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Chinese Connection: Heroin Line

HONG KONG (AP) — Among the farm houses, tenements and sprawling mansions of this colony are about 20 secret laboratories producing more and more of the heroin sold on American street corners, according to Western narcotics experts.

This "Chinese Connection" is expanding as legal and diplomatic pressure threatens the traditional "French Connection" of Turkish opium or morphine processed into heroin in France and then smuggled to the United States.

The U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs estimates the percentage of Southeast Asian heroin supplying the American market has at least doubled recently, to almost a third of the total U.S. supply.

But narcotics agents tend to scoff at precise figures.

"The traffickers don't publish balance sheets, so how can we know how much they are smuggling," says one agent.

Norman Rolph, Hong Kong's commissioner of narcotics, says: "All the people in this business are very security and surveillance conscious. They have a high degree of mobility. The laboratories in which they refine the morphine are everywhere, from chicken runs to villas. They spend just a day or two in each one and then move on to another."

The opium and heroin trade in this part of the world is almost exclusively run by Chinese, and the vast bulk of their trafficking is for Asian addicts. Officials say there is no indication mainland China is exporting any of the narcotics.

If arrested, the traffickers almost never tell authorities about their smuggling network. "The Mafia are publicity hounds compared to the Chi-

nese," says an informant in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand.

"Money and fear are the only things that hold this dirty business together, and money is the only thing we can chip at it with," he adds.

Thailand and Hong Kong use a reward system based on the value of drug seizures to attract informers. In Hong Kong, an informer can earn as much as \$100,000 for a tip that leads to a major seizure and arrest. And nearly all major seizures come from such information.

But generally it is only the small fry that are caught. The rich financiers pulling the strings from the top evade arrest. They carefully avoid any direct contact with the people handling drugs. Even when authorities know whom they are, no evidence can be obtained to convict them, agents say.

Narcotics officials agree the

trafficking in Southeast Asia has not been hurt or even slowed by law-enforcement efforts. Some believe, however, recent large seizures are a promising start to a widened drive.

It seems doubtful any progress is being made in the most vital country of all — Burma.

About 70 per cent of the world's illicit opium is grown in the "Golden Triangle," a border region of Burma, Laos and Thailand. It is so nicknamed for its shape on a map and the money flowing into it from the opium traffic.

Most of the opium production from the "Golden Triangle" comes from the Burmese part, which is outside the domain of the government.

Tribesmen in the area live off the drug trade, and the government is reluctant to move against them because it sometimes uses them against Communist guerrillas. The United States does not supply aid to Burma and its influence is slight.

President Nixon, in hopes of throttling the heroin supply before it reaches the United States, has ordered American officials overseas to encourage Asian governments to step up their fight against narcotics trafficking and addiction. And the U.S. government is helping Asian governments build up their manpower and is assisting in the crackdown.

Wiping out the opium at its source is the key to success, officials say. This means destroying fields of opium poppies in the "Golden Triangle" and other areas and replacing the opium with other crops.

But many of the hill people who grow the opium are not enthusiastic about abandoning their opium harvest in favor of another crop which might not bring them as much money. Bandits and private armies roam the mountains, and they also depend on the trafficking for their money.

Agents report that, fairly recently, tons of heroin has been stockpiled in Burma. One possible reason for this accumulation is that a major market has been lost with the withdrawal of most American troops from South Vietnam. Another reason, they say, may be the expanding production.