

CAN'T QUIT: MARIJUANA, DRUG DEALERS SMUGGLING, AND THE UNDERGROUND ECONOMY

戒不掉的癮世代：臺灣的毒 梟、大麻、咖啡包與地下經 濟

Equal parts in-the-trenches reportage and sociological inquiry, this new account of the illicit drug use in Taiwan challenges traditional approaches that treat addiction as a crime.

Solutions to the drug problem in Taiwan have long been hampered by simplistic approaches that view drug use as a moral failing and a criminal issue. Questioning this logic, *Can't Quit* goes straight to the source, using interviews and field research to paint a complex portrait of drug use that defies categorical judgements of right and wrong. In this novel analysis, drug use is not simply a legal issue. It's a problem whose origins are embedded in the very structure of contemporary society.

Divided into three parts – “The Sea”, “The City”, and “The Web” – the book begins with the history of Taiwan's position as a node in the maritime flow of narcotics through Asia. Moving to “The City”, the book looks at the drug stores, night clubs, and middle-class drug users of the contemporary metropolis. Finally, “The Web” reveals the role of the dark web and social media in exposing people to drugs. From cold syrup to narcotics smuggled in instant coffee packets, from musicians to construction workers, author Cheng Chin-Yao introduces readers to the invisible drug problem that exists right under our noses. When it comes to users, these aren't drug-addled madmen or narco kingpins; they are ordinary people quietly slipping through the cracks of the system.



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Adopting an objective and non-judgmental view, author Cheng Chin-Yao enters juvenile detention facilities, prisons, work sites, nightlife districts, and rehabilitation facilities, recording the life stories of addicts from a range of backgrounds. When did they first come into contact with illicit drugs? Why do they feel the need to use? How could society and the system have better served them? Rather than confront drug users with the question “Why can’t you just quit?”, the author instead confronts readers with the question “What labels have we imposed on drug users, and why?”

This human-centered account of contemporary drug use in Taiwan is equally a sketch of a system that perpetuates drug abuse, revealing that addiction is not the result of individual bad decisions – rather it is the result of systemic factors rooted in the history, culture, medical systems, and economics of contemporary society.

Cheng Chin-Yao 鄭進耀

A culture reporter for Mirror Media, Cheng Chin-Yao has published numerous works, sometimes under the pen-name “Tiger Balm”. He is best known for his essay collection *The Nonexistent Man* and his nonfiction book *Take Out Lunch*, winner of the 2019 Openbook Award.

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By Cheng Chin-Yao

Translated by Chris Findler

Chapter 1 "It" arrived by sea

As we drive along a deserted road in Lu'ermen, the scorching sun high in the sky overhead, the occasional fish pond and farm field can be seen dotting the flat horizon. The driver confides in a tone reminiscent of a storyteller sharing a local legend, "Around here, outsiders like you don't want to be out in the streets at night."

Back in 1661, Koxinga, roused by translator He Bin who claimed that Taiwan was rich in fertile land and only defended by a handful of Dutch, mobilized his army to sail into the Taikang inland sea to attack the "red-haired" occupiers there.¹ They landed in Lu'ermen, but much to his consternation, the strike didn't go well and his troops suffered severe casualties. Koxinga blockaded the entire Taikang inland sea and, as a result, tens of thousands starved to death in the Dutch base of Fort Provintia.

Koxinga attacked Taiwan primarily as a means to secure a stable base of operations to support his fleet. Beginning with his father, Cheng Chih-lung, the Chengs of Fujian controlled China's southeast coastline. All ships had to pay for the right to transit, making the Cheng family extremely wealthy.

Ships sailing northward from the Dutch East India Company's base in Jakarta to engage in trade in Xiamen and Japan had to pass by the strategically-located island of Taiwan. In addition to spices, tea, porcelain, and deerskins, their cargo included opium, a product that sparked clashes, both social and political, in the 20th century.

