

The On-going Campaign

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The boy sat there, concentrating on rolling an approximately 7cm by 7cm white piece of paper on a table. Inside the paper was mustard scraps, giving off a delicate tobacco scent. He carefully used his thumbs and index fingers to wrap the scraps in the paper. He rerolled the paper several times before he finally finished rolling this handmade cigarette with a satisfied lick.

This was Chen Zhongxiang's first cigarette. He was 16 at the time. Now he is 39 and runs a small restaurant, "Bailu", in the north of downtown Beijing, near Third North Ring Road. "I can't afford to smoke when I was 16. So I made cigarettes by myself. It was like the ritual. I enjoyed that process. But I never thought what would happen to me the first time I smoked," said Chen. "If I knew, I would never smoke even I was paid to do it."

Chen used to be a heavy smoker. From cigarettes without a filter tip such as Xiangyang, and Feige two decades ago, to those with filter tip like Hong Shancha and Zhonghua, Chen introduced these brands like he was talking about his dear friends. He tried to quit smoking twice. In 1999, his newly married wife, Wu Xiao, persuaded him to quit smoking, but the attempt failed. Chen was a chef in a small restaurant then and worked nearly 10 hours a day. The only pleasure he could take was to light a cigarette with other staff members after work. Chen started to run his own restaurant in 2002. Being an owner is much harder and busier than being a chef. Under heavy pressure, Chen smoked even heavier than before. 10 cigarettes or even a whole pack a day was usual to him. He always smoked Yun Yan or Hong Tashan, 6 RMB or 10 RMB a pack. "Giving cigarettes is a part of business! If you refuse other people's cigarettes, people will feel offended. They would think you don't like them. I was no longer a chef then. I needed to develop my business and supported my family. Cigarettes helped me to get close with people," Chen said.

It wasn't until Wu got pregnant in 2005 did the idea of quitting smoking come back to Chen. The happiness and excitement of being a new father made Chen determined to quit smoking for the sake of the baby and his wife. On January 19, 2006, a healthy baby girl came to his family. Chen never smoked at home again. When he could not bear his craving for a cigarette, he would go to the street and lit one. "I smoked at most 3 cigs a day. Sometimes I didn't smoke the whole day. I quit for my daughter, and my family. But I did not completely quit until 2008," Chen said.

The Olympic were coming in 2008, and the Beijing Municipality has advocated "Green Olympic" since 2007. Restaurants were one of the public places that should reserve a smoking-free area. Chen was excited about the upcoming Olympics and he made up his mind to contribute his own effort to Green Olympics. Although the idea of setting up smoking-free areas in restaurants was introduced years ago, most restaurant just put a no-smoking sign on the table instead of strictly banning smoking. With the new smoking ban, Chen made his Bailu restaurant a smoking-free one. He quit smoking completely because he thought it would help to promote "Green Olympics". "But life always cracks a joke on us," Chen said.

One early morning in late December 2007, Chen Zhongxiang got up and brushed his teeth. But he found that some blood came out of his gums. Chen did not pay attention to the bleeding at first because it just happened sometimes. For the following month, however, every time he brushed his teeth, the gums bled. Sometimes the gums even bled without a reason. He began to worry about his health but he did not tell his wife until she found it herself in January 2008. Wu Xiao insisted

that he should go to the hospital because one of their friends had a similar symptom and that turned out to be an incurable disease. “Before I left home for the hospital, I looked at my two-year old daughter. She was so innocent, like an angel. And I was so guilty, like a sin. What if I had an incurable disease? Who is going to take care of my family? I kept asking myself about these questions. I began to feel nervous for the first time,” Chen smiled, “One thing I could not understand is that I have quit smoking for nearly two years. Why the Death chose me? I knew other people who smoked for a life time and they were totally as healthy as non-smokers. Why me?”

“So many people are smoking, I would not be the unlucky one.” This might be most smokers’ first belief. China is the world’s largest producer and consumer of cigarettes, with nearly 2 trillion smoked every year. The country has 350 million smokers, roughly one quarter of its population. The smoking ban regulations, introduced in Beijing since May of last year, a follow-up to a 1996 regulation, was the country’s striking effort to honor its commitment of having a smoke-free Games, and part of the country’s long-term campaign to promote its citizens’ health. The implementation of the smoking ban at public venues has attracted widespread attention at home and abroad. Now, one year has passed, and the government seems quite sanguine in its evaluation of the impact of the regulations. The Beijing Municipal Health Bureau told said on May 4th that the prevalence of cigarette use decreased to 21.5 percent last year, 1.5 percent lower than 2007. A public survey conducted at the end of 2008 by the city’s health supervision office also showed that 80.8% of the local residents believed the number of people lighting up cigarettes in public places had declined. However, dissident voice from the grassroots and other experts may suggest otherwise.

