

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

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Abstract and Keywords

Opium, the ancient narcotic, has fascinated the West where tastes for the exotic arose alongside British and French colonialism. The mystery of poppy origins is equaled by the opacity of the two largest illegal opium-producing regions that emerged after 1950: the so-called Golden Triangle, in Burma (Myanmar) in mainland Southeast Asia; and Golden Crescent, in Afghanistan, in Southwest Asia. Illegal opium production in these two regions developed as part of the deep historical, geographic, and political complexity that explain their remoteness, lawlessness, and protracted armed conflicts. As a result, scholars of various disciplines have long researched opium production, trade, consumption, and traditions. This chapter examines the causes and dynamics of illegal opium production, including how illegal opium production has benefited from the turmoil of Asian history and geopolitics, from synergies between war economies and drug economies, from underdevelopment and poverty, and from decades of failed often-counterproductive anti-drug policies.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Asia, Burma, Cold War, geopolitics, Golden Crescent, Golden Triangle, opium, prohibition

THE history of the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum* L.) involves a long and complex relationship between the plant itself and human societies. The poppy, which probably originated somewhere between the western Mediterranean and Asia Minor, was part of the trading activity of the earliest migrations between the different peoples of Europe and Asia.¹ But it is in Asia, where societies have had a long association with psychoactive drugs, that large-scale commercial opium production eventually developed and where the vast majority of today's legal—and illegal—opium is still produced.² Though opium was mentioned as early as the thirteenth century BCE in Egypt and 987 BCE in China, it seems that it only became an important commercial commodity in sixteenth-century Mughal India, especially after it became highly coveted by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British.³ In the southernmost parts of Europe, where some of the oldest archeological evidence of the opium poppy have been found, the use of opium declined after the fall of the Roman Empire (Romans learned about opium from the Greeks who knew about it from the Egyptians) in the fifth century CE. It reappeared much later with the return

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

from the Crusades (in the late thirteenth century), thus underlining the role of the Arabs in the geographical spread of opium, including to India in or after the seventh century.⁴

The opium trade took on new global dimensions only after the European maritime powers developed and initiated a modern era of globalization, as a result of their post-1492 expeditions. The interpenetration and interdependence of the world's markets were to inaugurate new dynamics and to lay down the conditions for the modern global drug trade. After having made the European colonies in Asia viable, and even profitable, opium spread on a global scale: it accompanied Chinese immigrant workers (coolies) to the Americas in the nineteenth century; subsidized Japanese expansionist policies in northern China (Manchuria) in the early twentieth century; enriched many modern drug traffickers; and, last but not least, played a significant role in various war economies throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.⁵

(p. 591) The history of large-scale opium production can be divided into three eras that correspond to three production areas: first, with the development of opium production in India after the sixteenth century under Mughal and British rules; then with China's massive production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and finally, as will be detailed below, with the surge of illegal opium production in Southeast and Southwest Asia (centered around Burma/Myanmar and Afghanistan) after the 1950s and even more so after 1970. Modern large-scale illegal opium production only developed in Asia after the Second World War disrupted traditional and legal opium supplies to Western colonies. But decolonization and subsequent communist upheavals also played a significant role by reshuffling Asia's geopolitical map through numerous protracted armed conflicts.⁶ From the end of World War II on, illegal opium production evolved in the multiple and complex contexts of often-counterproductive national and international prohibitions; a particularly disruptive US-led war on drugs; synergies between war economies and drug economies (during independence wars, the Cold War, civil and other internecine wars, and the most recent so-called war on terror); and the ensuing criminalization of peace economies where and when peace was achieved.⁷

As a result, about fifty countries illegally produced opium throughout the world at the turn of the twenty-first century. Illegal production reached an all-time high (at least 10,500 tons) in 2017, mostly, it must be stressed, because of the unabated growth and unrivaled dominance of production in Afghanistan.⁸ Wars and the opium economy have long helped sustain one another in Afghanistan, but large-scale commercial opium production in that country is rather recent (exports of small quantities have been carried out since the late nineteenth century, but there was no large illegal production before the 1970s). Afghanistan reportedly became the world's most important illegal opium producer in 1991 when it surpassed Myanmar (known as Burma until 1989). The country has since largely confirmed its supremacy, going from an estimated production of 1,980 tons of opium in 1991 to 8,200 tons in 2007 and to a record-high nine thousand tons in 2017.⁹ With only 550 tons of opium produced in 2017, Myanmar has now fallen very far behind Afghanistan but most likely remains the world's second illegal producer, just ahead of Mexico and far ahead of Laos.¹⁰ Yet global outputs of opium can quickly vary, and accord-