Ship manifests of the Dutch East India Company indicate that Taiwan might have been the first location in the Qing Empire to come in contact with the drug. Local country records in Fujian also frequently mention it, stating that unrighteous men and heartless women gathered alongside roads in Taiwan to smoke opium.

Opium, the "source of ten thousand evils", is not just a drug.

In 2021, business at a run-of-the-mill cold noodle shop in Jiangsu suddenly began booming. After receiving a tipoff, police investigated and discovered that the proprietor had laced the chili

¹ Tonio Andrade (2017), *Lost Colony – The Untold Story of China's First Victory over the West*, China Times Publishing.

oil with poppy pods, an opium precursor.²

Similar incidents are reported every few years. These “urban legends” suggest that eateries use this forbidden ingredient to addict diners to their fare, so they will keep coming back for more. But is there any truth to rumors that poppy is being regularly used in restaurant fare?

Opium is made from poppies. The pod, which is left on the stem when the flower withers and drops off, is scraped with a knife to extract a white liquid – a sedative, painkiller, and the raw material for opium and morphine. To produce large quantities of opium efficiently, poppy husks (the dried pods and stems of the poppy) are boiled together and refined into opium.

Poppy seeds contain low levels of papaverine, an antispasmodic, but they are not harmful. Many countries allow poppy seeds to be fried or added to foods, and the oil that’s left over from deep-frying the seeds can be used to produce animal feed. Almost every part of a poppy plant has economic value.

The thought of an opium-laced hot pot might seem shocking, so we queried some addictionologists and received a range of answers. Can a person become addicted to the “opium” that is added to hot pots and chili oil? They said it depends on a variety of factors, such as the concentration of addictive components in the poppy husks, the number of husks added to the hot pot, and how frequently that person eats hot pot. Without the answers to these questions, it is difficult to estimate an individual’s risk of becoming addicted.

Poppy husks are controlled substances in most countries, so how is it that these hot pot restaurants seem to be able to obtain them as easily as they acquire hot peppers? Let’s look into the earliest origins of the “opium hot pot” urban legend.

The first such story, which appeared in Taiwan newspapers in 1988³, reported that a restaurant in Neijiang, Sichuan Province was charged by the local government health unit with serving hot pots laced with poppy husks. In 1994⁴, similar incidents were rumored to have occurred in Shanghai, Luoyang, and other places. In 1999, Hong Kong’s *Apple Daily* reported that the soup base of a hot pot restaurant in Shanghai had tested positive for papaverine⁵.

China Xinhua News confirmed in 2004 that 215 dining establishments in Guizhou Province were using poppy husks in their soups and hot pots. All were forced to shut down. In 2014, a journalist with China Central Television entered the kitchen of a Sichuan hot pot eatery with a hidden camera. The owner, whose face was blurred, pulled out a burlap sack stuffed with poppy husks and whispered confidentially, “Our hot pots taste better, because we add these. But they’re illegal. The cops are out there busting people.”

There’s something fishy about these “opium hot pots” that we keep hearing about. First, poppies have long been a controlled item. They’re hard to obtain and expensive. It would be costly

² Ma Jiajia (2021), Voice of China, “Man becomes addicted to cold noodles. Police discover shop used poppy!” (https://www.shanwei.gov.cn/swkjj/zhuanti/x_s/content/post_761007.html)

³ *United Daily News* (1988), “Are Diners Getting Addicted? Hot Pots Laced with Poppy. Sichuan Shop Owner Has no Conscience”, *United Daily News*, February 25, 1988, p. 5.

⁴ Liu Feng-chiu (1994), “Poppies Really Spice Things Up,” *United Daily News*, February 8, 1994, p. 20.

⁵ *United Daily News* (1999), “Hong Kong Newspaper Claims Shanghai Shop Owners Secretly Lace Food with Poppies, Customers Addicted”, *United Daily Evening News*, January 31, 1999, p. 4.

to use them as a seasoning for hot pots. Second, it would be difficult to eliminate the risk of customers becoming addicted to opium hot pots since it's almost impossible to determine how much hot pot somebody would have to eat before they got hooked. It wouldn't make sense for shop owners to take such great legal risk just to have customers keep coming back.

