking up. "The drug problem is spreading continuously," the National Narcotics Control Commission said in a report last year. "We must combine crackdowns on drug-related crimes with reducing the number of drug addicts," it added.

China has a long history of battling to keep drugs away from its citizens. But, as **Kelvin Chan** explains, even the threat of labour camps and execution have failed to prevent the return of large scale heroin use to China's villages, towns and cities

So who are China's heroin junkies? Many are young males from the country's smaller cities, towns and villages. "We see these injecting drug users as mainly young men. It's very clear it's men in their early 20s. The typical profile that you have is they're either unemployed or unable to hold a job because of the their drug use" said Joel Rehnstrom, country coordinator of the UNAIDS office in Beijing. Women make up about 20 to 40 per cent of heroin users, others say.

Poverty, a lack of opportunity and easy access to narcotics are all factors that drive young people to drug use. Many of China's heroin users are found in the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, two of the country's poorest. It's unclear just how many people in Yunnan and Guangxi are addicted to heroin, although a report released in December 2004 found each had more than 10,000 people with HIV, the highest rate of infection in the country. Most of those infections are attributed to injection drug use. Experts say that intravenous drug users are now driving the spread of Aids in China, a change from the 1990s when it was mainly due to poor villagers selling their blood for money.

GOLDEN TRIANGLE

In addition to being poor, Yunnan and Guangxi have also been a key part of the route for drugs coming out of the Golden Triangle. Yunnan is a mountainous, rugged and remote province bordering two of the three countries that form the triangle, Laos and Myanmar. Thailand, the third, is wedged between the two on the western side. According to Detective Senior Inspector Paul Lewis of the Hong Kong Police's Narcotics Bureau, these days, most of the drugs coming out of the Golden Triangle originate from Myanmar, "Thailand has almost eradicated heroin production. The majority is going on in Myanmar and, to a lesser extent, Laos". The NNCC report said that the Golden Triangle produces 70 to 80 tons of heroin a year and 80 percent enters China via the Sino-Myanmar border, the report also said that "Large quantities" of methamphetamine tablets made in the Triangle are also entering the country for markets in the northeast.

Locals in Yunnan are used to smuggle the drugs over the border from Myanmar and Laos. From there, dealers from different provinces come to pick them up

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and transport them inland by car, courier and mail. Officials say that with police cracking down in the south, traffickers have had to find new routes through India and Nepal. They have also been forced to use more northerly routes in China to get them to ports on the eastern coastline for shipment to the West.

The Golden Crescent, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and some Central Asian republics, is also becoming a key source of drugs flowing into China via the most western province of Xinjiang.

MIGRANT WORKERS

“China continues to be a major heroin trafficking route to the Pacific Ocean and onward to other locations in developed countries,” said Wayne Bazant, a Bangkok-based official with the United Nations Office of Drug Control. “Not only is heroin going along those roads but also drug-using behaviour, specifically injecting drug use and that kind of behaviour is exported in all those provinces,” added Mr Bazant. China’s massive migrant worker population is also falling prey to drug use, experts say. The booming cities are attracting people from the countryside in search of work. But as they leave their families and social structure, it “leaves them in a more vulnerable position to all kinds of social problems,” Mr Bazant said.

An armed policeman stands guard as 300 kilos of confiscated heroin is burned in north west China

After heroin, amphetamine is the next most popular drug used in China, while ecstasy and crystal meth are popular among rich, young urbanites in the country’s major centres. “Because of its increasing popularity with young party-goers in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Chinese law enforcement officials report significant increases in the domestic production of MDMA (Ecstasy),” the DEA said in its report on China.

Provinces in the south are becoming big centres for making and distributing amphetamines while legally made chemicals produced in China and used to make methamphetamine, Ecstasy and cocaine are also showing up in the Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa and Latin America, reports say.

In response, police are trying to stamp out trafficking by using hardliner methods. In 2003, the latest year for which numbers are available, China arrested 63,700 drug crime suspects. Dealers are usually executed: either by a bullet to the back of the head or a lethal injection. Indeed, it’s something of an annual ritual for the official state news media to announce that dozens of drug dealers have been executed across the country in the run up to International Anti-Drugs Day.

But that means criminal drug gangs now believe they are better off facing the authorities in a gunfight than in the courtroom. Lately, the police have come up against drug traffickers armed with automatic weapons and grenades.

As for the junkies, they are rounded up by the Public Security Bureau and put into compulsory treatment centres. There are 583 such centres with more than 116,000 beds but they “do nothing to help people,” said one international Aids expert working in Beijing. The expert, who didn’t want to be identified, said various treatment methods include going cold turkey, but the recidivism rate is about 99 per cent. “All the emotional and psychological issues are not addressed,” she said. “There’s not a cadre of people in China that are substance counsellors.”

TREATMENT

That’s because drug users have traditionally been viewed by society as criminals or deviants. “There is a lot of stigma associated with drug dependence,” said Mr Bazant. “It’s a big impediment to treatment responses.” Addicts who fail three times in treatment and rehab are sent to one of China’s 151 forced labour camps for drug addicts for as long as five years, Mr Bazant said. Still, the national government’s attitude seems to be changing slowly.

For one thing, a pilot methadone treatment programme was set up in March 2004 with eight clinics to treat junkies in the southwest. For another, Premier Wen Jiabao paid an unprecedented visit to a drug rehab centre last summer, a sign that China’s leadership is aware of the problem and its effects on social stability. “Up till then (addicts) were seen as a scourge of society,” said the international Aids expert. “But things are just starting to turn around.” ■