

# The Death Penalty in China – the road to reform

Research by leading Oxford academics, Professor Roger Hood and Professor Carolyn Hoyle, has influenced worldwide reform of the death penalty. Nowhere is this more evident than in China where the number of executions has fallen dramatically over the last decade.



Roger Hood, formerly Professor of Criminology and Carolyn Hoyle, Professor of Criminology at Oxford University have undertaken a sustained cross-national study of factors that influence changes in the scope and application of capital punishment. The work began with Roger Hood's report for the United Nations on the progress made towards the world-wide elimination of capital punishment, published by OUP as *The Death Penalty – A worldwide perspective* in 1988. Hood and Hoyle joined forces as co-authors of a revised and enlarged fourth edition (2008) and a fifth edition (2014), such has been the remarkable and continuing increase in the countries that have abandoned or reduced their use of capital punishment.

This book (which has been translated into Chinese, Persian and Japanese) and their other research reports and articles have become an essential resource for criminal justice professionals, NGOs, and policy makers attempting to reform the use of capital punishment in many countries such as Trinidad, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Taiwan and Japan. Over the past decade their direct engagement with policy makers and scholars in China, their involvement in judicial education, and as consultants to EU-funded research projects, has made a distinctive contribution acknowledged by those who are pressing for reform and elimination of the death penalty.

'Hood and Hoyle are doing vital work which is only going to get more vital with the politicisation of the death penalty in Asia'  
Clive Stafford Smith, Reprieve

China has long had the reputation as the world's chief executioner but in the last decade has become much more receptive to international trends and human rights obligations. Hood and Hoyle's book is the only international academic work on the death penalty that is widely disseminated and discussed among Chinese academics, policy makers and practitioners in both closed and open fora.

In 2007 the Supreme People's Court of China assumed the power to review every death sentence handed down by a lower court. Whilst the execution rate is still regrettably a closely guarded secret, it is widely rumoured that the number of executions has at least halved since this reform. Then, in February 2011, China abolished the death penalty for 13 non-violent crimes, reducing the number of crimes punishable by death from 68 to 55, and banned capital punishment for offenders over the age of 75. The number of capital crimes was further reduced in 2015 to 46, marking a decrease of almost a third in five years. As Professor Hoyle explains 'Important in themselves, these reforms are emblematic of China's emerging commitment to limit the scope and practice of capital punishment in stages, with, as it stated to the UN Human Rights Council in 2007, the final aim of abolition.'

'Hood and Hoyle's research has had a significant impact on the debate on the death penalty in East Asia and their work is one of the contributing factors to changing policy.'  
Baroness Stern, International Centre for Prison Studies.