To determine the veracity of this urban legend, we need to study the historical development of opium, understanding the various uses of the substance and how it became viewed as a drug. You might be surprised to learn that it has deep historical connections to Taiwan.

On the corner of Liangzhou Street and Chongqing North Road in Taipei City is an expansive parking lot that was once the site of the two-story, red-brick Hong Chi Hospital established by Dr. Lin Ching-yueh in 1910. Taken over by the Taiwan Governor-general's Office in 1930, it became Taipei Geng-Sheng Hospital, the principal center for opium-addiction treatment in Taiwan. At the time, its rehabilitation methods were considered the most advanced in the world.

The hospital's founder, Lin Ching-yueh, was the first doctor in Taiwan to systematically study opium addiction, conducting a survey of opium users during the period of Japanese occupation. In a paper written in 1913, Dr. Lin pointed out that addiction is a spectrum, and that only a small portion of addicts lay in bed all day smoking opium, or were consumed with cravings. Many of the addicts Lin studied actually had normal jobs. He even found that some individuals had been using the drug for up to seven years without ever becoming addicted.⁶

This would indicate that opium, which has been around for centuries, is not as addictive as morphine, heroin, or other modern drugs. Returning to the hot pot problem: it seems that one would have to consume several opium hot pots every day for a decade or more to get hooked. Yet, it is also true that shops that add opium to their food do see business improve. It is speculated that customers aren't actually addicted; rather, the tiny amounts of papaverine in the hot pots might simply stimulate the sense of taste, warm up the body, and give customers a slight high.

Restaurateurs who insist on adding poppies to their dishes aren't necessarily trying to get customers addicted. A more fundamental reason is that poppy husks have a long history of use in China as a medicinal herb and food seasoning. When added to food, it gives it a distinctive appeal, like other seasonings. In this sense, historically it is a food, not a drug. Residents of the mountainous border regions of southern China even make tea out of poppy husks.

Today, opium is indisputably regarded as a drug, but how this medicinal herb and seasoning became a drug is rarely discussed. Exactly what zesty flavors did this "drug" impart? And why did it later dwindle in popularity? In 1945, after helping the last batch of opium users quit, the Taipei Geng-Sheng Hospital, by then known as the Taiwan Provincial Cessation Center, declared that the opium problem in Taiwan had been successfully resolved and closed its operations. When people discuss opium hot pots today, more than seven decades later, they still do so from the perspective of drugs and addiction, ignoring the complexity of the issue. Opium is not only a medicine and a narcotic, it is a culinary ingredient and seasoning.

⁶ Hsu Hung-bin (2002), "The Images of Opium in Taiwan: from the Traditional Opium Gentleman, to the Experimental Sample in Geng-Sheng Hospital", doctoral dissertation, History Department, National Tsing Hua University.

Prior to the 1930s, opium wasn't just a drug. According to Taiwanese scholar Liu Mingxiu, also known as Ryu, Meishu, records from the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty indicate that Taiwan was the first area in Greater China to use opium. Dutch East India Company records also indicate that it engaged in opium trade with Taiwan in the later years of the Ming Dynasty.⁷

Opium was first produced in Persia, but as global trade expanded, the Dutch brought it to Batavia, Dutch East Indies (now Jakarta, Indonesia). There, tobacco was soaked in liquid opium and then smoked. In the late Ming, as Taiwan began to play a role in trade along China's southeastern coastline, it became the first stop for merchant ships carrying opium to the region.

