
Anti-smoking Campaign in China: An Inevitable War

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“I could have been part of that sky, too. But my wings vanished in puffs of smoke.”

Wei Jialin, 25, now a flight dispatcher at Beijing Capital International Airport, has been suffering from chronic bronchitis for four years. Or to be more accurate, four years ago, when he was still a junior pilot cadet at Civil Aviation Flight University of China, he was informed by the university hospital that he had contracted this disease after a routine physical examination.

“I knew immediately why. You know, I was already a heavy smoker then—usually one to two packets of cigarettes a day.” Wei’s instinct was not mistaken; doctors later proved the bronchitis was caused by long time smoking. What happened next was a “nightmare” as Wei recalled: many rounds of re-checkups, repeated talks with his instructor pilot and the dean, endless sheets of forms to fill out and then “Bang”, the door to the world of pilots was forever shut in his face. The reason was simple: a person with respiratory diseases like bronchitis is physically disqualified under the Appraisal Standards of Health Examination for Civil Aviation Pilot Cadets issued by Civil Aviation Administration of China.

Wei’s first puff of smoke was an unexpected byproduct of a pledge with his roommates in their freshmen year. They agreed to each bring back special local products of their hometowns. Being a native of the Yuxi city of Yunnan Province, a southern province of China famous for tobacco products, Wei chose to bring four packets of Yuxi (a cigarette brand), one packet for each roommate and one packet for himself. Then the four student pilots together started their “virgin trial” of smoking: “The first puff didn’t taste good, it was bitter actually, but I just enjoyed the feeling of being mature—I can do what an adult can do finally.”

The first packet was finished almost a month later and the initial whim out of curiosity gradually developed into a habit: happy, let’s puff a smoke; sad, let’s puff a smoke; stressed, let’s puff a smoke.... The habit soon deteriorated into an addiction, one to two packets a day or he’d feel at a loss until eventually, the physical examination result crashed his future career as a pilot. “I knew how harmful smoking is, especially to a pilot. But chances are some chain smokers can still live a long life, so I thought it was just a matter of luck, I told myself: ‘What the heck, it couldn’t be me.’ However, unfortunately, it turned out to be me,” Wei murmured, his eyes casting down on the floor.

The try-my-luck attitude towards smoking is but one of a series of problems that the anti-smoking campaign in China has to face. China has the largest tobacco planting areas, the largest volume of tobacco production and the largest smoking population in the world. “All of these factors make the anti-smoking campaign timetable more and more urgent.” Wang Longde, the chairman of China Preventive Medical Association said, expressing his deep concerns. China signed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2003, “The convention shall be fully carried out by 2011, but China is lagging behind and there are still a lot for China to do. Time is very limited and pressing for us,” Wang said.

There are 311 million habitual smokers in China, accounting for one third of the world smoking population, according to the third edition of The Tobacco Atlas released in April 2009. About 1 million people die of smoking related diseases annually. Besides, “540 million Chinese people are currently suffering from passive smoking, which kills over 100,000 non-smokers each year,” says the Report on China’s Anti-smoking Campaign of 2008 published by the Ministry of Health.

Such a phenomenon is largely due to the thriving tobacco industry, which has been nurtured under the Chinese tobacco monopoly system since 1982 and was granted legal status by the Law of PRC on Tobacco Monopoly of 1992. China, the world’s largest tobacco producer and consumer, is one of few countries that apply a tobacco monopoly system.

For more than two decades, the tobacco industry has been the biggest fiscal pillar for the Chinese government. In 2008, the industrial and commercial tax for the tobacco industry was 449.9 billion RMB, an increase by 16% from 2007, according to the State Tobacco Monopoly Administration—the Chinese specialized organ to govern tobacco-related issues. Apart from this, the industry has produced huge social benefits with an assets value at RMB 500 billion and 60 million employees each year.

Therefore, it is a hard decision for China to make when facing the anti-smoking campaign. The government has long been trying to strike a balance between responsibility for citizen health and incentives for such a profitable industry to operate.

Deep-rooted mentality of smokers also hinders the anti-smoking procedures in China. After one day's fighting with countless balance sheets, Zheng Tong, a senior accountant in the Chinese desk of Grant Thornton International accounting and consulting firm, joins into the stream of white collar workers going off shift, but he does not go home directly. Instead, he heads for Dong Po Cuisine, a restaurant for weekly gathering in Hai Dian District in Beijing.

"We choose to dine at the first floor in this restaurant, where smoking is not banned. You know, those Ya Jian (a Chinese word for private dining room) on the second floor are smoking-free." There are about sixty people on the first floor, who are immersed with smoke. However, upstairs is a totally different scene, a more congenial environment for non-smokers, which is smoking-free.