The smoking ban regulations, effective May 1, 2008, clearly defined non-smoking public venues and partly prohibited smoking in sites such as hotels, restaurants and training centers. Nevertheless, despite the fact that many social institutions and civic facilities have stringently carried out the rule, places such as shops and restaurants, for fear of losing customers, often turn a blind eye. According to Xinhua News Agency, China’s state news agency, a survey on 57 medium and high-end restaurants in Beijing reveals that while 95% of them may have bold display of non-smoking signs, they are lax in reinforcing the ban. Many of the restaurants have smoking and non-smoking sections neighboring each other. Only about 10% of the total restaurants have special non-smoking sections.

The economic concern, along with other obstacles, makes the smoking ban an ineffective one. The idea that the efforts to ban smoking in public venues can be an opportunity for the nation to cultivate awareness of concern for others is largely compromised. The battle to protect non-smokers from being harmed by passive smoking is as arduous as ever. According to statistics released in the 2008 tobacco control report published by the central government, over 540 million people are affected by inhaling secondhand smoke and approximately 55.8% of youth who suffer from passive smoking in public places.

A recent Health Ministry report on tobacco control decries a lack of effective limits on youth smoking, which is why China has 15 million smokers aged between 13 and 18, and almost 40 million teens who’ve at least tried to smoke. As anti-smoking awareness among the public is yet to be raised, smoking keeps inflicting a heavy toll. Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention discloses that the country’s lung cancer cases and death rates increased 20 percent in the past 30 years, and they will continue to climb as the number of smokers increases.

The ban itself also encounters a mixture of public voices. Most Beijing citizens welcome the ban as a great move to reduce secondhand smoking and improve public health. The smokers, now having to dodge around and smoke outside office buildings, dislike the ban.

Taxi drivers are the moving map of Beijing, and they seem to have the truest picture of lives in Beijing, since they drive around the city everyday and meet all kinds of citizens. Pei Fanchun, an easy-hearted middle-aged taxi driver, himself is a non-smoker. "Since last September, the non-smoking regulation in taxi bans smoking of the taxi drivers. We knew that we might be fined if caught by passengers when we smoking. But the passengers are not aware of it."

His colleague Fu Qiang, a strong and muscular man from the northeast in Pei's description, is a heavy smoker. "It is really difficult for him if he wants to smoke in his taxi. Sometimes the passengers will complain even if he opens the car window when he smokes. Since the Olympics, things have become more rigid. He always complained about the strict regulation which bans smoking. He encountered an examiner once when he smoked in the parking lot who intended to fine him 50 yuan."

"I myself am in approving of the non-smoking regulation. I know that smoking does no good to human body. On the other hand, I understand why Fu Qiang smokes so heavily. Driving for such a long hour is stressful for us-the taxi drivers. A cigarette is their only pleasure in driving." With an enforced smile and a shrug, he told us the truth. "I've put a non-smoking sign on my car. I assume the passengers could read the sign. But if I really encountered a passenger who wants to smoke in the car, I could do nothing about it." In his personal experience, he used to require a certain passenger not to smoke in his car. The passenger did not heed his words. "If he really needs to smoke, what I can do about it? I could not ask him to leave my car."

When asked about Beijing municipality's ban on public smoking, Li Zhaoran said: "The smoking ban has little effect in our shop, maintaining our customers is more important. Besides, the authority is more concerned about fire prevention than inspecting smoking in public area". He is the head waiter in a cafe named *Sculpturing Time* in Wudaokou, north of downtown Beijing, where Li noted above one third of male customers would smoke. Although the cafe reserves the entire second floor for smoking section, the non-smoking section is smaller and on the third floor. "Over half of our customers would smoke or come with friends who smoke, the non-smoker is a minority here," Li said.