Due to the trade relationship between Taiwan, Kinmen, and Xiamen, opium arrived next in southern China and from there, it spread throughout the Middle Kingdom. Many negative accounts of opium use in Formosa were left behind by the Qing Empire. Local histories describe Taiwanese as shameless junkies that could be seen smoking opium on roadsides everywhere. According to Hsu Hung-bin, associate professor with National Cheng Kung University's History Department and scholar of the opium issue in Qing Dynasty Taiwan, these accounts represent a biased view of the periphery from an imperial-centered perspective: "At the time, Taiwan was populated by migrants pioneering the land. Many single males crossed the sea to get here and when they gathered together, there wasn't anything else to do, so smoking opium was likely a pastime. These individuals were 'unreliable' precisely because they had left their homes and families and had no one to 'rely' on. In the eyes of officials at the empire's center, they were dope heads that didn't produce anything, out-of-control troublemakers that stirred up uprisings and engaged in gang fights."

Negative images that link particular ethnicities with drug use are common across the world. In the 1930s, the US blamed the marijuana problem on criminal behavior by Blacks and South American immigrants.

So who in Taiwan used opium? "Everybody from gentlemen and farmers to workers and businessmen," Professor Hsu states categorically.

Due to its unique geographic location and social climate, opium was widely used in Taiwan. According to Dr. Lin Ching-yueh's research, opium was not just a "drug"; it had exerted any influence on many aspects of society. This view of "drugs" was ahead of its time in Dr. Lin's era, and remains so today.

In the late Qing, farmers and soldiers in Taiwan used opium to prevent fevers and miasma, and wharf coolies used it to relieve stress. After work, they would head to nearby opium dens where they would smoke it and spend the night. Night workers used opium to cope with the mental stress of working odd hours.

Since the outflow of silver was a serious issue in the late Qing, farmers also used opium as a currency. As an important transit port off China's southeast coast, a range of opium products from around the world were available for purchase in Taiwan. Among mainstream opium products, the highest grade was produced by the British East India Company. This was followed

⁷ Liu Mingxiu (2008), *Japanese Rule in Taiwan and the Opium Issue*, Avanguard Publishing House.

by Indian opium. Mid-priced Persian opium was the most popular worldwide, while the cheapest came from China's Wenzhou and Sichuan.⁸

Late Qing intellectuals also used opium for socializing and entertainment, mostly in brothels, but some wealthy families employed individuals to prepare opium in their homes. During one field study, Hsu Hung-bin learned about an older woman from a wealthy family in the Dadaocheng region of Taipei who purchased and prepared her own opium. "Her family remembers that a peculiar smell filled her room."

She often reclined on a *kang*, a traditional heated platform, where she would smoke and chat with family members, old and young. "Nobody in the family was allowed on the *kang*. She only permitted her closest friend on it and the two of them shared her pipe." What's more, she wasn't a weak, sickly junkie. Everybody remembers her as an exuberant and cheerful woman.

"She wasn't the exception to the rule. Many wealthy people indulged. They had opium prepared for them. It was considered a normal social activity. Lin Hsien-tang's journal, for example, indicates that there were opium users in the Lin Family in Wufeng," Hsu explains.

Under Japanese rule, the colonial government decided to set up an opium monopoly system in Taiwan. Addicts needed certification from a doctor and the local government to obtain a permit to use opium legally. Although opium was strictly forbidden in Japan proper, it was allowed in the colonies, but could not be sold to Japanese serving in the military. Scholars of nationalism believe that this shows that Taiwanese were viewed as second-class citizens of the Japanese empire.

"This was clearly a type of differential treatment, but if we view it from the perspective of governance, opium is a very complicated issue." Early in the Japanese era, many anti-Japanese movements broke out around Taiwan. One of the complaints was that "Since the Japanese arrived, we haven't been allowed to smoke opium." Also, as Japan's first overseas colony, several governors of Taiwan sought to make the island financially independent and autonomous. Tax revenue from the sale of opium not only could be used to help realize this objective, it could also finance infrastructure for the developing colony.

In the early years, the opium tax accounted for as much as 40% of the colonial government's revenue. "The monopoly system was not just a means to collect money; it also had the goal of gradually eliminating Taiwan's opium problem." The Japanese government established the Pharmaceutical Institute, Office of the Governor-General of Taiwan (later known as the Monopoly Bureau), the first of its kind in the world. Through the institute, the government became directly responsible for producing and distributing the drug and combatting opium smuggling.

