

## Why the anti-smoking campaign falls into a paradox in China

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Zhang Jihui, who was born in Shijia zhuang, Hebei province, north of China, finished writing his “legend” at 45 of being friends and enemies with one thing in his life—cigarettes.

As a child, he disliked people who smoked. At that time, because of the poor economic condition in his hometown, few people smoked. At junior high school, one of his friends who resigned from the military army brought him a pack of cigarettes and taught him how to smoke. Out of curiosity, he followed his example, starting his first cigarette in his life. Later on, that friend often came to visit him with cigars. At that time, smoking was considered to be a little dishonorable in society and people then didn’t have an open mind as they do today. So the two boys hid in the corner of the streets or somewhere nobody could notice them. Zhang’s parents were all workers in factories. Although they never smoked, there were still several packs of cigarettes on the table of their home, just for the visiting guests who smoked. Unwatched by his parents, he used to steal one or two from the packs. But his daughter said in our interview that her father never thought of his heavy addiction to smoking in his whole life.

He started smoking when he lost his mother in a car accident; at that time he was 16 years old, working in a steel factory. One night, he was told by the hospital that his mother was knocked down so badly by the speeding car at the crossroad that she was bleeding internally. He stayed with his dying mother for nearly two weeks until she passed away. Everything changed since then. He seldom talked and began to smoke every day. The brand of cigarettes he used to smoke is “Heng Da” which cost only 2.8 jiao RMB (equals to 5 cents in US dollar). The director sometimes blamed him for his smoking by saying that “as such a little boy, how can you smoke?” But nothing worked out, he continued to smoke. At the age of 26, he resigned from the factory and came to Beijing alone to start his own business. He worked as a client servant for an ad company in Beijing. Then, smoking became a must to his career. In a bid to keep a good relationship with his clients, he had to treat dinner with cigarettes or send several expensive cigars as a gift to his clients. He became more addicted to smoking. His teeth turned yellow and he often coughed.

26 is an age old enough to find a girlfriend at that time in China, but it was a big problem for Mr. Zhang. He dated some girls, most of whom dumped him because he smoked. One funny story happened with a beautiful girl who smelled strong smoke from his clothes, saw his yellow teeth, and asked him “Are you from the countryside?” At that time the people in rural areas were likely to have yellow teeth because of the poor quality water. Finally, he was lucky to find a woman who didn’t mind his smoking and have a family with her. One year later, they had a daughter. The financial condition of his family was just so-so, but his addiction was increased year by year. The brand of the cigar he smoked upgrade from “Heng Da” to “Hong He” “Peony” and “Panda”, which are much expensive. He could smoke two or three packs of cigars in one day. The walls and windows turned yellowish-brown. His daughter, who disliked his smoking, often asked her father to go outside to smoke. Because of the strong smoke, his daughter didn’t approach him very often and their relationship became more and more distant. His wife quarreled with him arguing that he spent too much on cigarettes in a family that was not rich enough to afford it.

Disease finally came. At the age of 40, he developed high blood pressure, so the doctor advised him to quit smoking. In order to drop her husband’s addiction, his wife controlled all the money,

including his salary, and bought him a lot of sugars and melon seeds to replace the function of cigarettes. Indeed, at first, he listened to his doctor and wife, just eating the “replacement”. But the “replacement” ended their duty as he couldn’t help smoking again when his condition improved. He saved lots of money in his drawer to buy cigarettes and smoke when his wife was away from home. In front of his wife, he kept on eating the sugars and melon seeds. He became a cheater. The lie continued until five years later, when he died of lung cancer at the age of 45.

Such stories happen about every 42 seconds. According to a survey conducted by Beijing Association of Smoking Control in 2007, about 2000 people died attributable to smoking every day in China. This number will rise to 8000 in 2050 if no useful measures are taken. Smoking continues to be a major risk factor for mortality in China, with almost 700 000 premature deaths attributed to tobacco use. With 360 million smokers, China has more cigarette consumers than any other country -- a smoking prevalence of 31 percent among the general population. China has such a big smoker population, partly because more and more people are starting to smoke at an early age, and mortality rates among women for passive smoking are comparable to active smoking.

