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Zero tolerance

Curbing China's growing narcotics market

By Dan Steinbock | July 29, 2015, Wednesday |  PRINT EDITION

Drug syndicates are struggling to create a foothold in China. It's time to fight back.

If you like to take long walks in Shanghai, this may have been the first summer when you detected something new in the air: the scent of marijuana. It is a sad experience that leaves one apprehensive.

Rising threat

The metropolises of the advanced economies offer abundant warning examples.

Despite billions of dollars spent on the war against drugs annually, drug cartels have distribution networks in over 200 US cities.

Today, America is struggling with one of the worst heroine epidemics in its history. Between 2002 and 2012, the number of heroin users doubled and today there are an estimated 1.5 million chronic heroin users in the country.

If you have lived in major American or European cities, you know only too well that what starts with "just marijuana" tends to end with meth and heroine.

The writing is on the wall. Recently, Shanghai Daily reported about the arrest of suspected members of an armed drug ring in Guilin City of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region as well as the seizure of drugs in Guangdong; and the sentencing of actor Zhang Lin for providing venues for drug users.

The illicit drug business seems to be expanding. Last February, in the biggest drug bust in recent history, Shanghai police smashed a gang operating in the city and Guangdong Province, while seizing some 2.4 tons of methamphetamine.



A police officer checks the drugs seized during a raid in Guangdong Province. — Ti Gong 28 held in Shanghai's biggest drug bust ever, By Chen Huizhi | February 6, 2015, Friday

More addicts

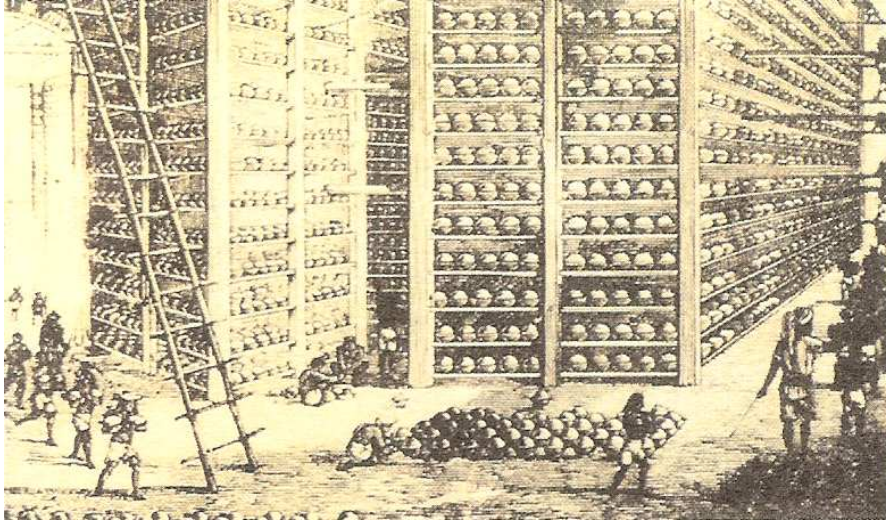
According to China's National Narcotics Control Commission 2014 Annual Report on Drug Control in China, heroin is today the most abused drug on the mainland, followed by synthetic drugs such as ketamine, methamphetamines and other amphetamine-type stimulants.

In the past, drug abuse was the curse of the unemployed, the self-employed, farmers and migrants.

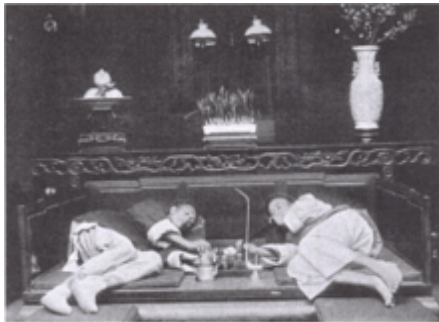
Today, as the 2014 report states, it is spreading to the new urban class; employees of enterprises and institutions, freelancers, people in the entertainment sector, and even civil servants.

Since 2010, Shanghai police have reportedly busted an increasing number of drug cases. Nevertheless, the number of drug addicts in the city has soared by 30 percent in the same time period.

As economic growth has waned in Europe and North America, growth markets are shifting to Asia — including the market for drugs.



Storage of opium at a British East India Company warehouse



A Chinese opium house, photograph 1902



British opium ships

Historical shadows

To Chinese people, increasing prosperity means better living standards. To criminal syndicates, it means a cynical opportunity to turn a human dream into a hellish nightmare.

Since living standards are likely to double in China during the ongoing decade, the curse of drugs is not to be under-estimated. Today, domestic criminal groups reportedly control many large-scale drug and precursor chemical criminal activities in China. Meanwhile, a large and increasing number of transnational criminal organizations seek to establish a foothold in the mainland.

In China, the drug threat has a particularly ominous shadow.

Grown in Indian plantations owned by the British East India Company and transported by traders to coastal cities in Guangdong, opium was smuggled to Chinese middlemen who retailed the drug in the mainland.

Some 170 years ago, opium paved the way to colonial wars and a century of humiliation.

The only effective way to avoid a similar fate in contemporary China is a zero tolerance approach to drugs.

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