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

ing to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) less opium was illegally produced in the world in 2016 (6,380 tons) than in Afghanistan (whose production doubled between 2016 and 2017) alone in 2017. While global illegal opium output increased at least tenfold between 1970 and 2017 (from 1,066 tons to at least 10,500 tons), the dominance of both the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent has remained unchallenged since the 1980s.¹¹

Although the vast majority of the world's opium is now illegally cultivated, nineteen countries legally grow opium poppies under strict state control for the pharmaceutical industry. But Afghanistan and Myanmar are not part of this system.¹² Afghanistan was a legal opium producer in the first half of the twentieth century and had even “emerged as one of the more consistent sources of raw pharmaceutical opium” during World War II (p. 592) before it lost its right to legally produce and export opium in the 1950s.¹³ In contrast, India has long been the world's largest legal opium producer and only legal raw opium exporter. This is partly due to the country's long, rich opium history: the opium poppy has been cultivated there since at least the tenth century, opium production developed throughout the northern part of the country in the sixteenth century under the Mughals, and the British controlled and developed the opium production (Malwa and Bengal) and trade after 1773 through their East India Company. Three countries other than India (the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Japan) legally produce opium, although only for their own domestic markets and in much smaller quantities than India.

Depending on stocks, legal annual opium—predominantly Indian—production fluctuates even more than illegal production. Global legal output diminished from over one thousand tons in 2000 to a historic low of 42.2 tons (4.6 tons in morphine equivalent) in 2016.¹⁴ Other than India, all legal opiates producers and exporters (not all producers are exporters), including Australia, France, Spain, and Turkey (the four other main producers during the last two decades), extract morphine and other alkaloids directly from “poppy straw,” that is, from the plant itself, not from opium, which is actually the dried latex obtained from incising opium poppy capsules. In 2016, about 463 tons in morphine equivalent were legally produced in the world out of poppy straw, down from 586 tons in 2015.¹⁵ This is only slightly more than the 448 tons of heroin (equal to morphine equivalents) that were reportedly produced illegally around the world during that same year. This equates to 2,100 tons after deduction of direct opium consumption.¹⁶

Modern Illegal Opium Production

The world's illegal opium production is now much lower than it was in 1906 (42,000 tons: 35,364 tons produced in China and 5,177 tons in British India) when Charles Henry Brent, the first Protestant Episcopal Church bishop of the Philippines and a staunch opponent of the then booming opium trade, wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt asking for the United States to call for an international conference to enforce anti-opium measures in China.¹⁷ But, as we have seen, global illegal production is now much higher than it was in 1970. Indeed, following the multilateral efforts of the League of Nations (1919–46),

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

then of the United Nations (1945), and after the communist government in Beijing succeeded in eliminating opium production in China between 1949 and 1959, global illegal opium output had reportedly plunged to a low point in 1970.¹⁸

But this contraction of global production was to prove ephemeral, since it was mostly due to the rapid suppression of large-scale Chinese production and of smaller Indian production—and not to an efficient global prohibition regime. Major shifts in production occurred over the following twenty years. In fact, many argue that the highly repressive global war on drugs launched in 1971 by US president Richard Nixon proved not only ineffective but also counterproductive. This is what historian Richard (p. 593) Davenport-Hines, notably, details in his social history of drugs when he explains how “presidential Drug Wars” have exacerbated the world’s drug problems through “intolerable nonsense.” He declares that “Richard Nixon ... was the first man in the White House to have direct, calamitous influence on drug policy” and how “Ronald Reagan ... surpassed Nixon as a wrong-headed drugs warrior.”¹⁹

Likewise, Alfred McCoy, the historian of the “politics of heroin” in Asia, stresses the failure of repressive prohibition: “there is ample evidence to indicate that the illicit drug market is a complex global system, both sensitive and resilient, that quickly transforms suppression into stimulus.”²⁰ Indeed, reduction and ultimately suppression of drug supplies in producer countries have been the guiding principles and goal of the global prohibition regime and of the ensuing war on drugs.²¹ However, it is now largely accepted that the war waged on drugs during more than forty years has in fact accompanied, if not encouraged, the expansion not only of illegal opium poppy cultivation (in Asia as well as Latin America), but also of coca (in South America) and cannabis cultivation (worldwide).²²

