



Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China

Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, Zhou Xun

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To this day, the perception persists that China was a civilization defeated by imperialist Britain's most desirable trade commodity, opium—a drug that turned the Chinese into cadaverous addicts in the iron grip of dependence. Britain, in an effort to reverse the damage caused by opium addiction, launched its own version of the "war on drugs," which lasted roughly sixty years, from 1880 to World War II and the beginning of Chinese communism. But, as *Narcotic Culture* brilliantly shows, the real scandal in Chinese history was not the expansion of the drug trade by Britain in the early nineteenth century, but rather the failure of the British to grasp the consequences of prohibition.

In a stunning historical reversal, Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun tell this different story of the relationship between opium and the Chinese. They reveal that opium actually had few harmful effects on either health or longevity; in fact, it was prepared and appreciated in highly complex rituals with inbuilt constraints preventing excessive use. Opium was even used as a medicinal panacea in China before the availability of aspirin and penicillin. But as a result of the British effort to eradicate opium, the Chinese turned from the relatively benign use of that drug to heroin, morphine, cocaine, and countless other psychoactive substances. *Narcotic Culture* provides abundant evidence that the transition from a tolerated opium culture to a system of prohibition produced a "cure" that was far worse than the disease.

Delving into a history of drugs and their abuses, *Narcotic Culture* is part revisionist history of imperial and twentieth-century Britain and part sobering portrait of the dangers of prohibition.

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