

Human Bridges Across Asia

China-South Asia Dynamics in a New Belt and Road Era

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Section I

Historical Ties and Religious Crossroads

2 Psychoactive Substance Use and Social Solidarity in the Indo–China Borderlands

Xiaozhao Yousef Yang

Introduction

Why the Indo–China Borderlands Matter

The regions connecting present-day India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and southwestern China is referred to as the Indo–China borderlands. These regions constitute one of the major corridors through which *Homo sapiens* dispersed into eastern Eurasia during the great Out-of-Africa migrations. As populations settled and diversified in this ecologically complex zone, the Indo–China borderlands became a centrifugal center for multiple early civilizations, including the Bod (Tibetan), Shu, and Western Zhou civilizations in what is now China, the Nyaung-gan cultural complex in Burma, and the Daojali–Hading culture in Assam.

The Indo–China borderlands have long been mischaracterized as a marginal space of refuge and exile between major civilizations. This misreading reflects the intentional distortions perpetuated by modern nation-states seeking to erase the true historical origins of their populations. Genetic, linguistic, and archaeological evidence increasingly demonstrates that these borderlands were central to East and Southeast Asian history (Yang 2025). Multiple lines of genetic evidence indicate that modern East Asian populations trace significant ancestry to prehistoric populations originating in what is now broadly defined as the Indo–China borderlands, particularly along the India–Burma–Eastern Tibetan Plateau corridor (Kang et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2014). The distribution of ancestral Y-chromosome haplogroups D, NO, and C indicates population continuity extending back approximately 40,000–60,000 years. Not just passing through this region, these populations settled and built communities here, which would have sustained complex material and symbolic practices across millennia.

Archaeological sites across Yunnan, Sichuan, Myanmar, and neighboring uplands correspond closely to the present-day distribution of Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups, including Tibetic, Yi, Bai, Tujia, Chin, and Sinitic populations. This correspondence underscores the long-term continuity between prehistoric settlement patterns and modern ethnic distribution. In addition, linguistic evidence converges on the same conclusion. The Sichuan hypothesis of the Sino-Tibetan homeland (van Driem 1999), supported by the computational estimate based on the velocity

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field method (Zhang et al. 2019), places the origins of one of Asia's largest language families squarely within or adjacent to the Indo–China borderlands or eastern Tibetan Plateau. It is noteworthy that the main alternative to the Sichuan hypothesis—the northern China hypothesis—differs in some cases more in terminology than in substance, as the proposed homeland is usually placed in the upper Yellow River region of Gansu and Qinghai, a part of the eastern Tibetan Plateau (Wang et al. 2013). The Upper Yellow River, despite the impression of continuity conveyed by its name, constituted a distinct geological, climatic, and demographic region in prehistory, rather than forming a continuum with the lower Yellow River.

The primary importance of Indo–China borderlands means this region must be understood as *sui generis*, a distinct region with its own history and composition. Indo–China borderlands constitute a historical core where major eastern Eurasian civilizations developed, rather than erroneously assumed a marginal zone—a stance that inevitably resulted from the Central-Plain-oriented Sino-centrism and Indo-Aryan-oriented Indo-centrism worldviews. Only so can we understand why several psychoactive substances were initially cultivated or produced from the very beginning of the civilizations here. Their cultivation accompanied early civilizations and was an integral part of them. Alcohol, cannabis, and later tea emerged within the early civilizations indigenous here. Substance use here is a long-standing tradition rooted in the region's deep history, embedded in human evolution and collective life, rather than an anomaly. On the other hand, the abuse of psychoactive substances has been a tragic outcome of the much later conflicts imposed by the power struggles between local communities and modern bureaucratic and imperial states.

I argue in this chapter not against narcotic control, nor against the fact that using substances may entail disastrous health implications. I track the early adaptive functions of psychoactive substances for social solidarity among the communities in Indo–China borderlands, as evidenced in historical and sociological research. However, it was the persistent struggle and conflict between state-making and community resistance, through means of taxation, prohibition, extraction, and market monopolization, that transformed substance use from locally evolved practices of communal solidarity into an economic weapon. In short, the Neolithic agricultural revolution produced substances for human use to build communal bonds and solidarity, but contemporary state-making efforts and local resistance both exploited substances for their own causes and manufactured the public health disaster.