This data shows that opium has long revealed a strange duality: on the one hand, it can relieve pain and suffering, even bring pleasure, but, on the other hand, it is capable of plunging heavy and/or long-term users into severe addiction. In a 2000 book produced within a then-emerging body of scholarship, historians Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi showed, along with their coauthors, how opium complexly meant different things to different people. It has been, and actually still is, “a palliative medicine, an item of recreational consumption, and addictive drug food, a form in which capital could be stored, a sign of national and ethnic degradation, and a mechanism for transferring wealth and power between regions and nations.” The authors stressed how “because opium could be many things to many people, it usually eluded whatever controls that regimes, legislators, and moralists placed on it,” as “the narcotic, economic, political, and even cultural pulls of opium went so strongly in favour of its continued use.”²³ As a result, opiates are still produced, traded, and consumed illegally throughout the world despite prohibition and despite their universally known dangers. But if prohibition has failed to suppress or even diminish illegal opium production in the world, it has also meant, unfortunately, that accessing opiate-based analgesics through medical prescriptions can still prove difficult or impossible, even in traditional producing countries like India.²⁴

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

In the end, it can even be argued that the increase of global illegal opium production is partly due, among other push-and-pull factors, to the stimulus created by prohibition, the counterproductive effect of forced eradication campaigns, and the inadequacy of alternative development projects.²⁵ Still, despite the post-1970 surge in illegal opium production, partisans of the drug containment theory suggest, understandably in more hypothetical than empirical terms, that an “increase in the size and scope of the illicit drug industry would have been far greater in the absence of law enforcement.”²⁶ Criminologist Peter Reuter and his colleagues adopt a more balanced yet equally hypothetical conclusion when they write that “The consolidation and expansion of the control regime in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, to include prohibition against consumption, (p. 594) did not prevent renewed expansion of opiate consumption or the tendency toward mass markets and widespread distribution networks—nor does the adoption of the more stringent policies appear to have caused them.”²⁷

What is clear is that the huge increase in illegal opium production that took place between 1970 and 2017 was carried out despite varied intensified anti-drug efforts at multiple levels, and despite a growing body of scholarly literature that explains the dynamics of global illegal drug markets and the shortcomings of anti-drug policies and programs.²⁸ Yet the data on illegal drug production and trafficking universally relies upon one, and *only* one, existing source, that is, the world drug reports and country surveys produced by the UNODC (which mixes data generated by the UNODC with unverified data produced by various national drug agencies according to different and unspecified methodologies).

While these reports clearly contain “much useful data and analysis,” it must be acknowledged that their credibility is often “undermined by the selective use of the available evidence to support questionable claims for the success of the UN track record in tackling illegal drug markets.”²⁹ Of course, knowing how any data is produced and by whom deeply matters, especially when illegal drugs are concerned. Indeed, as the political scientist Peter Andreas writes, “illicitness makes possible a politics of numbers” and UN and other official figures (notably those produced in the US State Department’s own narcotics reports) are “particularly susceptible to speculation, distortion and sometimes even outright fabrication.” Such figures are, as a result, “highly problematic yet go largely unchallenged because they serve multiple interests and functions that inhibit skeptical scrutiny.”³⁰ It is therefore essential to bear in mind that, despite what etymology suggests, data is not a given. Instead, it is always produced, and considering data without knowing how it was produced can prove very misleading.

With respect to the differences between national and international agencies that produce official data on drug production, and which “have a powerful incentive not to question the numbers and what they measure,” scholars have a responsibility to question these numbers and to abstain from misleading or creative interpretation.³¹ On the more qualitative end of available data, scholarship on opium has traditionally focused on colonial drug histories and on modern drug supply and consumption issues.³² As befits any complex global social problem, scholars adopt varied approaches and cover varied topics such as interna-

tional drug control, drug industry economics, agrarian economics, organized crime, international relations, and the health and social effects of opiate abuse.

