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Drug Policy History, Design and Practice: Introduction

EDITORIAL

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ABSTRACT

The history, policies and practice of drug control in Asia have been historically multifaceted, particularly concerning substances like opium, cannabis, and various indigenous psychoactive plants. The opium trade, notably in the 19th and early 20th centuries, significantly impacted Asian societies, triggering conflicts, influencing international relations, and altering the socio-economic fabric. Yet, the history of drug control across different parts of Asia reflects a complex interplay of factors and a stark regional diversity. This special issue serves as a platform for interdisciplinary studies that link Asian drug trafficking with collaborative legal responses across the region. The primary objective is to compile an overview of the history, current practices, and policies addressing drug production, trafficking, and usage in a continent that houses 60% of the global population. This is done by sampling articles that encompass the large geographical scope of Asia, from Northeast Asia to the Middle East.

The special issue focuses on three key dimensions of drug control that affect Asian countries: Historical landmarks, including milestones of drug control policy developments at the national level, which shaped the international regime over the last two centuries; public health and history of local responses with the analysis of the burden of infectious diseases, and the state of access to controlled essential medicines; and, criminal justice and historical landmarks of its development through legal responses and punishments.

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The examination of drug control history in Asia, spanning from the opium wars to initial multilateral agreements and the subsequent illegal production and trafficking of scheduled substances—both natural and synthetic—has been extensively studied: “the relationship between Asia and psychoactive substances is deeply embedded in the region’s history, influencing societal norms, economic structures, and policy formulations.” (Dikötter et al. 2004). Throughout history, the interaction between societies and psychoactive substances has shaped cultures, economies, and political landscapes. Nowhere is this relationship more intricate and impactful than in Asia, where the historical trajectory of drug policies remains a complex tapestry intertwined with global trade, colonialism, cultural practices, and geopolitical shifts.

Drug policies in Asia have been historically multifaceted, particularly concerning substances like opium, cannabis, and various indigenous psychoactive plants. The opium trade, notably in the 19th and early 20th centuries, significantly impacted Asian societies, triggering conflicts, influencing international relations, and altering the socio-economic fabric. The clash between imperial powers and Asian nations over opium delineates how policies surrounding this trade have not only fueled geopolitical tensions but also reshaped domestic dynamics (Brook et al. 2000).

Yet, the history of drug control across different parts of the continent reflects a complex interplay of factors and a stark regional diversity. In East Asia, particularly in China, the historical trajectory of drug control dates back to imperial eras where opium consumption was regulated and later prohibited during the 19th century due to its detrimental effects on society (Zhang 2022). Conversely, in South Asia, the cultivation and consumption of substances like cannabis have deep-rooted cultural and religious significance (Ferrara 2021), complicating efforts at complete prohibition. Central Asia, historically situated at the crossroads of trade routes, has experienced varying degrees of drug control influenced by geopolitical dynamics, including the Soviet era’s attempts at strict prohibition and subsequent challenges post-independence. In western Asia (the Middle East), drug control efforts have been shaped by the region’s pivotal role in global drug trafficking networks, with policies often influenced by geopolitical alliances and domestic security concerns. This diverse history underscores the need for nuanced approaches and analyses that engage with both cultural practices and international frameworks.

This special issue does not attempt to cover the entire spectrum of issues related to drug control over the whole of Asia. Existing literature and the extent of diverse models of controls, national policies, and substances used and produced are too extensive to cover in one special issue. Instead, this special issue serves as a platform for interdisciplinary studies that link Asian drug trafficking with collaborative legal responses across the region. The primary objective is to compile an overview of the history, current practices, and policies addressing drug production, trafficking, and usage on a continent that houses 60% of the global population. This is done by sampling articles that encompass the large geographical scope of Asia, from northeast Asia to the Middle East.

As the articles in this special issue highlight, pivotal moments in national-level drug control policies have influenced the international drug control framework over the past two centuries as much as they were influenced by it, and infectious diseases and access to controlled medicines for pain relief remain highly influenced by the implementation of drug control. Additionally, differences with simultaneous similarities make up the nature of illegal drug markets across different Asian sub-regions.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS: CASE STUDIES FROM CHINA, THE PHILIPPINES AND LEBANON

The first part of the special issue focuses on a historical perspective linking the premises of drug control in select countries with the socio-political evolution of societies and provides an overview of the political gains and reasoning behind the adoption of prohibition in these local contexts. While far off geographically and culturally, the following examples provide similar dynamics in terms of responses to the threat of the illegal drug market and the policy responses to control it, while simultaneously dissecting the power structures behind the prohibition of drugs. These focus not only on national powers and institutions but also on regional and international influence, including from state and non-state institutions in neighboring countries

and global powers. These articles provide an overview of both the structural and momentary dimensions, providing impetus to impose strict legal drug enforcement instruments in different parts of Asia.

