

CATHERINE CARSTAIRS

"Deporting 'Ah Sin' to Save the White Race: Moral Panic, Racialization, and the Extension of Canadian Drug Laws in the 1920s"

Catherine Carstairs traces the history and impact of a “**moral panic**” over drugs in Vancouver in the 1920s. This campaign was led by community organizations, spread by local newspapers, and supported by local politicians. Carstairs suggests that the campaign was distinctly **racialized**: anti-Chinese racism was foundational to the campaign and its supporters spread a narrative that Chinese drug traffickers were responsible for corrupting 'innocent' white youth. Carstairs shows how the campaign both influenced the development of Canada’s severe anti-drug legislation and accelerated existing public support for Chinese exclusion.

BEYOND THE TIMELINE

William Lyon Mackenzie King (then Deputy Minister of Labour) is sent to investigate riots and claims for compensation by businesses. One of the claims is from a group of opium manufacturers that had been operating openly and legally in Vancouver. Members of a Chinese anti-opium league call on King to help limit use and production of opium. King then creates a report that says that opium use in BC is “spreading” out of the Chinese community to white women and girls and that frames Canada as far behind other countries in terms of anti-opium campaigning. This paves the way for the *Opium Act* of 1908.

By 1922 (unlike in the discussion of the 1921 amendments) no one in the House of Commons challenges the notion that drugs are a serious issue in Canada. The discussion in the House is laden with anti-Chinese racism, to the point that members are so focussed on the deportation of Chinese people convicted of drug offences that they do not even consider that non-Chinese immigrants who were not yet naturalized could (and would) also be deported under this legislation.

By 1929, when consolidation of the *Opium and Narcotic Drug Act* was being discussed, the panic had subsided and the race of traffickers was not mentioned in the House of Commons. However, Carstairs argues that this can be seen as both a mark of how naturalized and engrained the discourse of the white drug user as a victim of the "Asian trafficker" was in the public mind and as a turning point where the public fear of drugs had become strong enough to no longer require leveraging racist discourse in order to pass strict anti-drug policy.

CANADIAN DRUG POLICY 1908-1923

- **September 1907** Anti-Asian riots in Vancouver lead to Canada’s first drug legislation.
- **1908** *Opium Act* prohibits the manufacture, sale and importation of opium for other than medicinal purposes.
- **1911** *Opium and Drug Act* prohibits use of opium and other drugs. Sale or possession of morphine, opium, and cocaine carries a maximum penalty of one year in prison and \$500 fine; smoking opium carries a maximum sentence of one month in prison and \$50 fine (neither offence had a minimum sentence).
- **1920** Emily Murphy publishes five articles about drug use in *MacLeans*.
- **Spring of 1920** *The Vancouver Sun* runs its first campaign against drug trafficking and calls for the abolition of Chinatown.
- **March 1921** Public outcry after Joseph Kehoe pleads guilty to robbery with violence and is sentenced to five years in prison and 24 lashes. Kehoe was from a "good family" and had started using drugs upon his return to Canada after WWI (73). In an interview he blamed those who sell drugs for his addiction and imprisonment.
 - Comrades of the Great War group passes a resolution opposing light sentences for those who sell drugs. The group and its supporters called for two-year minimum sentences for first-time traffickers and five years and a lash for subsequent offences, for all 'aliens' with drug-selling convictions to be deported, and for police to be able to search for drugs without a warrant.
- **May 1921** Minister of Health introduces legislation to amend the *Opium and Narcotic Drug Act*: A person found guilty of a narcotic offence should be liable to 7 years in prison (this amendment passed); A person convicted of giving or selling to a minor should also receive whippings as a penalty (this amendment did not pass).
- **January 1922** *Vancouver Daily World* begins sustained front page campaign against drugs.
 - A series of public meetings calling for stricter anti-drug legislation follow.
 - These meetings are endorsed by the mayor and city council of Vancouver.
- **June 1922** New amendments to the *Opium and Narcotic Drug Act*: Judges given power to deport any 'aliens' convicted of possession or trafficking (while not stated explicitly, this was only meant to affect Chinese Canadians); six-month minimum sentence for possession or trafficking is introduced; police are given the right to search anywhere except a “dwelling-house” without a warrant if they suspected there could be drugs there.
 - 1922: 3% of Chinese-Canadian population prosecuted under this Act.
 - 1923-32: ~2% of Chinese-Canadian population deported under this Act.
- **1922** *The Black Candle* published (brought Vancouver drug panic to a larger Canadian audience).
- **July 1923** *Chinese Immigration Act* initiates Chinese exclusion.
- **1923** Codeine and marijuana added to Schedule of Restricted Drugs without debate; Right to appeal possession and trafficking convictions limited.