Opium and Academic Research

Until 1972, when historian Alfred McCoy published his seminal and now classic book on the politics of heroin in Southeast Asia, academic work largely focused on how nineteenth-century “opium lubricated Western penetration into Asia, especially for the (p. 595) British, and helped significantly to pay for the upkeep and administration of Western colonies there.”³³ McCoy’s book was the first to detail the political role of narcotics in the postwar world and its modern strategic connection with issues of power politics, most notably by exposing the US Central Intelligence Agency’s role in Southeast Asia’s surging heroin economy. The 1972 classic was then revised through two English editions, which McCoy expanded to include Afghanistan and Latin America.³⁴ This helped to explain how the West turned heroin into a global commodity, first by devising a counterproductive global prohibitions system and the War on Drugs, and secondly by waging wars through proxies with the paradoxical result of fueling illegal drug production at the global level. McCoy’s book was actually the first to demonstrate how important a role opium had played and was still playing in “the great and complicated equation of modern Asian history.”³⁵

McCoy’s research was also the first based on extensive fieldwork (meaning he went *into the field*, which was, and is, still uncommon for historians) and to produce empirical data on modern illegal opium and heroin production.³⁶ Yet, as stressed recently in David Mansfield’s unparalleled field-based work on the rural opium economy in Afghanistan, the need for empirical data remains high as most research on illegal drug production is still characterized by “short-term one-off studies, reviews of secondary literature and interviews with policy-makers in capital cities or military bases.” There remains, he writes, “a need to engage in primary data collection with rural communities themselves,” not only to construct better knowledge and understanding of drugs but also to develop policies that are truly evidence-based.³⁷ Therefore, primary data is most needed in order to overcome the incomplete information too often characteristic of underground economies.

Still, many significant works have been produced on the history of opium production. While the following list is hardly exhaustive, it shows a wide variety of approaches and topics. The first broad historical approach to the multiple dimensions of opium production, trafficking, and consumption over the centuries was authored not by a scholar but by novelist and filmmaker Martin Booth.³⁸ As for the work on opium produced by academic historians, it has largely focused not on broad histories but on specific periods and/or certain geographical areas. One exception is Richard Davenport-Hines, whose “social history of drugs” describes the roles of opium in different societies and heavily—and rightly—criticizes prohibition.³⁹ This is also what historian David Courtwright did in his social and biological account of why and how the profitable exploitation of psychoactive drugs (the “psychoactive revolution” that turned many drugs into global commodities), especial-

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

ly by and to early modern European elites, gave way to modern policies of prohibition (the rather “erratic psychoactive counterrevolution”) that also proved profitable, this time to traffickers.⁴⁰

Other works are more specialized and have largely focused on how the drug trade, whether legal or illegal, played into or against state-building at various times and in various regions. This is the case of historian Carl Trocki, whose work focused on how the early opium trade helped build colonial empires in Asia in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, that is, mostly before international regulation. As for historians (p. 596) Kathryn Meyer and Terry Parssinen, they studied the birth and rise of modern international drug trafficking among political upheaval and state-building enterprises in the Far East between World War I and World War II, that is, basically after international regulation was implemented in 1912.⁴¹ Chinese anthropologist Zhou Yongming chose to study how anti-drug policies and actions in twentieth-century China were intertwined with both state-building and communism-infused nationalism, explaining how Chinese communism and nationalism allowed for opium suppression in China.⁴² He provided one of the very first non-Eurocentric approaches to the history of the opium trade, and his work was notably followed by a multiauthor volume (which included articles by Carl Trocki and Zhou Yongming) edited by Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi.⁴³ This showed how so-called opium regimes and the use of the opium trade in state-building implicated not only British actors (through British imperialism in the nineteenth century), but also Chinese merchants and Chinese state agents (through Chinese capital formation and state-making at the turn of the twentieth century, up until the Maoist suppression of opium production in the early 1950s), and Japanese imperialists (through Japanese colonialism in the 1930s and 1940s).

While most of the work done on post-1950 opium history tends to come from scholars other than historians, few of these social scientists resort extensively to fieldwork to *produce* firsthand data (rather than to *collect* secondhand data) in the anthropological sense. Yet, state-building issues remained central in their approaches. The long and rich fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan by international consultant and socioeconomist David Mansfield details and explains the complex political economy of illegal opium production in Afghanistan and how both the drug economy and anti-drug measures have affected state-building there. Sociologist David Macdonald is another researcher with rare long-term field experience in Afghanistan’s opium fields and his book on drugs in Afghanistan focuses on drug consumption and its expansion over a quarter century of continuous armed conflict, worsening poverty, and instability since the mid-1980s.⁴⁴ Criminologist Ko-lin Chin is another scholar with a deep field-based understanding of the opium economy, this time in northern Myanmar, where he shows in a balanced approach that differences between state-building and drug trafficking prove difficult to delineate and that “organized” crime is more fantasized than real.⁴⁵ Political scientists Martin Jeslma and Tom Kramer also conduct, albeit to a lesser extent, field-based research, notably on Myanmar.⁴⁶ The collective book they edited documents and discusses, with a focus on peace and state-

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

building, the relationship between drugs (opium and methamphetamine) and conflict in Burma/Myanmar.