Substance Use in Indo–China Borderlands

The significance of the Indo–China borderlands for the study of psychoactive substances is inseparable from their significance in human prehistory and early social development. From tea, alcohol, and cannabis to opium and its derivatives, this region has long been infamously associated with both licit and illicit substance use and production. For example, Burma remains one of the world's largest sources of opiates and synthetic drugs, with recent estimates indicating over 50,000 hectares of opium poppy (Johnston et al. 2019). In Northeast India, 22.3 percent

of adults reported current alcohol consumption compared to the national average of 12 percent. Alcohol drinking is also much elevated in samples of adults from Yunnan and Tibet, compared to China's average (Yang et al. 2021). What makes the Indo–China borderlands particularly burdened by the persistent production and use of psychoactive substances across historical periods?

Two explanatory paradigms have dominated scholarly efforts to account for the production and use of psychoactive substances. The first is the deviance paradigm, rooted largely in criminology and social psychology, which treats substance use primarily as deviant behavior. Approaches such as social bond theory, social disorganization theory, and routine activity theory locate drug use in weakened social control, anomic neighborhood, or economic inequality. The second paradigm is constructionist. This body of work has contributed to academic knowledge of how stigma, power relations, and moral regulation created the very narcotic problems that moral entrepreneurs and power elites attempt to suppress.

Both paradigms help explain substance use, yet each falls short in the Indo–China borderlands. The deviance paradigm illuminates micro-level mechanisms but remains ill-equipped to explain why entire regions become historically entrenched sites of substance production and circulation, or why the use persists even in places with relatively stable social institutions. In contrast, the constructionist paradigm can overstate the social construction of drug problems. However, substance use cannot be really comprehended without specifying what each substance actually does to human cognition, emotion, and behavior.

Indeed, psychoactive substances affect human behavior in functional ways. Their evolutionarily developed functions can confer adaptive advantages in various circumstances. Experimental research shows that some non-human species, such as fruit flies, actively seek out fermented substances, suggesting that psychoactive compounds can confer adaptive advantages under certain ecological conditions. In human societies, psychoactive substances have similarly enhanced survival and coordination. Opium derivatives are routinely used as medicine, just as amphetamine is used as a performance-enhancing tool; caffeine and nicotine alter cognitive and emotional states; and alcohol has facilitated social interaction and mediated status hierarchies and power relations. Far from being deviant, psychoactive substances have always been integral to human social and economic life.

Exactly due to these evolutionarily adapted functions, human societies need, although to a moderate degree, psychoactive substances to fully operate as a collective unit. In response, various political actors struggle to control and monopolize the production and circulation of substances. They all try to make use of the very functions that substances deliver on the human body and mood to achieve their intended goal of community-making and state-making (Singer 2012; Stevens 2010). This historical and political macro-level perspective has been productively applied to other narcotic-intensive regions of the world, but remains underdeveloped in scholarship on the Indo–China borderlands. Within this framework, states, insurgent groups, religious institutions, merchant networks, and criminal organizations are interest-pursuing agents embedded in specific institutional and cultural configurations (Andreas 2019; Bucerius 2014; Mandić 2020). Psychoactive

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substances become strategic resources in these struggles. For example, centralized states have historically tried to monopolize, levy taxes, and penalize psychoactive substances to finance their government and troops. Local elites and community leaders, as a form of the proto-state, have used the same substances to sustain ritual life and consolidate communal authority (Merz 2008). In this view, the production and use of psychoactive substances constitute a political economy of competition and alliance among multiple actors, rather than a social problem reducible to individual addiction or socioeconomic marginality.

In this chapter, I argue that substances contributed to the emergence and persistence of ancient civilizations by supporting community integration, ritual authority, and economic exchange. Only later did such substance use manifest dysfunctions associate with conflict, extraction, and state consolidation. Against this backdrop, this chapter asks a central question: How have psychoactive substances functioned simultaneously as instruments of state-making and community-making in the Indo–China borderlands, and what does this reveal about the relationship between the state and local communities?

Methodologically, this chapter adopts an interdisciplinary historical–comparative approach. I examine psychoactive substances as instruments in long-term processes of state-making and community-making. The analysis integrates evidence from genetic and linguistic scholarship on population origins, archaeological research on fermentation and plant domestication, and historical records of conflicts over substances.

Methodology

This chapter uses a historical–comparative approach to study psychoactive substances in the Indo–China borderlands. The goal is to understand how substances have been embedded in social organization, political power, and community life over long historical periods.