"I am really curious that there are so many restaurants banned smoking. In China, you know, smoking is one part of socializing process, which makes out a cordial atmosphere," said Zheng before the dinner. "But now I am 35 years old, and still single. That is the reason that my mum persistently urged that I should quit smoking. She always said, before an ideal wife comes an ideal life, from which obviously smoking is discursive." There are a lot of friends around him who smoke, and when he is socializing with them, they firmly hold that smoking is a personal matter that denies any outside intervention; then smoking becomes appropriate, if not necessary. Besides, smoking is a good relief to the pressure from work and life. "When you puff, it is kind of like puff away all the troubles and pressure," he said, as if in deep meditation.

So he, together with his friends at dinner, begins their 'cordial' chat. "Maybe I will quit smoking under the exigency from my future wife, I'd prefer that before an ideal life comes an ideal wife!" said Zheng before we leave.

Zheng is a typical smoker who believes that smoking is a personal business. However, he does not realize the fact that most of the 540 million passive smokers are exposed to secondhand smoking in public spaces. Though the regulations are in effect to ban smoking in public areas, the outcome is not satisfying. Nowadays, the most common practice for Chinese people to reduce smoking effects in public areas is to designate smoking areas to cater to both smokers and non-smokers.

"Most people take it for granted that those smoking areas designated in public places such as restaurants, pubs, cafes and stations can spare them from the harms of secondhand smoke, but they are wrong," said Xu Guihua, deputy director of Chinese Association on Tobacco Control, at a press conference in January in Beijing. "The practice of separating smoking and smoking-free areas to prevent potential harms of exposure to secondhand smoke has been proven useless by health experts worldwide," she added.

Secondhand smoking does much harm to human health and lung cancer is the most common deadly disease caused by direct smoking and secondhand smoking. When Tiantian's (alias) father and mother are enjoying their cigarettes at home, they never know they do not only puff away their cigarettes, but also puff the poison gas into the lungs of their 6-year-old daughter, "Her parents have never thought that smoking could be a lethal weapon to their daughter," said Jin Feng, the doctor in charge of Tiantian.

It was in 2007 when Jin Feng, chief surgeon of the department of cerebral surgery in the Pectoral Disease Hospital of Shan Dong Province, opened the case report on Tiantian. "Frankly speaking, I was shocked, for she is the youngest patient I have seen during my nearly thirty-year professional life in cerebral department," said Doctor Jin.

However, the more depressing result came after Doctor Jin had consultation with other experts. Tiantian was an advanced lung-cancer patient, meaning that the goal of treatment is only to prolong the patient's life as much as possible, meaning that death—a unfathomable word for a six-year-old child—will be an imminent threat to engulf her frail life.

Then the reason why such a little girl could be an advanced lung-cancer patient hung over Doctor Jin's heart until the day he met her parent in her ward. Standing by the feeble Tiantian's bed were her father and mother. According to Doctor Jin's description, apparently depressed, they mumbled out several words to introduce themselves with a heavy Shan Dong accent; but on hearing Doctor Jin's

declaration of the consultation result, they froze. “It’s just like a bolt out of the blue, how come my little daughter could be a lung-cancer patient? The people who smoke are us, not her.” said Tiantian’s mother. It is true that she herself did not smoke, but since birth, she had been besieged by smoke puffed away by her parents, which equaled to injecting nicotine into her lung incessantly. “It is true that we did not stop smoking even when we hugged her, when we hushed her to sleep, and when we played with her...” confessed her mother to Doctor Jin.

Even though Tiantian was transferred to a hospital in Beijing for better treatment, she did not sustain very long. On April 4, 2008, after one year of cancer, she passed away peacefully, ending her ephemeral life which was supposed to be a more wonderful life than only seven years’ torture of cancer.

Lung cancer is the leading lethal disease caused by smoking. Compared to nonsmokers, men who smoke are about 23 times more likely to develop lung cancer and women who smoke are about 13 times more likely. Based on the Report on China’s Anti-smoking Campaign of 2008, most cases of lung cancer death, close to 90% in men, and 80% in women, are caused by cigarette smoking.

Secondhand smoking is harmful too. Secondhand smoke contains more than 250 chemicals known to be toxic or cancer causing, including formaldehyde, benzene, vinyl chloride, arsenic, ammonia, and hydrogen cyanide, according to statistics released by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2007. Currently, 540 million Chinese people are exposed to secondhand cigarette smoke at home or public places.

“Infants and young children are especially susceptible,” said Doctor Jin Feng. “Their lungs are still developing and childhood exposure to secondhand smoke results in decreased lung function. Children who breathe secondhand smoke are more likely to suffer from coughing, wheezing, phlegm and breathlessness.”