At the crossroads between firsthand data production and secondhand data collection are a number of broader works on the rural economies of drugs by geographers, ethnographers, and historians. In the original collection they edited in 2004, geographers Michael Steinberg, Joseph Hobbs, and Kent Mathewson also depart from the ubiquitous focus on drugs and state-building to instead examine the social, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions of illegal drug production and trade from the perspective of “indigenous” farmers and cultures.⁴⁷ Although it is only one of the drugs studied in their book, opium still features prominently with empirically grounded texts (p. 597) from Alfred McCoy on the stimulus of prohibition, Joseph Westermeyer on opium in Laos, Nigel Allan on opium in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Zhou Yongming on anti-opium campaigns in the early People’s Republic of China.⁴⁸

At the opposite end of the drug thematic, further from farmer perspectives and field-based studies, are works that rely largely on preexisting (even if often unpublished) data and that focus on the successes, failures, and unintended consequences of anti-drug policies and actions. While most of the above works (Jelsma and Kramer, Mansfield, McCoy, Zhou Yongming, etc.) also examine such issues, at least to varying degrees, some authors focus more on why and how illegal opium supply can be cut. Criminologist Letizia Paoli, economist Victoria Greenfield, and economist and criminologist Peter Reuter pose that very question about the world heroin market. Based on an extensive review of preexisting published and non-published data about global heroin markets and a few key-producing or transiting countries (Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Colombia, India, Tajikistan) they draw policy-related conclusions on various scales. The authors critically examine how, when, and why enforcement has or has not allowed supply cuts, and rightfully conclude that there are “very limited possibilities of successful global reductions in opiate production and supply under the current international control regime.”⁴⁹ Yet they do not go as far as to argue that strict enforcement through repressive actions (such as forced eradication and trafficking interception) proves counterproductive or harmful, as argued by many other authors.⁵⁰ James Windle, another criminologist, tends to agree with Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter when he posits that while global suppression or reduction of illegal opium production is unrealistic, source country interventions have fared much better than usually acknowledged.⁵¹ There are countries (China, Iran, Turkey, Thailand, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Laos), he argues, that have successfully eliminated or significantly reduced illegal opium production from their territories. In the end, most if not all authors realistically agree that the current international control regime stands in the way of successful global reductions in illegal opium production, something that Martin Jelsma already made clear in a 2002 critical assessment of alternative development and drug control, when he stated that “25 years of attempts to reduce supply have had no measurable impact at the global level.”⁵²

Unfolding Asia's Opium History

Historical data shows that the increase in modern illegal opium production occurred during or after World War II, that is, after international control became increasingly prohibitionist. Modern production can be divided into two main historical periods distinguished according to production and regulatory trends: from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, and from the 1970s on.⁵³ Modern production started in the late 1940s and early 1950s with the end of British and French colonial rule in Asian countries (India and Indochina) where opium monopolies had contributed to make colonial enterprises financially profitable. As Brook and Wakabayashi argue, opium provided foreign (p. 598) powers the financial means to undertake colonial empire-building.⁵⁴ This is something that Carl Trocki has also shown when studying the place of the drug trade in laying the groundwork for European colonies in Asia. Trocki writes, "What sugar, alcohol and tobacco did for the Americas and Africa, opium did for Asia."⁵⁵ However, the opposite is also true, since colonial empire-building clearly made large-scale opium production, trading, and consumption feasible.

Although opium bans were repeatedly and ineffectively issued in various countries throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (or even before that: 1360 in Siam, 1729 in China, etc.), numerous new ones were issued after World War II: in Thailand (1949, enforced in 1959), the People's Republic of China (1950), Iran (1955), India (1959), Burma (1962), Turkey (1967, and again in 1973), Laos (partially in 1971 and fully in 2000), Afghanistan (1945, 1958, 1973, 2000, 2002), Pakistan (1979), the Soviet Union (1973), and so on.⁵⁶ A few countries eventually proved successful at significantly reducing illegal opium production, mostly through radical political regime changes (China, Iran, the Soviet Union), or by resorting to legal production (Turkey) or long-term subsidies in the context of low production levels (Thailand).