The analysis draws on four types of evidence. First, it uses genetic and linguistic research to situate the Indo–China borderlands in deep historical time. This literature helps establish that the region has been a long-term zone of settlement, interaction, and cultural continuity. This background is necessary for understanding why substance use has persisted here across many centuries.

Second, the chapter draws on archaeological research related to agriculture, fermentation, and the domestication of psychoactive plants. Evidence from Northeast India, Yunnan, and nearby upland areas documents early alcohol production, the cultivation of plants such as cannabis and tea, and the material conditions that made sustained substance use possible. These findings show that psychoactive substances were part of everyday life from the early stages of agrarian society.

Third, the chapter also examines historical records such as dynastic documents and religious texts. These materials are used to exemplify how states and local authorities attempted to regulate, tax, or monopolize substances such as tea, alcohol, and opium. They also show how local communities responded to these efforts, sometimes cooperating with the state and sometimes resisting it.

Finally, the chapter relies on existing ethnographic and historical studies of upland societies in Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia. These studies provide concrete descriptions of how substances are used in ritual, labor, trade, and social interaction. They help link large political processes to everyday social practices.

This chapter looks for recurring patterns across time and place. It asks why substances repeatedly become objects of state control and tools for building local solidarity. A historical–comparative approach is necessary because these processes unfold over long periods and across changing political systems.

Evidence

Prehistoric Substance Use in Indo–China Borderlands

Human groups possessed language and tools long before civilization (writing and state). What distinguishes the Neolithic transition is the emergence of agriculture, permanent settlement, and surplus production. These changes created new social problems: how to bind larger groups and legitimate authority. Psychoactive substances proved effective for these purposes. Studies have hypothesized the evolutionary advantages of using fermented fruit and grains to locate the sources of rich energy among non-human primates (Clites, Hofmann, and Pierce 2023; Dudley 2014), but few have noted the potential advantages of alcoholic beverages in facilitating the functioning of complex societies among humans. Indeed, psychoactive substances had several critical functions for social solidarity (Singer 2012; Wadley 2016).

Many of these early societies at the beginning domesticated plants for subsistence, but also developed new uses for surplus produce. When productivity consistently outpaced consumption under the blessing of tool innovation, the right soil and climate, and a fair system of distribution, the surplus produce needs to find another utility. Early communities in the Indo–China borderlands developed fermentation, converting surplus grains into alcoholic beverages. The Neolithic cultures in 1000 BCE Northeast India produced pottery that made fermentation and alcohol storage feasible (Hazarika 2013), and oral history has further corroborated this possibility (Tamang 2022). Archaeological remains from Neolithic sites in China and the Indo–China borderlands show that alcohol was produced and consumed regularly. Pottery jars, residue analyses, and brewing vessels document this practice. Alcohol converted agricultural surplus into a socially usable resource. It could be consumed collectively in ritual settings and redistributed by emerging elites to create shared emotional and bodily experiences. Evidence from Neolithic China (ca. 9000–3900 BP) indicates that communal drinking was embedded in social life and helped build social networks and reinforce group solidarity (Liu 2021). Chemical residue analyses of pottery from Neolithic sites in China, including the Yangshao Culture (ca. 7,000–5,000 BP) and Dawenkou culture, dated to about 7,000 years ago, show that people intentionally brewed and drank fermented beverages made from rice, millet, Job’s tears, and other plants. These were often associated with sacred rituals and

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communal feasting (Liao et al. 2025; Liu 2021). Chinese archaeologists compared the drinking ceremonies and community dance depicted in Yangshao-era pottery with modern Qiang and Tibetan practices and concluded that alcohol drinking was the key feature that distinguished this western region from other ancient cultures in eastern China (Liao et al. 2025). The spread and intensification of drinking vessels and fermentation technology indicate that alcohol was widely consumed in ritual and social settings, reflecting growing demands for collective activities and feasting that accompanied social complexity (Liao et al. 2025). These material findings show that alcohol was, at least accidentally, functional in collective activities and communal solidarity.