Early on, sales of opium produced by the Pharmaceutical Institute were dismal. Eventually, it was discovered that the popularity of opium wasn't dependent on high morphine content. In fact, if the morphine content was too high, it made smokers sick. Acceptance actually hinged on

⁸ Hsu Hung-bin (2018), "Hidden Paradise Behind the Curtain? Opium Use and Smoking Spaces in Colonial Taiwan", published in *The Underprivileged Under Japanese Colonial Rule: Taiwan and Korea*, Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica.

flavor, so the Pharmaceutical Institute invited “enthusiasts” to test their product. By the middle period of Japanese rule, Taiwan’s Office of the Governor-General had developed a unique approach to the drug problem: they extracted morphine from opium, turning a profit from global export, and then sold the weakened opium in Taiwan as a means to gradually rein in the drug problem.

Japan’s handling of Taiwan’s opium issue drew the attention of other countries. The US dispatched experts to Taiwan to study its methods, because it wanted to introduce a similar system in the Philippines, a US colony. Yuan Shih-kai, the head of the Chinese government at the time, also sent specialists to Taiwan, in hopes of solving the opium problem which had been plaguing China since the late Qing.

In the 1920s, Japan became a major world exporter of narcotic medicines. In addition to producing opium in Taiwan, it cultivated the raw materials for cocaine and other narcotics in Southeast Asia, Manchuria, and on the Korean Peninsula. Prior to the First World War, the Great Powers, including the US, Japan, and Great Britain, had organized the International Opium Commission, which, after the Great War, became the International Narcotics Control Board under the League of Nations. The goal of the organization was to resolve the global drug problem, but it also served as a platform for “narcotics diplomacy” where the powers could negotiate for their own commercial interests. Under international pressure, Japan planned to use the opium issue in Taiwan as a model.⁹

In 1928, the Japanese colonial government was employing a strict “opium permit” system, however, many still smoked without a permit. In order to bring these “black numbers” under control, the government was planning to reissue smoking permits and to begin treating addicts, but members of the Cultural Association, including Lin Hsien-tang, saw it as another attempt to poison the Taiwanese. As protests erupted, Tu Tsung-ming, Taiwan’s first Doctor of Medical Sciences, began advocating for compulsory rehabilitation of opium users, an idea in line with what the colonial government’s thinking. Thus, when the Office of the Governor-General of Taiwan established Geng-Sheng Hospital as a site for their compulsory inpatient rehabilitation program, Tu Tsung-ming was placed in charge of treatment and research.

“Employing criminal law to enforce mandatory rehabilitation was rare in the world at the time,” Hsu Hung-bin explains. Before Tu Tsung-ming, Dr. Lin Ching-yueh also treated large numbers of opium addicts, but he employed a milder, outpatient approach. He didn’t hospitalize addicts, and respected their wishes regarding treatment, helping them to maintain their daily routines and work habits. Dr. Lin viewed opium use as a behavioral spectrum with various use patterns. Only a small portion of users were actually junkies. He didn’t particularly stigmatize users or emphasize a negative image of opium.

The emergence of Geng-Sheng Hospital, in conjunction with the contemporary ethos of society, served to accelerate the negative image of opium as a “drug”. Anybody who used opium, regardless of whether or not they had a permit, was forced to go to the hospital and undergo inpatient therapy. The treatment was effective at first, but after users left the hospital, Tu Tsung-

⁹ Jun Kurihara (2017), *Japanese Imperialism and Opium*, National Taiwan University Press.

ming's research indicated that less than 50% stayed off the drug. The rest had to be supervised by police or re-admitted to the hospital for further treatment. By quarantining users away from society, the program treated "drug use" as a behavior that existed in isolation, completely ignoring the social context in which it was embedded.

At that time, for example, opium was a recreational pastime and a means to facilitate social interaction. Users would return to their old social networks after being released from the hospital and quickly gravitate back to smoking opium.