What is clear is that the strategy of annual forced eradication campaigns to create high-risk environments has failed almost everywhere when politically favorable conditions were not met.⁵⁷ Indeed, other countries, such as Afghanistan, India, Laos, Myanmar, and even Pakistan, never met the same success as say China, Turkey, or Vietnam despite numerous forced eradication campaigns and, to a much lesser extent, alternative development programs. What the history of supply reduction teaches us is that since illegal opium production is made possible by complex political, economic, and social contexts, no solutions can work outside of systematic political, economic, and social programs. Of course, such programs are difficult to implement in countries such as Afghanistan and Burma where war, political instability, state-building issues, poverty, and corruption have long hindered political and economic development.

Yet despite Asia's centuries-old opium history, both Afghanistan and Myanmar are fairly recent large-scale opium producers, something that cannot be properly understood without delving into some of the key early historical developments of the Asian opium industry. Opium has been produced for centuries in Asia, most notably by the Mughal rulers of India, and its production, trade, and consumption were intermittently banned in various

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

countries, especially in the Chinese Empire (first in 1729). But in the mid-nineteenth century, the British imposed their trade in Indian opium upon China through two so-called Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60). The legality of the opium trade had been imposed upon China by the British Empire with the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and eventually led to the development of large-scale Chinese production. China had no choice but to promote an opium import substitution program in order to address the deficit of its balance of payment with British India.

In response, in 1909, the United States convened the International Opium Commission in Shanghai and in 1912 The Hague Convention urged its members to limit opiates to medical uses. Less than sixty years after the Treaty of Tianjin legalized the Chinese import of British opium, production was on its way to becoming illegal, (p. 599) except when destined for medical uses. This first step toward a global prohibition of certain drugs was going to prove successful, at least initially since world opium production was mostly due to massive Chinese production and secondary Indian production. As such, world opium production was drastically reduced before 1970 not because of a functioning global prohibition regime, but because opium bans were successfully enforced in the two main producing countries. In fact, the first unintended consequences of global prohibition and of the many national opium bans materialized in the emergence of illegal production regions of the so-called Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent areas of Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia.⁵⁸

Indeed, during the post-World War II era a new major opium-producing region emerged south of recently opium-free (and communist) China: mainland Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle. In 1970, Burma alone contributed 47 percent of the world's illegal opium production and Afghanistan a mere 10 percent. Then, between 1970 and 1989, global illegal opium production increased by about 220 percent to 3,395 tons, along with a marked change in the relative importance of producing countries.⁵⁹ In 1989, Burma, whose many complex internal conflicts had spurred opium production, was still the world's top illegal opium producer even though a challenger for world supremacy had emerged to the west of the Himalayas. Afghanistan, whose opium output increased 800 percent in thirty years (from 130 tons in 1970 to 1,200 tons in 1989) already produced 35 percent of the world total. By 1989, Afghanistan alone was producing more opium than the entire world had in 1970. At the close of the 1980s then, the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent together supplied 96 percent of the world's illegal opium—a percentage that has since remained virtually unchanged despite the steady rise of global output.

While World War II marked the beginning of modern illegal opium production, the Cold War that ensued played a direct and prominent role in the rise of the production and trafficking of illegal drugs, and especially of opium in Asia. Indeed, the financing of many anticommunist covert operations, such as those led by the CIA, relied on the drug economy that existed in various proxy states where drug trafficking was often condoned and even encouraged. Specific historical cases illustrate how the anticommunist agenda of the CIA played a decisive role in spurring the global illegal drug trade. These include the “French Connection” and the role of the Corsican mafia against communists in France and South-

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

east Asia (Laos and Vietnam), the propping up of the defeated Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang) in northern Burma, the Islamic mujahedeen resistance in Afghanistan, and, on another continent, the Contras in Nicaragua.⁶⁰ The United States, as the leader of the global struggle against communism, extensively used its intelligence agencies to conduct covert operations worldwide—often illegally and without congressional authorization. In the global struggle to contain communism, local aid was needed and widely found in local criminal organizations. In his effort to reveal the extent of the “CIA complicity in the global drug trade,” McCoy suggests that the contradiction between idealism and political realism became extreme in the clash between prohibition and the protection of Cold War allies.⁶¹ However, the end of the Cold War did not reduce illegal opium production in Asia as the end of foreign subsidies to warring Afghan (p. 600) factions largely spurred opium poppy cultivation in an Afghanistan that remained at war.