Long-term substance use may have even shaped the biological traits of populations in Indo–China borderlands. Genetic studies show that the distribution of alcohol-metabolizing enzyme variants differs sharply across East Asian populations (Lee et al. 2014). The well-known ALDH2 deficiency that leads to facial flushing and acute alcohol intolerance, known as “Asian flush”, is in fact concentrated mainly in southeastern China, Korea, and Japan. The condition reaches up to 90% in Zhejiang and Shanghai, but it is very rare among Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman groups in western China, the Tibetan Plateau, and Northeast India, as the ALDH2 mutation is virtually non-existent among these populations (Lee et al. 2014). Instead, many of these populations exhibit ADH1 gene variants associated with more efficient ethanol metabolism, suggesting long-term selective pressures linked to sustained alcohol consumption (Clites, Hofmann, and Pierce 2023; Peng et al. 2010). We should be careful in interpreting this as evidence of biological determinism. Instead, it points to a process of gene–culture coevolution in which routine alcohol use in communal life and social organization over long periods had led to biological adaptation. It requires a relationship more than a coincidence that the adoption of alcoholic beverages fermented from sorghum, millet, and barley, which were consumed among the first Sino-Tibetan people before the domestication of rice, happened almost at the same time as Sino-Tibetan agriculturalists started to aggressively expand from the eastern Tibetan Plateau or upper Yellow River valleys into central and southwest China. The formation of a more coordinated society, mobilization of collective activities, and complex mobility capacity may have been facilitated by the adoption of a psychoactive substance that reduces fear and inhibition, stimulates impulse, amplifies the brethren feeling towards fellows, and the inimical feeling towards outsiders.

Other than alcohol, prehistoric civilizations in the Indo–China borderlands also engaged in the early domestication and use of other psychoactive plants. Both tea and cannabis were first domesticated in the Indo–China borderlands, and they remain key hubs of production today. Tea domestication was first proposed to be in Yunnan and Assam in early scholarship, which is now confirmed by modern genetic studies (Meegahakumbura et al. 2018). A more liberal estimate would locate the origin of tea domestication to northeast India, Burma, Yunnan, and parts of Sichuan. Although the English word for “tea” came from the Hokkien pronunciation of the Chinese word 茶, the reconstructed Old Chinese for this word was pronounced *rla*, which is still preserved in various Sino-Tibetan languages in

Indo–China borderlands: *khalap* in Naga, *polap* in Kachin/Jingpho, *la* or *le* in Yi, Lahu, and Naxi, *lepet* in Burmese. Plant genetic studies and linguistic evidence jointly point to Indo–China borderlands as the homeland of tea cultivation and the earliest center of tea consumption for psychoactive purposes.

Cannabis was first used in the same broad region in southern Himalaya, Yunnan, and Sichuan, as early as 12,000 years ago, with genetic evidence indicating the purposeful selection for the psychoactive types in the wild, in contrast to the textile use of hemp (Ren et al. 2021). By the 4th century CE, Daoist texts already documented widely ceremonial uses of cannabis for its mind-altering effects. In the medicine book *Shennong Bencao*, cannabis was documented to have the properties of “tastes mildly spicy, grows in river valleys, cures injury, good for organs, expels coldness, eating too much drives people crazy and see ghosts, eating for a long time lifts spirit and feels delighted”.¹ Together, these substances functioned as technologies of social coordination. In the subcontinent, one of the oldest hallucinogenic drinks—*Sumo*, as recorded in the Rigveda,² or its linguistic equivalent *Haoma* used in Zoroastrian ritual—is widely believed to derive from either ephedra or cannabis. Although there is little evidence that non-Indo-Aryans consumed this drink, ephedra was also native to and likely first domesticated in the west and north ranges of the Tibetan plateau.

More importantly, psychoactive substances co-evolved with institutions. Tea structured monastic routines and labor rhythms. Alcohol anchored ritual calendars and alliance-building. Cannabis mediated healing, cosmology, and altered states are central to religious authority. By this point, we can see that psychoactive substances were not pathological addictions, but the result of purposeful cultivation and production in prehistoric and historical societies. Alcohol and other psychoactive substances were used for concrete social purposes, including but not limited to cooperation, bonding, mobilization, and emotional regulation. Because the main civilizations in this region (that is, the Tibeto-Burman and early Sinitic groups) emerged in this homeland together with the production of psychoactive substances, their social impact went far beyond medicine or individual recreation. Because, as these societies grew larger and more complex, psychoactive substances became increasingly involved in social organizations, not limited to the organization of deviant activities but also inclusive of how legitimate governments mobilize and extract resources.

