The Asian Cocaine Crisis
Pharmaceuticals, consumers and control in South and East Asia, c. 1900-1945
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Introduction and Aims
Between 1900 and 1945 Asia became one of the world’s largest markets for cocaine—as medicinal substance and recreational intoxicant—and was used as far apart as India and China. The project tackles the questions of why Asians took to cocaine in the early 20th century and what drove governments there to respond so rapidly to the demand for this modern pharmaceutical. In 1900, controls were imposed but officials grappled with the use and supply of cocaine for the next five decades. The project will offer radical new perspectives on the production, consumption and control of medicines and intoxicants.

This project will produce the first study of a drugs crisis forgotten in Asia and by historians of intoxicants and medicines. It aims to: i. explain the growth of the market in the region; ii. shine a light on government responses; iii. trace sources of supply and distribution; iv. identify origins of ideas about cocaine in Asia.

Cocaine Global Timeline
1492s The Incas operate coca plantations in the Andes. The Spanish take over in the 1500s and coca goes global.
1708 Coca mentioned in Institutions Medicas, a materia medica by German doctor and botanist H. Boerhaave.
1855 Cocaine first extracted from coca leaves.
1862 Merck starts production of commercial cocaine.
1863 Vin Martini (coca wine) is introduced by A. Martini.
1860s Coca used as a popular anaesthetic in eye surgery.
1884 Freud publishes On Coca; recommends cocaine use.
1886 Merck produces 156,352 pounds of cocaine.
1886 Coca-Cola is introduced by J. Pemberton.
1902s Porro Davie starts to manufacture refined cocaïne.
1919 Coca-Cola enters market in Asia, especially India, prompting regulations from local administrations.
1920 Coca-Cola removes coca from their formula.
1920s Cases of nasal damage are reported as snorting cocaine becomes popular.
1912 Coca-Cola related fatalities reported in USA.
1914 Cocaine is banned in India.
1920s The League of Nations spearheads global regulation.
1930s Japan emerges as the world’s leading cocaine producer (23.3%), followed by USA (21.3%), Germany (15%), UK (9.9%) and France (8.3%).


Research Questions
Consumers: Who consumed cocaine in South and East Asia in this period and why did they do so?
Suppliers: Who was involved in sourcing, distributing and marketing cocaine in those regions during these decades?
Governments: What drove efforts to prevent the consumption of cocaine in Asia and how successful were the measures taken?
Society: How were ideas about cocaine and its consumers formed among scientists and doctors, among officials and diplomats, and in society more generally?

Where’s Asia in Global Cocaine History?

Discussion
Asian consumers of intoxicants and narcotics have been at the heart of the history of drug use and drug control since the 19th century. Representations of Asians—as passive and helpless drug users—created in the Victorian era, is central to understanding addiction as well as regulation. The establishment and development of today’s international drugs regulatory system stemmed from the Asian consumption of local drugs—opium and cannabis—and historians have therefore focused on these. By examining the rapid growth of a market for cocaine, that most modern of pharmaceutical products in 1900, this project promises to produce a more complex picture of Asia’s drugs consumers. It is noteworthy that the initial sources of the drug lay outside of Asia, in Holland and Germany, and answering the question of who produced and transported cocaine into the region will provide important new conclusions about the global circulation of drugs and medicines in general, and of cocaine in particular. By looking at a medicine that arrived in Asia despite the efforts of colonial governments to prevent it, the study promises to reshape ideas so that pharmaceutical companies, medical entrepreneurs and local commercial interests and placed at the heart of accounts of the ways Asia took to Western medicines in the early 20th century. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries administrations in Asia led the way in debating how intoxicating-consumings societies could and should be governed. Interestingly, cocaine was linked by both colonial governments and community elders to youth at a time of growing anxiety about anti-colonial violence and growing nationalism. Due to these factors, cocaine emerges as a unique drug commodity and study of cocaine in Asia through these lenses promises to force a rethink.

Findings/Goals
The project would provide a wide-ranging and nuanced set of questions centred on consumers and suppliers of cocaine in Asia along with government responses and ongoing social attitudes to cocaïne in the first half of the 20th century. This would capture local detail and offer a comprehensive and comparative assessment. Over all, the research will test overarching theories about the place of intoxication and medication in modern societies against the data on cocaine from Asia to produce newer and more nuanced ideas that reflect experiences beyond the West.