RACIALIZATION

For Carstairs, racialization is “the process by which attributes such as skin color, language, and cultural practices are given social significance as markers of distinction” (69). Carstairs shows that anti-drug campaigners, the Vancouver media, and local and federal politicians invoked ideas of “‘innocent’ white youth” being corrupted by “shadowy Asian traffickers” to justify the drug panic. Carstairs calls this use of imaginary stereotyped characters a **“racial drama”** and asserts that it was essential to the effectiveness of anti-drug campaigning in Vancouver (and Canada as a whole) in the 1920s.

MORAL PANIC

A “moral panic”, originally coined by Stanley Cohen, is a period of widespread public distress about a **perceived** social problem. Carstairs uses the term “moral panic” to describe how drugs came to be viewed as a serious threat to society in Canada in the 1920s. Carstairs notes that moral panics arise in contexts of social inequality and often deepen these inequalities (in the case of the 1920s drug panic, already-marginalized Chinese Canadians were further stigmatized).

KEY LEARNINGS

- Rather than being led primarily by government officials, the drug panic was incited by community groups and media organizations. MPs were influenced by the anti-drug campaigning of their constituents.
- Anti-drug campaigners and newspapers drew on existing racist narratives (that Chinese Canadians were unfairly dominant in the Canadian economy, for example) to lend credibility to the narrative they were spinning: that Chinese Canadians were responsible for the “degradation” of white youth through drug trafficking.
- The drug panic fuelled severe legislation punishing both drug users and drug traffickers and also intensified support for Chinese exclusion, ultimately leading both to the deportation of Chinese Canadians under the *Opium and Narcotic Drug Act* and to the exclusion of Chinese immigrants under the *Chinese Immigration Act*.
- The image of the “innocent white addict” was created and leveraged by anti-drug campaigners and government officials, but did not lead to actual social support for working-class white drug users.
 - In fact, middle and upper-class drug users were able to continue to access drugs through doctors in this period, and so were virtually unaffected by the new legislation.
 - The question of addiction treatment went virtually unaddressed by federal or provincial governments.
- As such, the drug panic affected Chinese Canadians and also affected working-class Canadians more broadly.
 - Carstairs notes in her conclusion that some aspects of the drug laws of the 1920s – expansion of police rights to search without a warrant, for example – affected the civil liberties of anyone who came into contact with the Canadian justice system.

EMILY MURPHY & “AH SIN”

- Emily Murphy was a well-known writer and activist in Canada the 1920s. She campaigned for suffrage for white women, temperance, forced sterilization, eugenics, and, after becoming a Magistrate in Alberta, began advocating against drugs.
- Between 1920 and 1922 she published seven articles and a book, *The Black Candle*, highlighting what she saw as the serious threat of drugs.
- Murphy framed the threat of drugs as “a Chinese menace” and at the core of her argument was the idea that drugs were a threat to the “white race” as drug use led to “miscegenation” (a derogatory word for relationships between people of different ‘races’).
- As a vehicle for racist stereotypes, Murphy frequently invoked an imagined Chinese character who she called “Ah Sin” in her articles.
- In 1923, Murphy nominated herself for a Nobel Prize for her anti-drug campaigning.
- Carstairs points out that both Murphy herself and other historians have overemphasized Murphy’s role in the development of drug legislation.
- While Murphy’s first five articles in *MacLeans* marked the beginning of sustained and intense anti-drug campaigning in Canada, Carstairs shows how Vancouver community groups and newspapers were more directly implicated in Canadian drug policy in this period.