State-Making

Following Weber, state-making refers to how states try to control violence and establish legitimate rule within a certain territory (Weber 2019). As Tilly later emphasized, this process is closely tied to extraction through war efforts, especially in places where states must raise revenue to maintain order or fight rivals (Tilly 1985). A vein of literature was devoted to studying how the states use expansion and consolidate power using narcotic control, and in turn, state-running logistics and management are affected and constrained by the action of drug producers, who are often competitors to key state interests (Andreas 2019; Roberts and Chen 2013).

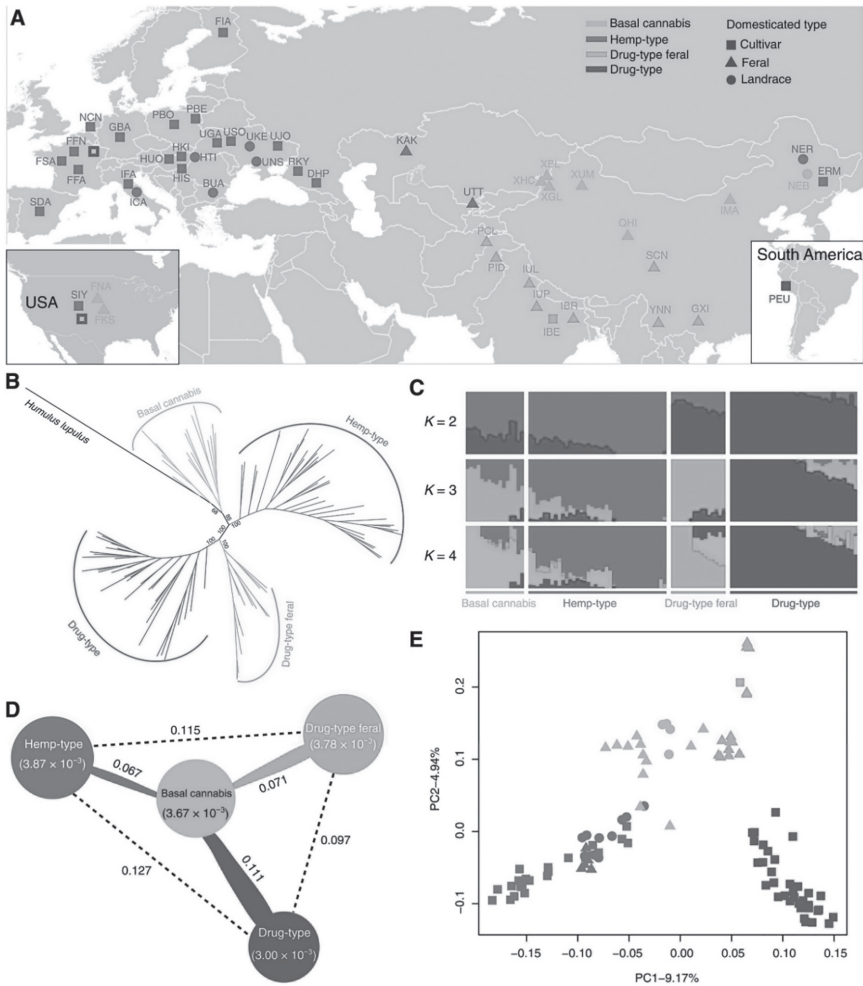
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Photo 2.1 Earliest domestication of cannabis.

Source: Ren et al. (2021).

In frontier and upland regions like the Indo–China borderlands, the state-making process has seen limited success. Mountains, deep forests, and rugged terrain make it hard for states to use force directly. People are often scattered across small settlements and organized through strong local ties, which further weakens outside control. Because of this, states have often depended on indirect ways to extend their authority, such as taxing certain goods, setting moral rules, and controlling key products.

Psychoactive substances fit these strategies particularly well. First, they are easy for states to tax and generate fiscal revenue. From the seventh to the fifteenth centuries, the Tea–Horse Road linked Sichuan and Yunnan to Tibet and South Asia, facilitating exchanges of tea, horses, and medicinal goods. This trade financed military campaigns and administrative expansion, demonstrating how substances could be converted into state capacity. The Tang dynasty established government tea trading ports to manage borderland commerce. During the Song dynasty, the Tea and Horse Agency institutionalized this system by exchanging tea for horses needed for frontier defense, effectively transforming Sichuan into a fiscal asset. While this system generated revenue and military supplies for the state, it also placed heavy burdens on local producers and, in many cases, pushed them into debt or bankruptcy.