In his article “Resilient Drug Economy and Politicised Control: The Rise and Fall of the Administrative Bureau of Prohibited Drugs in China, 1922–1925,” (Huang 2023) Yun Huang discusses the emergence of refined drugs like morphine and cocaine in late 19th-century China, initially for medical use but gradually becoming a non-medical commodity. It explores the 1910s, marked by shifting political landscapes and the spread of drug misuse, leading to the establishment of the Administrative Bureau of Prohibited Drugs in Shanghai in 1922. This Bureau’s history, often overlooked by historians, is crucial to understanding the refined drug issue and the power struggles surrounding drug control. The article delves into consumption patterns, supply sources, and evolving regulations, shedding light on the resilience of the drug economy amidst shifting market strategies, rising profits, and changing global pharmaceutical networks. It highlights how factors like price, accessibility, and intermediaries influenced drug consumption, revealing a complex web of socio-economic drivers behind drug use. Additionally, it touches on smuggling routes, the impact of WWI on drug imports, and the involvement of Japanese smugglers in the refined drug trade. The piece draws from diverse primary sources, including archival records, newspapers, and trade reports, to analyze the Bureau’s rise and fall and the multifaceted dynamics shaping the refined drug landscape in early 20th-century China. The Bureau faced resistance from drug stores, local authorities, and even foreign powers in Shanghai. Internal power struggles, economic tensions, and political instability affected its operations. Ultimately, it was a combination of local opposition, internal conflicts, and the scandal involving the Bureau’s director that led to its closure. The short life of the Bureau was emblematic of the challenges the government faced in attempting to control the drug trade amidst a tumultuous political and economic backdrop. It took until 1930 for the government to successfully establish a National Narcotic Bureau, highlighting the enduring struggle to combat the drug trade within the political dynamics of the era. The regulations were meant to define legitimate versus illegitimate use, but there were numerous hurdles in their implementation. Smuggling tactics evolved, the political landscape was fragmented, and foreign powers complicated matters. Civil society organizations, like the International Anti-Opium Association, played a pivotal role in advocating for stricter controls. These groups connected the anti-opium movement to broader nationalist sentiments, emphasizing China’s sovereignty over its affairs.

In “The Show Must Go On: A Brief History of Lebanon’s Drug Control Politics” (Wazan 2023), a policy commentary, Michelle Wazan provides an in-depth look at Lebanon’s historical entanglement with the drug trade. Political, economic, and international pressures have undeniably influenced the trajectory of drug policies and their implementation in the country. It is interesting how these policies often manifest as performative gestures aimed at meeting international demands while retaining the underlying structures that benefit from the drug trade. The intricate ties between politics, corruption, and the drug trade have not only persisted but have also become deeply rooted, entwined within the fabric of Lebanon’s power structures. The description of arrests often targeting the lower echelons of the supply chain while the higher-level figures remain untouched paints a clear picture of the selective nature of law enforcement actions. The economic significance of the drug trade, especially in specific regions like the Bekaa Valley, where alternatives to illicit crops have struggled to compete in terms of profitability, sheds light on the complexity of trying to eradicate such deeply entrenched practices without addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by those involved in the trade. The international dimension is also intriguing. The balancing act between international pressure, assistance, and the performative nature of drug policy implementation to retain foreign aid reveals a lot about the pragmatic choices made by the Lebanese state. Overall, the analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of Lebanon’s historical struggle with drug policies, illustrating how interconnected political, economic, and international dynamics perpetuate the country’s involvement in the global drug trade.

Gideon Lasco and Vincen Gregory Yu discuss in “Drugs and the Marcos Dictatorship: The Beginnings of the Philippines’ Punitive Drug Regime (1970–1975)” (Lasco & Yu 2023) the history of drug policy in the Philippines, particularly during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s. They highlight how Marcos used the issue of drugs as part of his larger campaign to strengthen his rule and justify martial law. The government framed drug addiction as a threat to national