In Afghanistan prior to 2004, the United States again condoned opium production in areas held by various local commanders whose support was deemed strategically necessary to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda. After 2004, when the opium question was once again raised in Afghanistan, it appeared that short-term strategic advantages had been outweighed by “unintended” strategic inconveniences and constraints. Having benefited from the support of local commanders and warlords involved in the opium business, the international community and the Afghan government could ill afford to lose the support of the large proportion of the Afghan population dependent upon the opium economy, particularly in the strategic former development zone of Helmand Province. In Afghanistan, as in other parts of the world (especially Burma/Myanmar), opium has long been at stake in armed conflicts, as its trade has allowed such conflicts to be prolonged. As the complex history of opium in Asia shows, opium production and trade have been central to world politics and geopolitics for centuries and the role of the opium economy in Afghanistan is nothing new. During most of the twentieth century, then, wars and conflicts fostered illegal opium production and made peace building more difficult as war economies and drug economies fed each other in a vicious cycle.⁶²

As a consequence, not much has changed since 1989. The key things that have changed, especially since the mid-to-late 1990s, are the relative sizes and breakdowns of production figures but, as was the case before 1950 and even before prohibition, the vast majority of the world’s opium is still concentrated in two or three, albeit different, countries. Yet global opium production is likely to be higher than estimated by the UNODC as India’s large illegal production remains poorly known and unaccounted for. India is undoubtedly one of the world’s largest illegal opium producers, not only because of diversion from legal cultivation (often overestimated), but mostly because of illegal production (systematically underestimated or wholly ignored). The fact that the eradication of illegally cultivated areas often surpasses legally cultivated poppy hectareage is testimony to the importance of illegal Indian opium production. In the end, the mystery of illegal opium production in India suggests that the overall global volume of illegal opium is underestimated by the UNODC.⁶³

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

What is known, though, is that a steady increase in illegal opium production has occurred globally since the 1970s and that it took place in spite of the many efforts (and rare successes) deployed by the international community to reduce illegal opium poppy cultivation worldwide.⁶⁴ Of course, the reasons for this global policy failure are many and complex, rooted in the long history and politics of Asia and of the poppy. Above all, opium production has clearly thrived amid the ongoing turmoil of Asian history and geopolitics. The nineteenth-century Opium Wars; the twentieth-century Cold War and its many local conflicts waged by proxies in Burma, Laos, and Afghanistan; and even the twenty-first-century war on terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan have helped spur the continent's illegal opium production. As amply demonstrated by many authors, illegal drug economies and war economies share a long history and the same complex geographies in Asia.⁶⁵

(p. 601) But of course opium production also thrives on economic underdevelopment and poverty, whether war-induced or not: it is now widely acknowledged that the vast majority of Asian opium farmers grow poppies in order to cope with poverty and, above all, food insecurity.⁶⁶ Indeed, despite a great diversity of milieus and agricultural practices, most of the Asian farmers who resort to opium production do it because of food insecurity, although the incapacity to reach self-sufficiency has very different causes that are clearly made worse by war.

In Southeast Asia's agrarian systems, the very labor-intensive upland rice production (much more than wheat in Afghanistan) is limited less by land scarcity than by available workforce (limiting maximum cultivated areas per household). However, lack of irrigation techniques and extremely limited availability of wetlands (valley bottoms) in the uplands of Southeast Asia also help to explain food insecurity. Socioeconomic surveys have shown that, in Southeast Asia, the extent of opium poppy cultivation depends largely on the availability of paddy land and therefore on the degree of food security achieved by households. The situation is particularly difficult in the Wa region of northeastern Myanmar where war has stalled economic development, where average households only produce enough rice for four to six months of consumption, and where the poorest families often have only one to three months' worth of rice. When food security is fragile or is not reached, and when legal cash crops are not available or marketable, opium production is often the only solution left to many Southeast Asian upland agriculturalists.⁶⁷

The situation is obviously quite different in Afghanistan as wheat self-sufficiency is often compromised because of land scarcity (there are few available plots of limited size) and because of overly large households. Limited land availability and large households make the labor-intensive production of opium necessary to buy wheat to feed large but resource-poor Afghan families. In this semiarid to arid country where irrigation is often crucial for agricultural production, decades of war have contributed to the prolonged lack of water for agriculture, destroying traditional irrigation channels and displacing significant segments of the population. As David Mansfield shows for Afghanistan, most households cannot produce sufficient wheat flour to meet basic food requirements, since land holdings are typically small, household members numerous, and wheat yields too low.⁶⁸ In the

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

end, resource-poor Afghan households without access to enough land or good irrigation are the most likely to resort to opium production.