The logic of monopoly intensified under the Ming dynasty. Private tea trade was criminalized, and violations could be punished by death, enforcing an almost absolute state monopoly over tea production and circulation. Similar patterns appeared outside China. In British India, the colonial state monopolized opium production and distribution, which generated major fiscal revenue and helped finance imperial administration.

Second, these substances are easy to regulate in moral terms. States can decide which kinds of use are allowed and which are forbidden, define proper rituals versus improper behavior, and use laws or moral language to justify intervention (Vuolo et al. 2024). Confucian ritual texts such as the Book of Rites (礼记) and the Rites of Zhou (周礼) explicitly prescribed when alcohol should be used. Unsurprisingly, proper and licit use of alcohol was closely linked to official activities, such as ancestral sacrifices, court ceremonies, and official banquets. In contrast, grassroots and communal festival use of alcohol was often censored (Dikötter, Laamann, and Xun 2002). Imperial law followed this logic: The Tang Code (*Tanglü shuyi*) did not prohibit alcohol, but punished drunken violence and public disorder. In Northeast India, Ahom chronicles (*Buranjis*) record state concern with alcohol and opium use among soldiers and officials, citing Buddhist principles and moral stories. Interestingly, the early modern history of Bhutan and Sikkim saw a vehement official stance towards tobacco, but indifference and tolerance of opium use, which highlights the moralistic tendency rooted more in nationalism than science alone (McKay 2014).

Third, controlling substances can indirectly shape local organizational structures and the relationship between the central government and the local communities (Andreas 2019). It is well known that the Opium War of China was not triggered by any puritanical prohibitionist from the Manchu dynasty. Lin Zexu's campaign against British opium was about eradicating consumption as well as restoring the state's control over the trade by redirecting opium circulation into official channels. In Tibet and other upland societies, control over tea affected religious and political organizations: as tea became a daily necessity, monasteries and local leaders who controlled access to tea gained considerable power within their communities.

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In southwest China, the *tusi* (native chieftain) system offers another example of how substance control reshaped local authority and state–community relations. During the Ming period, *tusi* who maintained good relations with the central government were granted licenses over tea production and trade. A well-known case is the Nakhi lords of Lijiang, who controlled major sections of the Tea–Horse trade routes linking Yunnan to Tibet. Through state recognition and accepting the Chinese surname of Mu, this clan gained authority over local tea production and circulation, while acting as an intermediary for imperial supply and frontier stability. By granting substance-related privileges to cooperative *tusi*, the state strengthened loyal local elites, weakened rival groups, and reorganized frontier governance without direct rule. Similar episodes repeat in history. In the 18th century, Manchu troops captured Sipsongpanna after an incident involving Chinese tea merchants and local Tai producers. Although the Manchu army then partially retreated after more conflicts, the local power dynamics permanently changed, and tea was the trigger (Perdue 2008).

For these reasons, psychoactive substances repeatedly became targets of state attention. Across different historical periods, states tried to regulate, tax, monopolize, or ban their production and circulation.

Community-Making

Community-making refers to processes through which local groups generate solidarity, legitimacy, and collective capacity independent of centralized authority. Drawing on Durkheim, ritual practices—especially those involving collective consumption—are central to the production of moral community. In the Indo–China borderlands, psychoactive substances such as alcohol, cannabis, and opium have long played this role. While states repeatedly attempted to monopolize and regulate these substances, local communities consistently used them to build solidarity, secure economic autonomy, and resist incorporation (Mandić 2020).

James Scott’s concept of *Zomia* highlights strategies of state evasion in upland Southeast Asia, including mobility, swidden agriculture, oral traditions, and flexible social organization (Scott 2010). This chapter extends Scott’s framework by arguing that psychoactive substances are a missing but essential element of these strategies. Substances were not merely consumed; they organized ritual life, funded local institutions, and stabilized social ties under conditions of political pressure.

