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Yaba or Shabu — It's the Next Heroin

It's called Yaba in Thailand and Shabu in Malaysia, but by whatever name methamphetamine drug is Asia's new high and as easy to buy as a bowl of noodles or rice.

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May 14, 2012

FEATURE

The pills come in pretty colours of dusky rose, green, red and orange. Placed in a palm, they look innocent enough, like pencil-eraser sized pieces of candy — something a child would love. Closer inspection will show that there are imprints of these alphabets “R” or “WY” which tell you that what you're looking at is the drug called Yaba — which is set to become, if not already, Thailand's most abused drug after heroin.

Also called “crazy medicine” in Thailand, Yaba is a mayhem mix of Methamphetamine (Meth) and caffeine which is shaped into a circular bright-coloured pill.

Meth is also known as “Nazi Speed”, a reference to its widespread use (under the brand name “Pervitin”) by Hitler's men during World War II. Malaysians would know it better by its street name, Shabu.



Call it what you may, the names do nothing except to claim more fans. The fact that it is sometimes flavoured — grape, vanilla and orange — and referred to by the Thais as “chocalee” helps with its popularity among children young as 10 years old.

Yaba is considered to be even deadlier than pure Meth, its counterpart more popular in the western hemisphere. Incidentally, Yaba has already made its entrance into the United States.

In 2005, that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said it had seized at least 12,000 Yaba tablets from mail facilities throughout the nation [sic — these seizures were made by U.S. Customs and Border Protection], manufactured by a single foreign organization.

Small enough to fit a regular drinking straw, which is incidentally how the drug is transported, Yaba can be swallowed as pill, or heated on an aluminium foil, its fumes inhaled — a technique which is also called “Chasing the Dragon.”

Children, teens are targets

The physiological effects of Yaba are nearly identical to methamphetamine, according to federal researchers. The only difference is, with Yaba the ‘high’ can last for days instead of hours.

Caffeine helps slow down the release of meth into the body. First, it starts with an adrenaline rush, like racing down the first hill of a roller coaster for hours.

Your body temperature rises. Chills shoot down your arms, legs and chest.

Some users hallucinate sensations such as bugs crawling under their skin. They bite or pick at their skin to get the bugs out. Then, when the high is coming to an end, users clench their fists, their face gets rigid and the whole body may shake.

Some people will sleep for days following the high, known as “crashing.” Drug enforcers agree, however, that it’s not the length of the ‘high’ that makes Yaba more dangerous than meth, it’s who Yaba is marketed to — children.

According to the US National Drug Intelligence Center, the fact that the pills are bright coloured and candy-flavoured as well as distributed through legitimate pharmacists give the perception that it is safer than other drugs.

In Thailand, drug dealers are marketing this drug to the younger generation, getting children, teenagers and 20-somethings hooked on the drug to both increase demand and get younger, hipper dealers.

If you know which alleyway to head to in Thailand, don’t be fazed when men call after you in halting English, “Yaba. I have Yaba. Good quality. You want?”

Only [\$10] a hit

A Yaba pills can cost between 300-500 Bhat [US\$10-15] sometimes more, depending on demand and sometimes, quality.

Since 2003, Thailand’s war on drugs has been more of a violent, physical war.

Responding to an epidemic of Yaba use in Thailand, its then-prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra approved measures to treat a drug pusher as “a dangerous person who is threatening social and national security.”

The ensuing campaign resulted in the homicides of 2,275 drug criminals in three months, more than double the number killed during any three-month period before it, according to Human Rights Watch.

The Thai government maintains they were killed by other drug criminals, but the human rights group remained skeptical and cited cases of police shootings and “extrajudicial killings.”

This has done nothing to deter the Yaba pushers and addicts, not only in Thailand, but also all across Southeast Asia.

Wherever you go, be it to Laotian villages, Thai construction sites, nightclubs in Shanghai, Tokyo or Dhaka — methamphetamine which is Asia’s new high, is now as easy to buy as a bowl of noodles or a packet of rice.

Its popularity is a symptom of the region’s astonishing economic growth. This new prosperity has liberalized trade, reduced transportation costs, accelerated the movement of people and products, and created a vast middle class with cash to burn.

Mobile methamphetamine labs

All this has helped traffickers shift their product to millions of fresh consumers.

Add to this is the fact that Meth is cheap and easy to make. Unlike opium fields in highland Southeast Asia, meth labs can't be detected by satellite.

Something that grows out of the ground can be much more easily detected than a mobile 'laboratory' that can be dismantled and moved within a couple of hours.

And these 'laboratories' are reputedly capable of producing huge amounts of methamphetamine.

Asia's appetite for narcotics is now so prodigious that it attracts criminal organizations from across the planet. Iranian and West African drug mules are now routinely arrested at Asian airports.

Meth can be eaten, smoked, snorted or injected. It is said to boost energy, self-esteem and sexual pleasure, but can also cause paranoia and aggression.

It is highly addictive and withdrawal symptoms include fatigue, anxiety and long-term depression.

That addiction is difficult to treat, partly because the drug's popularity straddles social and economic divides, town and country, work and leisure.

Yaba's high and low

The same drug that helps labourers endure back-breaking work in the fields allows affluent urbanites to party till dawn.

Eighteen-year-old Chaiya Charoen is one among thousands of teenagers who rely on Yaba to get through the day. He asks to be called Chai, a curt dismissal to his full name which translates as victorious and triumphant in Thai.

A Yaba addict since he was 17-years old, the sprite-faced teenager gamely shared what got him hooked on the drug.

Chai tells us that he comes from an average family in terms of finances. He is the fourth of five children.

He had his sights set on a university education and the competition for a scholarship was fierce. There were many times that Chai felt he couldn't keep up with the demands of maintaining a consistently good grade.

One day, a friend told him about a pill that could help him stay awake and give him the surplus energy he needed to study and keep up with the competition as it were.

"This was an ex-schoolmate of mine and he gave me the pill and explained how it can be taken. I was falling back on my grades and I needed to do something about it. I thought, how bad could just one pill be? So I took it," he said, shoulders shrugging in apathy.

Chai confessed that the initial phase was great and he began taking Yaba more often than not.

He would study after every Yaba hit and initially scored good grades. But as the days progressed, his grades began dropping and eventually he stopped thinking about his education altogether, not caring in the least about the consequences.

'It destroyed my life'



As for the money to buy Yaba, Chai unabashedly admits to stealing from his parents and older siblings. This is something he still does.

He said that his parents probably know what he's doing, but are just too tired to punish him or scold him any more.

"So they just leave me to my devices, which suits me fine," he added unapologetically.

Chai is also unrepentant. He doesn't see a reason to quit Yaba; in fact he doesn't want to and knows that he will never be able to give it up.

His need to "chase" Yaba is too great.

"If I don't do this daily, how am I going to continue my day? I know that this has destroyed my life. I have no interest in anything else and I don't care about what it does to my family because all I care about is where am going to get the money for my next hit.

"I know I'm going to die in a couple of years and I have no more friends. No one wants to talk to me any more and this includes my family. So what's there to live for?

"I might as well just keep on doing this — like a slow suicide until my time comes," he said, face hard but with eyes spilling out tears.

"I have nothing else but this," he continued, taking out a straw which contained four Yaba pills — enough for a two-day hit.

Even as Chai now admits, "I wish I hadn't listened to my friend that day, when he suggested I take Yaba," one wonders if there is truth in his words.

More so that he said this while placing a pretty pink pill on a ready piece of aluminium, lighter expertly held in the other hand.

"Maybe I'll give this up one day," he smiled through glazed eyes as he claimed the first wafts of smoke.