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U.S. fights Asian tradition in its drug war

Second in a series

By Keyes Beech
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CHIENGMAL, Northern Thailand — Not long ago a visiting American congressman asked a U.S. narcotics agent in Bangkok if the hill tribesmen of Southeast Asia had any idea of the havoc their product, refined to heroin, was creating in the streets of New York.

For a moment the agent was speechless at the question. Then taking a deep breath, he replied: "Sir, they never heard of New York."

They never heard of Bangkok, either.

The question is indicative of the wall of ignorance that separates most Americans from the history and realities of the drug traffic in Southeast Asia.

FOR FOUR centuries, beginning with the aggressive prodding of greedy European colonialists, Asians have been cultivating the poppy that yields the opium that yields the morphine that yields the heroin that is now finding its way into the United States.

Up through World War II and beyond, every Southeast Asian government had its opium monopoly. Everywhere it was a major source of revenue, like other government monopolies including salt and tobacco.

In the middle of the last century the British fought a war to win the right to sell opium to the unwilling Chinese. Hong Kong had its own opium "farm." And not until 1946 did the British outlaw the drug traffic in Hong Kong.

FOR THE ASIANS opium was, and still is, an escape from the pains of reality just as alcohol is an escape for so many Americans. Some Asians become addicts — a growing number, in fact — just as some Americans become alcoholics.

Opium is a pain-killer in

more ways than one. An American woman may swallow a pill to ease the pain of her menstrual period. The hill tribe woman of Southeast Asia's golden triangle — the upper reaches of Burma, Thailand and Laos — will smoke a pipe or two of opium.

Opium also happens to be the only cash crop of the hill tribe people, their only means of acquiring some of the minor luxuries of the outside world. Their economy is as dependent on opium as the lowlanders are on rice.

DURING all those earlier years, to Americans opium was an Asian affair. But two years ago, when heroin addiction hit epidemic proportions among American GIs in South Vietnam, the Asian narcotics traffic suddenly became America's business.

Now the GI market almost has vanished with the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. But the drug problem lingers on — a legacy of the Vietnam War as the heroin traffickers seek new outlets in the United States to replace their lost GI market.

At the same time President Nixon has declared global war on the international drug traffic. As a result, stopping drugs has become almost as important as stopping communism among U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia.

IN AT LEAST three countries — Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam — all the resources of U.S. embassies have been thrown into the campaign to choke off the flow of heroin to the United States.

Embassy political officers, accustomed to routine diplomacy, have been diverted to full time narcotics assignments. "One way or another, we spend at least 50 per cent of our time on narcotics," said a senior embassy officer in Bangkok.

"Hell," said a young foreign service officer recently transferred to narcotics work. "I love it. It's a lot better than shuffling papers."

THE CIA, stung by charges that it has contributed to the drug traffic by collaborating with opium-growing hill tribesmen and corrupt Asian officials, has thrown all its intelligence-gathering resources into the antidrug campaign.

On top of all this, agents of the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs have made their appearance in Asian capitals from Tokyo to Hong Kong to Bangkok in increasing numbers.

For 10 years there was one U.S. narcotics agent in Bangkok. Today there are 12 operating in all Thailand, "making cases" in co-operation with Thai police.

SINCE Thailand is the natural conduit for drugs coming from the golden triangle, the

biggest effort has been centered there.

"When the heat is on from the White House," said one U.S. official, "you jump. No one questions the desirability of cutting off the drug traffic, although some of us wonder if there isn't an element of overkill in the current campaign."

If there is an element of "overkill" — and that is debatable — the reasons are understandable. Mr. Nixon is running for re-election and the "Asian drug connection" could easily become an explosive campaign issue.

Next: The drug traffic — romantic and deadly.

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