Ritual significance: Collective rituals generate a sense of moral community that attributes and diffuses strong, meaningful bonds among the ritual participants. By drinking or smoking together, participants reinforce social ties and create a feeling of shared identity (Collins 2014; Rich, Hu and Xiao 2014; Yang, Vuolo and Wu 2022). Across the Indo–China borderlands, collective substance use has been central to ritual life and social integration. Alcohol is the clearest example. Among many upland societies in Northeast India, upland Burma, Yunnan, and eastern Tibet, locally brewed rice beer or millet beer accompanies nearly all major social events—births, marriages, funerals, harvest festivals, and inter-village feasts (Yang, Barnett, and Yang 2021). Sharing a cup or a pipe carried meanings of trust

and hospitality. These practices did not require formal institutions and often ran counter to public health and political campaigns.

Economic bases: Psychoactive substances also gave communities economic independence from central authorities. The mountainous borderlands of Indo-China are particularly suited for growing narcotics. Outside the Tibetan plateau, this region's warm temperatures, fertile soil, diverse ecosystems, and abundant rainfall and sunlight make crops like tobacco, tea, opium poppies, and marijuana easy to cultivate and highly productive. These crops have another advantage: they're valuable relative to their weight, making them practical to transport through rough terrain. They're also easier to conceal, leave unharvested, or store than conventional crops. This made them perfect for remote frontier economies. As Scott argues, highland societies often maintained their independence by trading in goods that states struggled to control (Scott 2010).

Drug crops functioned as alternative tax bases, supporting local governance in areas beyond state authority. In Kham, Tibetans preferred tea bricks as an alternative currency over decrepit Ming and later Qing, copper coins (Gros 2023). Under the influence, people in Sichuan also started to adopt alternative currencies, including tea bricks and sea shells, when the fiscal credit of the central government started to deteriorate (Yang 2018). Attempts by the Qing dynasty to control opium production and trade in Sichuan and Yunnan were repeatedly frustrated by evasion or armed resistance (Bello 2003). In the early 20th century, Liu Wenhui promoted opium in Kham to consolidate his status as a feudal lord (Gros 2023). Opium cultivation was, in fact, an economic ledger for Han warlords like Liu Wenhui and Yi general Deng Xiuting (Muga Kedi), who each utilized the market value of the medicinal and recreational materials in resistance to the nationalist government's attempt to impose their weak fiat currency.

Opium also funded local administrations, religious institutions, and armed groups. Ethnic militias in Burma depended heavily on opium and heroin trafficking to finance their resistance against the central government (Meehan and Dan 2023). Similarly, along the India-Myanmar border, insurgent groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) utilized drug trafficking routes to generate revenue for their military (Merz 2008).

Symbols of identity: Finally, psychoactive substances became symbols of collective identity and resistance. Sociologists have long found that substance use, even the licit use, is more of a gesture of resistance to the middle-class ideals of success imposed on the disadvantaged groups (Frizzell, Vuolo, and Kelly 2021; Kelly 2007; Young 1971). In Northeast India, traditional alcohol brewing among Naga groups remains closely tied to ethnic identity and ancestral practice. A fermented drink based on millet, *kodo ko jaanr*, was already mentioned in the Kirati literature in 600 BCE and is traditionally reserved for sacred ceremonies like worship and marriage in the Himalayan ranges (Tamang 2022). Ethnography of the Rongmei Naga shows that rice beer is not treated as ordinary alcohol but as a vehicle to preserve community tradition, undefined authenticity, and resistance to the colonial state power (Kamei 2025). In fact, cereal-based alcoholic beverages are essential to cultural life and festivities for indigenous people of Northeast India,

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who often consider alcohol use as a symbolic identity to distinguish authentic indigeneity from the more abstinent Muslim and Hindu immigrants (Barooah and Saikia 2024). In this sense, psychoactive substances functioned as tools of cultural continuity. They sometimes remind people of ancestral practices long lost to the modern standard of middle-class lifestyle and tell people in nuanced ways their difference from state-sanctioned identities.

Tea and alcohol are two more acceptable and legitimate forms of reminiscence of one's cultural identity, but the ambiguous and porous boundary between licit and illicit substances leaves ample room for disobedient groups to mark their identity with an association with opium and even synthetic drugs (Arsovska 2015). Opium acquired symbolic meaning as a marker of autonomy (Merz 2008). In several upland regions, opium cultivation was defended not only for economic reasons but as a way of life distinct from lowland norms (Michaud, Swain, and Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2016). In the case of Lanten Yao (Mun), the ethnic identification with the opium economy was so strong that the key goal of the modernization project by the Lao state is to replace the opium oriented identity with modern infrastructure, such as smartphones and tourism (Estevez and Palmer 2024).