As shown by history and geography, illegal opium production best prospers when war and poverty overlap, as in Afghanistan and Myanmar. Part of the problem, in both Afghanistan and Myanmar, is that illegal opium production outlives war. Obviously, peacebuilding is a difficult task and peace can be hard to sustain. But war transforms political and economic realities and dynamics to such an extent that time is needed for war-torn countries to transition from war economies to peace economies. Ending illegal opium production has proven as difficult—if not more so—than ending wars and poverty in the countries where poppies are illegally grown. In predominantly rural countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar, whose conflicts have lasted for decades and have stalled economic growth and development, it seems that the suppression of illegal (p. 602) opium production can only follow and proceed from the establishment of peace and reconstruction.⁶⁹

Opium suppression policies have not only failed because they often have been implemented before peace and reconstruction has been achieved, but also because they were for the most part inadequate, ill-funded, and improperly sequenced. In spite of three international “conventions on narcotic drugs” (1961, 1971, 1988), the launch of a global war on drugs by the United States in 1971, and the creation of specialized anti-drug institutions within the United Nations, the motto of the UN anti-drug agency, a “drug free world,” has proven an elusive and unrealistic goal.⁷⁰ The politics favoring poppy cultivation have proven more viable than policies designed and implemented to ban it. Neither the war on drugs nor developmental approaches have lowered illegal opium production in Asia, quite the opposite. Indeed, according to an independent evaluation of the UNODC’s policies, “where lasting reductions in production have been seen, other possible influences on farmer decisions not to cultivate drug crops can be put forward as being equally likely causes for change” and these influences include “overall economic growth (Thailand and Vietnam), political change (Myanmar), increasing government access to formerly remote areas (Pakistan), social pressure (Laos, Bolivia), subsidies (Thailand), and booming prices for alternative crops (coffee and cacao growing areas).”⁷¹

Future Drug History?

As shown by the rich and complex history of illegal opium production in Asia, prohibition and drug supply reduction have largely failed to reach their goal. Prospects are poor for both drug supply reduction and the political and economic development of the leading producing countries. The failure of prohibition of opium and other drugs over a century (since 1906–12), and of nearly fifty years of a US-led war on drugs (since 1971) and of alternative development programs, is increasingly obvious. Such a colossal policy failure begs explanation, including the fact that it is repeatedly blamed on insufficient means rather than on ill-conceived policies and programs. As a result, drug war politics are described as the “politics of denial” because “reports of failure only reinforced the resolve of public officials to ‘try harder’ to apply a little more funding, a little more firepower.”⁷²

The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

Despite its often-denounced failure and counterproductive impacts, the war on drugs has been regularly reinforced and expanded rather than scaled down, as supply reduction remains long controverted between ideology and rationality.

Failure is also imputable to ignorance, misunderstanding, or disagreement about the causes of illegal opium production and the motivations of opium farmers. As a consequence, it now appears that anti-drug policies and actions have failed because they have focused on drug supply reduction itself and not on the causes and drivers of illegal drug production. Forced eradication in particular actually increases poverty (the main driver of opium production) without addressing its underlying contexts or specific causes, (p. 603) including land scarcity, unequal land tenure arrangements, oversized households, labor shortages, climatic vagaries, political upheavals, armed conflicts, etc. In McCoy's words, prohibition, and especially eradication, transformed "suppression into stimulus."⁷³

Another explanation for the repeat failures of anti-drug policies and practices lies in the systematic prioritizing of anti-drug goals within broader peace-building and state-building agendas. This is underway in the complex situations of Afghanistan and Myanmar, where delicate transitions from war economies to peace economies are constantly undermined by opium bans and forced eradication campaigns. In Laos and Myanmar, tens of thousands of poor hill tribe farmers still bear the brunt of forced eradication programs and have to regularly cope with both the loss of their central cash crop and a lack of economic aid. In Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest and most unstable countries, drug authorities are frequently advised to entirely wipe out a third of their country's otherwise shattered economy in order to achieve peace, national reconciliation, reconstruction, and state-building.⁷⁴ Despite the obvious risks of political destabilization such programs present, and in spite of the inevitable human costs implied for the populations concerned, destructive repression is still proposed as a realistic solution when exactly the opposite is needed: (re)construction and economic development. Yet illegal opium production will not abate until its root causes are addressed instead of aggravated. In the meantime, despite their repeated failures, anti-drug policies and practices still push forward—or are even rushed—in the name of security and the rule of law, but at the expense of food security, fairness, and human rights.

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The Post-1950s Rise of Illegal Opium in Asia

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