security and blended it with concerns about criminality, activism, and Communist insurgency to create a singular ‘enemy of the state.’ The Dangerous Drugs Act of 1972, passed during Marcos’ tenure, introduced severe penalties for drug-related offenses, including the death penalty. The narrative also covers specific events, such as the public execution of a drug syndicate head, Lim Seng, as a demonstration of the government’s power and a pretext for further consolidating Marcos’ authority. The article emphasizes how Marcos’ administration utilized the drug issue to maintain control, despite evidence suggesting the continuation of the drug trade within the regime and its associates. It illustrates how the rhetoric surrounding drugs was used to justify human rights abuses, suppress dissent, and perpetuate the martial law regime. The article further discusses how various sectors of civil society—such as the Catholic Church, academics, schools, and NGOs—echoed and supported the government’s portrayal of drug use as a societal evil that needed eradication. The Catholic Church, through the CBCP’s statements, condemned drug addiction as a corrupting force, especially among the youth, aligning with the state’s rhetoric. Academics, including prominent figures, justified the government’s severe measures against drug abuse, attributing them to societal ills. Schools collaborated with the state on anti-drug campaigns, integrating these messages into their programs. Additionally, various NGOs emerged, focusing on rehabilitation and framing people who used drugs as individuals in need of fixing. These efforts reinforced the government’s perspective on drugs and drug users. Even cultural institutions, like the film industry, contributed to the moral panic around drugs by producing films that portrayed drug use negatively. All these elements of civil society seemingly supported the government’s stance on drugs even before martial law was declared. The article argues that this history laid the groundwork for future drug policies and regimes in the Philippines, highlighting connections between Marcos’ drug war and subsequent drug policies under different leaders, like Rodrigo Duterte. It also points out the global influence and geopolitical factors that shaped these policies, citing parallels with international drug conventions and American influences. Overall, the article depicts how the discourse on drugs was intertwined with larger political goals and control mechanisms during Marcos’ rule.

LONG-LASTING CHALLENGES: FROM PUBLIC HEALTH TO ORGANIZED CRIME

The second group of articles in this special issue focus on problems raised by prohibition and their roots, and how these problems are still persistent since the adoption of prohibition as a means of drug control. Mostly, these articles focus on the public health dimensions related to the illegal drug market, including the transmission of blood-borne diseases and the lack of access to opioid analgesics for legitimate medical use. The articles also offer a historical perspective on the policies that allow for such diseases and a lack of treatment to spread. For instance, treatment models for people with problematic drug use and drug policies date back to the colonial era. But at the same time, current harm reduction approaches are also imported from western countries and funded mainly through their international aid instruments. The authors emphasize in their articles not only the need to develop better health responses to unsafe drug use but also to further develop national ownership of these responses within Asian contexts.

In their article “Stalled Scale-Up of Opioid Agonist Therapies for HIV Prevention in Kazakhstan: History, Policy, & Recommendations for Change,” (Lieberman et al. 2023) Lieberman, Ivasiy, Altice, Bromberg, Ibragimova, Seksenova, Madden, Primbetova, and Terlikbayeva highlight the challenges faced in scaling up opioid agonist therapies (OAT) in Kazakhstan as multifaceted, including political opposition, funding limitations, restrictive clinical protocols, and logistical issues in medication procurement and distribution. The barriers identified include misconceptions about OAT, stringent regulations hindering access, funding challenges with the Global Fund’s withdrawal, and clinical protocols that do not align with international best practices. The recommendations provided to address these barriers are quite comprehensive and could significantly improve the accessibility and effectiveness of OAT in Kazakhstan. For instance, suggestions to introduce sublingual or long-acting injectable buprenorphine, implement take-home dosing, and streamline the initiation process are suggested to make treatment more patient-centric and effective. The removal or revision of the narcological registry, providing free testing required for the program, and expanding the types of clinics allowed to dispense OAT could also enhance patient accessibility and reduce the stigma associated with seeking treatment. Overall, these recommendations align with successful strategies implemented in

other countries facing similar challenges. The focus on reducing bureaucratic hurdles, updating clinical protocols in line with global standards, and making treatment more patient-friendly is suggested as the way forward to improve OAT accessibility and outcomes in Kazakhstan.