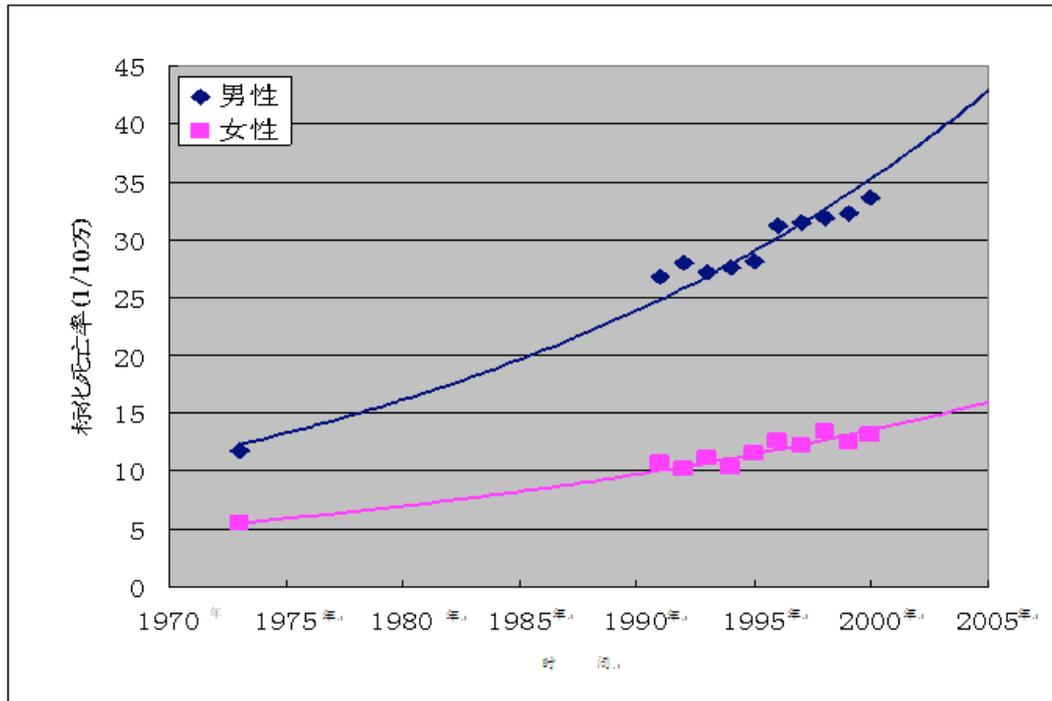
According to a prospective cohort study conducted in a nationally representative sample of almost 611,200 Chinese adults aged 40 or older by Dr Gu Dongfeng (Fuwai Hospital, Beijing, China) and colleagues, the prevalence of tobacco smoking has been continuously high in adult men (around 60%), and the average age of smoking initiation has been dropping and female smoking rate increasing during recent decades. Their findings are published in the January 8, 2009 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine. The death rate of smokers is 2-4 times higher than non-smokers. The incidence of lung cancer in our country each year is increasing at a rate of 4.5%. Estimates for the leading causes of smoking-related deaths were cancer (268,200), cardiovascular disease (146,200), and respiratory disease (20,300-113,300).

Relative Risk and Absolute Numbers of Deaths Attributable to Smoking in China, According to Sex and Cause of Death

Cause of death	Men: Multivariable adjusted relative risk*	Men: Deaths attributable to smoking, absolute n	Women: Multivariable adjusted relative risk*	Women: Deaths attributable to smoking, absolute n
Any cancer	1.55	240,400	1.62	27,800
Any respiratory disease	1.14	48,600	1.43	18,200
Any cardiovascular disease	1.17	126,600	1.21	19,600
Stroke	1.17	82,500	1.18	9,800
Coronary heart disease	1.21	30,400	1.41	7,300

\*Data were adjusted for age at baseline, educational level, geographic region (north vs south), urbanization (rural vs urban), and the presence/absence of hypertension, overweight status, alcohol consumption, and physical inactivity; the presence/absence of diabetes was considered as a time-dependent covariate.

