

ASIA

China and drugs

The kindness treatment

KUNMING, YUNNAN

How one enlightened Chinese province deals with addiction

THE rather sombre house choir and band of the Kunming Forced Detoxification and Rehabilitation Centre doesn't quite strike the chord with its rendition of the "Ode to Joy". But the next song, written by the inmates, about the young addicts' regret at causing their mothers heartache, hits the button. One young man in the choir looks pained. A girl chokes back her tears, while another breaks down sobbing. Even the policeman on the drums appears moved.

South-west China's Yunnan province, of which Kunming is the capital, has far and away China's biggest drug problem. The authorities argue that the province's 41m people are innocent victims of the international trade in heroin and, increasingly, in synthetic drugs such as amphetamines. They say that they have all but eradicated the cultivation of opium poppies in Yunnan, and insist there are no refining centres. Yet Yunnan is the busiest conduit for heroin coming out of the "golden triangle" in the northern, lawless regions of Laos, Thailand and, notably, Myanmar.

Yunnan's hilly borders are porous. It is said of Yunnan's several ethnic minorities that they buy their vegetables on one side of the border and cook their soup on the other. Opium, or refined heroin, can cross as easily as vegetables, and when China's interior opened up in the 1980s with roads, railways and commerce, international crime syndicates found Yunnan the best route to get their produce to market. Four-fifths of China's total heroin and opium seizures are in Yunnan province. Drug addiction, and later AIDS, followed the supply routes.

Mao Zedong claimed to have eradicated drugs in China. But by 1990 Yunnan had nearly 58,000 known addicts, more than half the country's total. The national authorities say there were 800,000 known addicts in China in 1998, an eight-fold increase since 1990. The use of dirty needles has been the main transmitter of AIDS, which first started to appear in China among the border minorities. Government statistics say 15,000 Chinese have the HIV virus, which can develop into AIDS, but officials acknowledge that this is a huge underestimate.

In Yunnan, hard-fisted tactics against

drugs, unsurprisingly, predominate. Some 400 drug-dealers are executed each year in the province: national and international anti-drug days are marked by an orgy of public condemnations in Kunming stadiums, followed by swift execution in private. Sun Dahong, the police chief who heads Yunnan's anti-drug enforcement, says that the province is the first to set up a special force of 13,000 armed police, soldiers and customs guards to stop drugs getting in—or, once in, from getting out. The United States has helped, providing surveillance equipment.

Yet necessity has become the mother of, by Chinese standards, unusual experimen-



Learning to live without drugs

tation. The Yunnan authorities have given money and sent 3,000 technical experts to help farmers, mainly in Myanmar, switch from opium to cash crops such as cereals, fruit and coffee. Mr Sun claims that, thanks to such help, a quarter of the 50,000 hectares (125,000 acres) given over to opium in Myanmar has been taken out of production. The 30 tonnes of refined opium that have thus been taken off the market each year, he says, is equivalent to more than all that has been seized in Yunnan this past decade.

What becomes apparent at the Kunming rehabilitation centre is the province's growing emphasis on prevention and cure for an addiction that police in most other places in China would treat as a crime. "But these are not criminals," says the centre's affable Communist Party secretary, "they're just law offenders. Personally, I feel a bit like an old schoolmaster. After all, 80% of the drug addicts on the streets of Kunming know me." Addicts picked up for the first time in Yun-

nan are sent for three months' detoxification in special centres. The Kunming camp, with unguarded gates, has 2,000 inmates, who undergo a mixture of detoxification (using herbal pills, made at the camp, to counter the toxins), counselling and the discipline of bootcamp.

The reputation of the centre's approach has spread. Half of the inmates come from 20 other provinces, and a good portion are volunteers who pay 150 yuan (\$18) a week to go clean. One such, a girl from north-eastern Liaoning province, lies in bed, a drip attached. She has just come out of several days' delirium. Her mother, who came to Yunnan with her to stay at the camp, says, "Now I can get some sleep." The non-volunteers pay nothing, but, once they are healthy enough, are put to work about the yard, or packing medicine into boxes. They do not seem to mind. One young man sitting eating sunflower seeds in the visiting area with his mother and sister says he had been on heroin for ten years, before coming to the centre. "This place is pretty good. In America you have to buy your own medicine for kicking drugs. We don't have to here."

The Kunming police, like the most liberal health-care officials in western countries, talk much of the need for community care and counselling once the inmates return home, as well as education efforts at schools. Some of these local efforts, visiting drug experts say, have had considerable success in keeping people off-drugs. Now Yunnan is giving the process a Chinese touch: a law is being drafted that will render community leaders responsible if their charges go back to drugs.

The Kunming centre is one of a number that practise a humanitarian approach to addiction. It is not only China's biggest, it is almost certainly its best, winning praise from the United Nations anti-drug programme. Some other centres, on the other hand, are not likely to be so welcoming to visiting journalists, particularly grim-named "detoxification-through-labour" camps run by the judiciary. Kunming officials admit that their success rate is still painfully low: 85% of those that leave the centre, they say, will take up drugs again. But something is working—probably the combination of rehabilitation with community care, and anti-drug education. The number of known addicts in Yunnan has actually fallen, to 20% below its 1990 levels. "I don't want to rub it into the noses of other provinces," says a local police official, "but in Yunnan we've turned the tide."