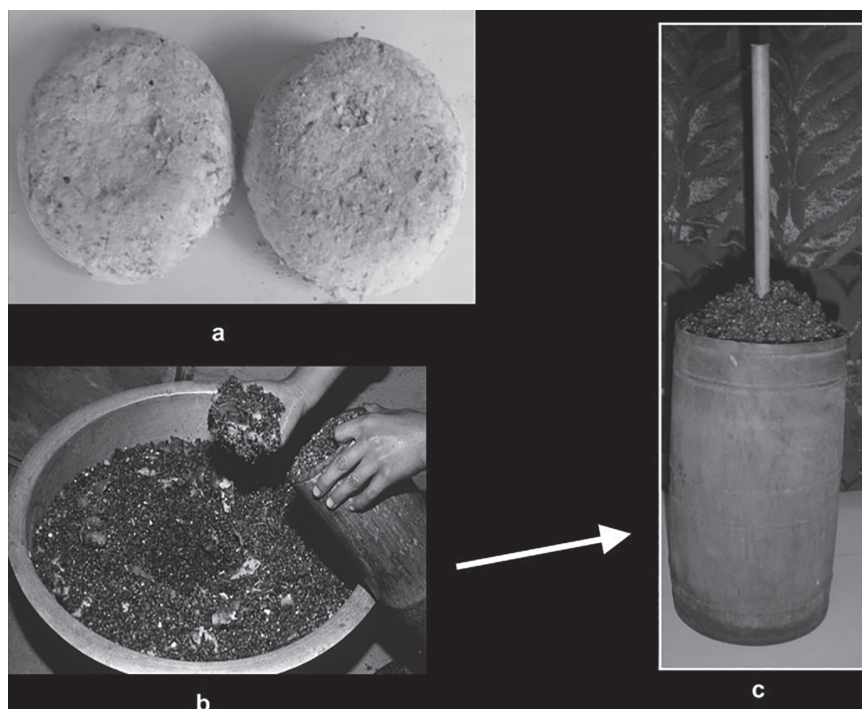


Photo 2.2 The traditional making of kodo ko jaanr, a Himalayan alcoholic beverage.

Source: Tamang (2022).

Conclusion

The Indo–China borderlands remain fragmented today. The region is marked by extreme cultural diversity and a complex political terrain that still makes direct governance difficult. States exist, but their reach is uneven. Meanwhile, variegated communities strive to maintain some independence or monopoly over others. Historically, this region was central to the early formation of populations, languages, and cultures across much of Asia. Psychoactive substances were present from the beginning of these processes. I have discussed how alcohol, tea, cannabis, and later opium were part of how people organized social bonds and boundaries. This history suggests that psychoactive substances are not marginal to social order. They have been built into collective life for a very long time, since the very beginning of the cultures in the Sino-Tibetan (aka. Trans-Himalayan) language family.

The historical and comparative evidence assembled in this chapter points to a central theoretical insight: psychoactive substances in the Indo–China borderlands functioned less as consumable goods than as relational infrastructure embedded in long-term struggles between state-making and community-making. Across pre-historic and historic contexts, psychoactive substances repeatedly served as technologies that facilitated social coordination for people in Indo–China borderlands. This perspective moves beyond seeing substances as either adaptive remnants or social pathologies. States repeatedly sought to capture these resources through extraction and prohibition. Conversely, local communities used substances to sustain autonomy and resist state incorporation. This produced a recurring pattern: substances initially embedded in communal life were destabilized by state intervention, leading to cycles of violence and public health harm.

The damage associated with drugs in the modern era cannot be ignored. Much of that damage does not come from substance use itself, but from rapid political and economic change that has disrupted older forms of regulation and meaning. States, markets, and armed actors have all intensified extraction and circulation. In that struggle, ordinary people have often paid the price. They have become the victims of the abuse, not the use, of psychoactive substances that their biological system has not evolved fast enough to adapt to. However, seeing psychoactive substances as moral problems or policy failures, a stance that most nation-states adopt, misses this longer history.

Notes

- 1 麻蕢: 一名麻勃。味辛平。生川谷。治七傷。利五藏。下血寒氣。多食令人見鬼狂走。久服通神明輕身
- 2 Rigveda 8.48: We have drunk the soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods.

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