The death rate of lung cancer in china from 1970 to 2005 from china smoking and health report 2006 according to sex.



The trend of the death rate of lung cancer in china from 1973 to 2005(1/100,000)  
 ◆male    ■female

The majority of smokers begin the use of tobacco in adolescence. A study showed that 1 / 3 to 1 / 2 of young people formed the habit and addiction after trying smoking. If no smoking before the age of 20, the possibility of adult smoking decreased significantly. It is worrisome that there is an upward trend in China's youth's smoking in recent years, and the youth started to smoke at an earlier age. A 1996 national epidemiological survey on smoking behavior showed that: smoking rate of 15 to 19-year-old was 9.7%. The age of starting smoking dropped from 22.4 years old in 1984 moved up to 19.7 years old. Accordingly, the number of 15 to 19-year-old smokers was about nine million, and the number of those who was trying to smoke was more than 18million. Smoking has a major impact on health of young people. The data from the 1996 national epidemiological survey on smoking behavior showed that the passive smoking rate in the youth, 15-19 years old, was as high as 48.9. It was estimated that the number of children and adolescents accounting for nearly 30% of the country's population who were enduring passive smoking was nearly 200 million. A WHO estimate based on the current trends of the children now 20 years old in China, shows 200 million will turn into smokers, of which at least 50 million will die because of smoking at a 35 to 69 years of age.

Exposure to secondhand smoke kills as many women in China as does smoking itself, according to new study findings by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley. The study estimated that in 2002, 48,400 women in China died from lung cancer and ischemic heart disease attributed to passive smoking compared with 47,300 lung cancer and heart disease deaths from "active" smoking. The researchers say their new findings reflect the fact that far fewer women than men smoke in China. Among active smokers, only 4 percent of the smokers were women, compared with 63 percent for men. In addition, about 52 percent of non-smokers are regularly exposed to secondhand tobacco smoke. The researchers combined data for smoking prevalence in China with projected mortality rates attributed to smoking. According to the study results, in 2002

active smoking caused 137,000 lung cancer deaths and 191,000 ischemic heart disease deaths in China. About 86 percent of these premature deaths were among men. The study also found that of the 12,000 lung cancer deaths in 2002 attributed to passive smoking, 73 percent, or 8,800, were among women. Similarly, women accounted for 84 percent, or 39,600, of the 47,000 ischemic heart disease deaths from passive smoking.

Shi Huayu is a student in Beijing Cuiwei Middle School. He is 15 years old and in grade 2. Speaking of when and why he started smoking, he said it made him feel cool when he was with his friends. Nobody taught him how to smoke; he learned it by himself. His parents did not know he was smoking, but his father is a heavy smoker. It was almost impossible to smoke at home and school is not safe either, huayu and his friends would smoke in the toilet in the school; they looked at each other smoking, which made him kind of proud. They liked to go out together. On the street, nobody would stop them. "When we are on the street, I know somebody is watching us, but I don't care, because they don't know us. It is our own business," Huayu said.

He didn't inhale at first, just sucked in the smoke and blew it out. One day another of his smoking buddies asked him if he inhaled. He said no, he really didn't realize that was part of smoking. His friend said to take a puff and then just breathe it back into the lungs. He tried it, but choked and coughed and got dizzy like everyone does when they first inhale. But he was determined to keep it up until he could smoke with the best of them. Because of peer pressure, wanting to be cool and do grown up things gave him the incentive to keep on inhaling till he got it right and became thoroughly addicted to the proverbial cancer stick.

"I have money to buy cigarettes. My father gives me pocket money usually if I ask for it." Huayu is the only child at home. His parents are both workers, busy, with no time to care too much about his studies and life in the school. Huayu said he might quit smoking when he graduates, but he won't quit right now. He didn't say the reason. "I didn't have any trouble when I buy cigarettes, I can buy them when I need them."

More women in Beijing have taken up smoking in the past 10 years, though the average smoking rate in the Olympic city is declining, a government-backed research has found. Women smoke for many different reasons in addition to being physically addicted to the nicotine in cigarettes.

