

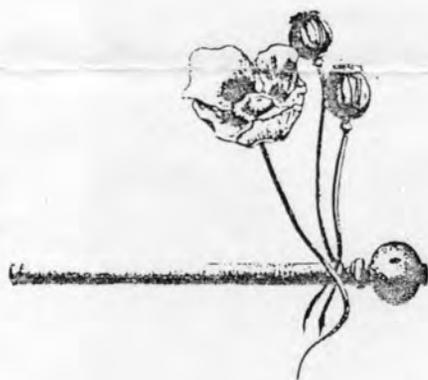
Poppies, Pipes, and People

Opium and Its Use in Laos

JOSEPH WESTERMEYER

"When I knew him, Wen Yu was sorely wasted and could not walk from one room to another without panting. But his home, while small, was one of the sturdiest and cleanest in the district. All his children were literate, and most were yet in school. His seventeen-year-old would be the man of the house soon. Wen Yu disdained opium and his addiction to it. But it had enabled him to persist in his labors even while ill in his younger years, and now its sale brought a good living to his family. 'I owe my life to opium!' he told me."

Opium production and use connote international intrigue, illicit wealth, and social degeneracy to industrialized societies. The experiences and attitudes of those growing and using opium in poppy-producing areas are not always so dramatic or so negative. Joseph Westermeyer spent ten years practicing medicine and studying the function of opium in Laos, and four years studying opium addiction in other parts of Asia. His combination of hard research and case studies gives a clear picture of the very different ways opium and its use are regarded in a developing agricultural society.



Opium is a mainstay of the highland economy in Laos, where ease of transport gives the poppy great advantage over other cash crops. Although opium is sometimes used without addiction as a recreational intoxicant or folk medicine, Westermeyer found that addiction is always a possibility, and poppy growers are especially susceptible. Opium consumption can initially enhance productivity, but its long-term use is generally debilitating. The biomedical, psychological, and familial problems of drug addiction also occur in Laos. Westermeyer describes heroin as well as opium addiction, includes a chapter on Caucasian addicts, analyzes the failure of American efforts to restrict opium flow, and evaluates treatments for addiction.

Joseph Westermeyer, M.D., is Professor of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Minnesota Hospital, and holds adjunct professorships in anthropology and psychology at the University of Minnesota. He has published many articles on alcohol and drug abuse, and is the author of *A Primer on Chemical Dependency* (1976).

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