Katherine Pettus provides in “Structural Imperialism and the Pandemic of Untreated Pain in the Asia Region” (Pettus 2023) a thorough examination of the complex, multi-layered issue of opioid availability in Asia, delving into its historical, cultural, and regulatory dimensions. The comprehensive approach combines historical context with contemporary analysis to unravel the persistent challenges related to opioid availability for medical purposes. The article is an extensive exploration that brings together various scholarly perspectives and data to highlight the roots of the problem and its ongoing implications. The focus on the historical commodification of opium by imperial powers and its far-reaching consequences for global norms and policies regarding opioids is an insightful lens through which to examine the present-day availability crisis. The analysis connects the dots between colonial legacies, geopolitical shifts, and the modern-day struggle for access to essential medicines, particularly opioids. Additionally, the incorporation of postcolonial theory and the examination of the lingering impacts of imperialism on regulatory structures, social norms, and governance practices add a thought-provoking layer to the discourse. It sheds light on the unresolved tensions and inconsistencies within governance systems that continue to hinder access to vital medications, particularly opioids, for pain management. Pettus underscores the importance of understanding the genealogy of current regulatory systems and cultural perceptions surrounding opioids, emphasizing how these historical roots continue to shape policies and access to medical care today. This multi-dimensional approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the opioid availability crisis in Asia and its broader implications. Furthermore, the article draws a clear line between the prevailing stigma surrounding opioids and the need for a comprehensive shift in policy and practice. It effectively encapsulates the multidimensional approach required to address the crisis of opioid availability in Asia and beyond. By grounding recommendations in international law and regulations, the author establishes a roadmap for improvement that emphasizes the need for education, training, and a balanced approach to prescribing opioids. This includes the recognition of palliative care professionals’ advocacy for well-regulated supply chains and institutional safeguards to ensure appropriate opioid use while averting misuse or diversion. The tragic reality highlighted in the conclusion—where traditional pain-relieving plant-based medicines are inaccessible while expensive synthetic opioids flood the market—is a powerful call to action. The emphasis on the need for technical health law advocacy and clarifying international normative frameworks provides a solid foundation for creating evidence-based legislation that addresses severe health-related suffering.

In “Situating the Local in Global Drug Policy Debates: Historical Overview of Political and Drug Market Developments in Azerbaijan” (Sultan 2023), Aysel Sultan provides a comprehensive and detailed analysis of Azerbaijan’s drug policy and its evolution since gaining independence. The article delves into the historical, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors influencing the country’s approach to drug control, shedding light on policy shifts, foreign influences, and societal responses. Sultan unpacks the interplay between global drug policies and their manifestations within Azerbaijan’s social, political, and economic landscape. The article draws attention to the limitations of relying solely on Western-driven drug policies and evidential frameworks, emphasizing the importance of context-specific approaches. It shines a light on how international standards might not effectively align with the socio-cultural and political realities of Azerbaijan, leading to suboptimal policy outcomes. The call for more comprehensive research, nuanced policymaking, and the consideration of local perspectives in drug policy reform comes across as the central argument. The narrative navigates between analyzing the global drug policy framework and highlighting the challenges Azerbaijan faces in adapting these policies to its context. The article further outlines the challenges Azerbaijan has faced in establishing an independent identity post-Soviet occupation, especially in reshaping its drug policy amid a backdrop of global political and economic pressures. It discusses the shifts in drug trafficking routes, the emergence of new synthetic drugs, and the impact of geopolitical conflicts on drug control measures. Furthermore, the article explores the emergence of civil society organizations focused on harm reduction, public awareness, and prevention between 1999 and 2010. The involvement of international bodies like WHO demonstrates the initial steps taken toward addressing drug-related issues within the country. The article highlights the complexities of contemporary drug policy, including the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise

of synthetic substances, changing drug use cultures among youth, and the limitations of current treatment programs. It touches on the societal stigma associated with drug use, the role of law enforcement, and the need for diversified and more effective intervention strategies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The exploration of drug control history in Asia presented in this special issue highlights the intricate and impactful relationship between societies and psychoactive substances throughout the continent's past. The history and dynamics of drug control in Asia present a rich tapestry of interconnected factors, spanning from historical legacies to contemporary challenges. This collection of articles has shed light on the multifaceted nature of drug policies across the continent, emphasizing the complex interplay between societal norms, economic structures, and geopolitical influences. Throughout history, Asia's relationship with psychoactive substances has shaped its cultures, economies, and political landscapes. From the Opium Wars to modern-day illegal drug trafficking networks, the evolution of drug policies reflects a convergence of global trade, colonialism, cultural practices, and shifting power dynamics. However, it is important to recognize that drug control approaches vary significantly across different regions of Asia, shaped by unique historical trajectories and socio-political contexts.

The articles featured in this special issue offer valuable insights into the historical evolution of drug control policies in select countries, including China, the Philippines, and Lebanon. These case studies highlight the diverse array of factors driving the adoption of prohibition and the complexities of enforcing drug enforcement measures within local and international contexts. Moreover, the examination of long-lasting challenges, such as public health issues in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, or India, underscores the need for comprehensive and evidence-based approaches to drug control. As we move forward, it is essential for policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders to engage in interdisciplinary research and dialogue to develop more effective and equitable drug policies in Asia.

By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange, policies that prioritize public health, safety, and international cooperation in addressing drug production, trafficking, and use across the continent can be defined. This special issue serves as a specific contribution to the ongoing discourse on drug control in Asia, providing a platform for further research and collaborative efforts in this critical area.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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