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# China's War on Drugs: the struggle to expel Opiates from the Opium Wars (1839) to today

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# **China's War on Drugs:**

the struggle to expel Opiates from the Opium Wars (1839) to today

Breanna Heilicher

Despite fighting a longstanding battle against Opium, and its subset Heroin, China's attempts to eradicate these drugs has proven to be an enduring struggle. This paper analyzes the Opium/Heroin history in China since from the First Opium War to 2017. Also discussed is the modification of the Chinese Penal Code, along with China's attempts to completely eradicate these drugs from its society. The analysis lies in attempting to understand whether China's efforts to remove Opium/Heroin have worked, or merely decreased their prevalence, or utterly failed. Ultimately, the persistence in the use or trafficking of these drugs remains, regardless of the strict sentences for violating these drug laws.

This paper is separated into four major parts: Part I—the Opium war; Part II—Post Opium War and the Eventual Reformation of China's Penal System; Part III—Drugs and China Today; and, Part IV—International Scope.

Part I looks at China's historical connection to Opium and Heroin leading up to the Opium Wars. A brief overview of history of the Opium Wars and some general accounts lay the foundation for understanding China's connection to the Opium trade, and why the addiction stronghold affected such a large segment of Chinese society.

Part II considers post-Opium War developments, which included the reformation of the Chinese Penal System. This section further discusses and reviews the penal system during the Opium Wars, how the penal system evolved after the Opium Wars and provides a specific snapshot of the 2005 penal code. Finally, it looks at the implementation of the Chinese Penal Code today.

Part III reviews the persistence of Chinese drug trafficking and usage despite severe penalties under the Penal Code, and the fact that the Communist Party has set a goal to have a “drug-free China.” Also, consideration is given to whether these policies have failed China. Or, are these policies setting up China for success in its “War on Drugs?” One section in this part contemplates how, if at all, China should go forward when deliberating new strategies. Should China be harsher? Or, should it consider bolstering treatment centers rather than the current punishments of incarceration or even the death penalty?

The common thread is: when China opens itself up to trade and strengthening its market, a resurgence of Opium (and Heroin) follow. In this modern era, it is almost impossible to remain isolated and free from trade. Therefore, while unable to cut off trading, China has attempted to create stricter laws aimed at combating traffickers and users of these drugs. However, again despite China’s attempts, stricter laws do not mean the end of the drug trade. China continues to wage its War on Drugs.