Yang Yunfang, a 38-year-old white-collar working for a joint venture, has smoked for more than ninety years. "I began smoking when I was 19. I just wanted to avoid eating or to control weight at first, but later I found it seems like an old friend of mine because I felt less stressful and less lonely whenever I took one," said she. "It is very hard for me to quit smoking because you cannot easily end the relationship with your old friend."

After she understood the dangers of smoking, she began to stop smoking but failed every time. "I have tried many times over the last few years to kick this addiction once and for all, but somehow, I always managed to be lured back into its clutches after a few weeks, or even after a 6 month quit. I thought I had it beaten! I think it must have been the "just one" lie which got me the last time. I smoked for another couple of years before I found the will power to try again, but every time I would fail." So it continued...

"I asked my husband to quit smoking many times, but he just wouldn't listen," said Zhang Xiaoyang, a housewife in Beijing Qingyuanli residential area.

"I dislike the smell of cigarettes, it makes me choke, and my husband knows that, I kind of can't understand that." She married 7 years ago, and at that time she knew about his smoking.

"Many other wives in my residential area have the same problem with me, but you can't divorce

because of that, right?” Zhang smiled when she left to pick up her son from kindergarten.

“Tobacco-caused diseases have emerged as one of the greatest health challenges facing developing countries,” said Bill Gates, retired co-founder of computer giant Microsoft, who has donated \$130,000 from his foundation to support China’s anti-smoking campaign. “The good news is, we know what it takes to save millions of lives, and where efforts exist, they are working,” he said.

Indeed, even some hospitals began to join in the anti-smoking campaign. “The 10 hospitals in Beijing are all preparing for staff training and schedule arrangements in the anti-smoking campaign,” said Wu Yiqun, director of Healthy Development Center. “The service is mainly provided at the respiratory disease department, where doctors prescribe medication like nicotine replacement therapy, teach skills in controlling smoking and give psychological direction,” Wu said.

“I think there is a lot of public health activity that is out there now and a lot of these campaigns are focused on de-glamorizing cigarette smoking,” said Cao Ronggui, director of Chinese Association on Tobacco Control. “We should pay more attention to youth, because they don’t react to the medical horror stories, but they really do react to the idea that cigarettes will not make them more glamorous and that cigarette companies are not on their side,” he said.

Local governments at various levels also took many actions and made regulations, such as the actions to ban smoking at public places, to prevent cigarette advertisement. But there is no nationwide law or regulation to prevent people smoking.

“Although the Government’s efforts are commendable, more needs to be done if we are to change the attitudes of the millions of people, who continue to smoke despite the serious health risks,” said Wang Longde, Vice Minister of Health, on the launch ceremony of Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in Beijing.

With these concerted efforts against smoking, however, the number of smokers in China still remains increasing. “The tobacco industry is to blame, at least in part for the situation, because cigarette production companies have used its financial might, the tax revenue, I mean, to thwart public health,” said Xiao Dan, director of WHO tobacco and health cooperative center in China. “In today’s business climate, the ethics of financial ties should be discussed more openly. We should ask if a company can decrease their selling this addictive product.”

The death of Mr. Zhang dealt such a big blow to the family. For his wife and daughter, it is a double blow both economically and mentally. Tens of thousands of RMB borrowed from the relatives and friends was used to cure his disease. With the money gone, the man died, and the wife and daughter had to pay off all the debt. The mother had to work harder and do more part-time jobs.

Sitting in tears every day, his wife seemed changed into another person who was quite silent. The tragedy seemed beyond her capacity of endurance. They both felt depressed, and can’t see even a glimmer of hope.

His death draws a profound lesson for the whole family. The daughter swore that she would never think of finding a husband who smokes. The mother, who had a mixed feeling about her husband, who had cheated her for several years, threw away all the cigarettes left in the home and couldn’t help hating all the people who smoke. Whenever seeing her relatives or friends smoking, she came in front of them and stopped their smoking.

“I will never find a husband who smokes.” Those are the last words from the mouth of his

daughter—Zhang Lingling, a 17 year-old girl. She said this is the most profound lesson she has learned from her father's legendary life of being friends and enemies with cigars.