Moreover, there are more smoking-related diseases than just lung cancer. When people think of cancers caused by smoking, the first one that comes to mind is always lung cancer. However, there are several other forms of cancer attributed to smoking as well, including cancer of the mouth cavity, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, bladder, stomach, cervix, kidney, pancreas, and acute myeloid leukemia.

When Tiantian’s mother sheds regretful tears over her little girl’s passing away, there are also some mothers, awakened by their duty, who successfully quit smoking. Qiu Lin is one of them. When the doctor told Qiu Lin one year ago, a 28-year-old university student after retirement as a professional handball player, that she was a mother-to-be, the first thing that rushed into her mind was not excitement, but the tough task in front of her: to quit smoking.

“For the sake of my baby, I have no right to indulge myself,” said Qiu Lin firmly. Since her entering into the sports circle, gradually she got into the habit of smoking, which her teammates deemed as a pressure-mitigating channel. “At that time, our schedules were extremely tight, and the prosaic training degenerated our life into black and white.” She is immersed into retrospection.

However, the expectation of a baby changed her and her roommates in the dorm, who share with her a similar experience and who are also smokers. “I was really surprised that when I told them the news, they unanimously agreed to try to quit smoking in order to create a clear environment for my baby.”

Liu Xi, one of her five roommates, said. “In fact, for several times, I have determined to quit, but it turned out to be that I am not that perseverant.” But things all changed after Xiao became pregnant; they realized the urgency to quit smoking, and they did so. They began to increase outdoor activity and tried to distract their attention from smoking by engaging themselves in other energy-consuming activities, like doing sports and studying.

Fortunately, these efforts are not futile like the previous ones. Qiu Lin has successfully said goodbye to smoking, and her other five roommates have transferred from regular smokers to infrequent smokers, and succeeded in keeping their room smoke-free.

“It is a protracted warfare, and I will endeavor to keep myself away from smoking. Besides, once you quit smoking, you will discover an active attitude towards life is more effective in dealing with pressure,” said Qiu Lin, pointing to her baby expected to come in this July, “and that ignites my new attitude towards life.”

Qiu Lin was one of China’s rising numbers of female smokers. According to the statistics published by the Ministry of Health in February, the number of women smoking continues to climb and now

2.6% women over 15 years old are smokers.

In light of statistics provided by the Ministry of Health, babies whose mothers smoke while pregnant or who are exposed to secondhand smoke after birth have weaker lungs than other babies, which increases the risk of many other health problems. And babies are 20 percent more likely to be born with low birth weight if their mother was exposed to secondhand smoke during the pregnancy.

The issue of smoking has become a great challenge for China. Since the tobacco industry has always been the biggest fiscal pillar in China, it is hard for the government to implement any harsh rules. "Some government officials still see the tobacco industry as a way to promote economic growth, so the anti-cigarette campaign might face unexpected challenges," said Wu Yiqun, deputy director of the Beijing-based NGO Thinktank Research Center for Health Development.

However, good news is that recent years have seen China's efforts in the anti-smoking movement, though they are not strong and alerting enough. Thanks to rising global pressures, the government has to turn its attention from smoking money to its smoking problems. China ratified the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2005 as the 89th country to do so and since then it has steadily observed the Convention by strengthening its control over tobacco products.

A senior analyst from Chinese Academy of Social Science, Mr. Chen Shuxun, suggested that regulation is playing a larger part in Chinese efforts responding to tobacco-related problems. Within five years, there will be a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, marketing and promotion, more stringent health warnings in place, increased taxation and smoke-free workplaces and public spaces.

2011 will be a critical year to China's anti-smoking campaign. China will begin to fulfill its commitment to a comprehensive ban on all forms of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship on January 1, 2011, in accordance with the FCTC.

The road ahead may be thorny but promising, though the past is irreversible.

"I could still remember the day I entered the campus for the first time. I was confident and ambitious and I had a promising future as a pilot. But now, I'm a dispatcher and my dream of flying high can never be fulfilled," Wei whispered

Wei tried to quit smoking after he was dismissed as a pilot cadet in the hope that he could one day return. But quitting smoking is more difficult than taking up smoking. Several failures later, he abandoned the idea of quitting; instead, he tried to cut down on smoking. One thing he persists in doing now is never smoking in front of his mom. For one thing, he doesn't want her to worry about him, and for the other, he knows the harm of second-hand smoking and this time he won't have a fluke mind.

"I hope I will have a son in the future. I will send him to Civil Aviation Flight University of China to become a pilot and I will never ever allow him to smoke," looking up to planes taking off and landing, Wei firmly said.