The restaurant manager of Meizhou Dongpo Restaurant, Guo Xiaodong, said his restaurant was one of China's first completely smoke-free restaurants in Beijing. "If we can provide a non-smoking environment surely it is better. That is our idea," he said. "We made this a no-smoking restaurant for the health of you and your family."

Before carrying out their smoke-free plan in his restaurant, they made a relevant survey to the customers about the smoking. 100% customers are all clear about the harm of the secondhand smoking, with only 88% of customers (including some smokers) supporting a non-smoking regulation. Only 7% of customers say that they won't visit the restaurant if it prohibits smoking.

Guo said his restaurant initially lost some customers during the transition to a non-smoking environment in October 2007. But now, business is as good as ever. Lv Shuang is a regular customer in this restaurant and he enjoys the smoke-free atmosphere. "Meal time is not very long. Why do people have to smoke? At other restaurants when people at the next table keep smoking, it is annoying," Lv said. Still, he confessed that smoking is viewed in China as an important way of socializing. "It is a courtesy gesture for the Chinese to hand a cigarette to their friends. Sometimes

they just feel more pleasant when they light up a cigarette habitually. Especially in some middle level restaurant opened along the street, people get used to the noisy smoking environment. This is the living style which most of the labor class are familiar with.”

Before China introduced the concept of “smoke free Olympics” and pledged to organize a green Olympic, the anti-smoking measures taken by its government were considered too conservative and mild. Many have envisioned that Beijing Olympics would be a watershed for the enforcement of the anti-smoking ban. However, some intellectuals currently won’t endorse this idea. Professor Zhanjiang from Department of Journalism at China Youth University for Political Science is one of them. He pointed out that “before and during the Olympics, the overriding concern is how to create a good image for Beijing city. And everything, including forbidding smoking in public took a solemn significance,” and argued that “the ban on public smoking soon loses its news value. Since there has not been a sustained government drive to enforce this regulation, the public attention moves onto other subjects.”

Quite a few people share Zhan’s opinion that there are no follow-up moves after the smoking ban, and the ban itself is not carried out effectively. “This ban is more like a government Public Relation campaign, it lacks the biting tooth in enforcement,” said an anonymous source from China’s Association on Tobacco Control.

Meanwhile, the words of some authorities may shed light on the difficulties encountered during the enforcement of the ban. Liu Zhujun, director at Beijing Ai Wei Hui (Patriotic Health Campaign Committee), explained that “Beijing has about 23,000 public places, but it only has less than 3,000 qualified personnel for supervision and inspections.” He believed that there was still a lack of public awareness and motive to end smoking in public places.

“To make the ban really work, we need not only strong law enforcement, but also a public that are willing to participate and understand the need and meaning of no-smoking in public,” Liu added.

As stipulated in the ban, Ai Wei Hui is authorized to fine the owner of public places, ranging from 1,000 up to 5,000 yuan, if the place continuously violates the ban. An expert panel advocating a ban on smoking in public places has called on authorities in Beijing to double the 5000-yuan fine. It’s prompted by the results of a survey last October. The survey of 6,000 citizens found that more than 70 percent of Beijing residents wanted the government to increase fines if it was serious about banning smoking in public places. Cui Xiaobo, an expert on the panel, believed that “harsher penalties for establishments will be more effective than going around fining individuals.” According to him, a draft to revise the current anti-smoking regulations and raise the penalty will be completed by the end of 2010.

Although many consider the anti-smoking ban as a boost while Beijing is determined to fulfill the promise of Green Olympic, the tobacco industry’s power has not diminished. One reason is that state-owned China National Tobacco Corp. and the industry’s watchdog, the State Tobacco Monopoly Administration (STMA), operate under the same roof. Expert critics such as Yang Gonghuan, director of National Tobacco Control Office, have long proposed the split between the company and watchdog. However, there’s still a long way to go. Before then, the corporation will continue to brazenly promote their smoking advertisements and encourage low-price cigarette production for the rural market.

Today, smokers hardly roll cigarettes themselves in China because there are very cheap ones. Many smokers still have no clear idea OF the devastating results that smoking might lead to, just like Chen Zhongxiang and his wife years ago. But now, Chen is nearly a half expert. He started to

do body check in Beijing Renmin Hospital, in February 2008. At the same time, he checked his symptom online and read articles about the bad effects of smoking. The checking result came out in March. All his family felt relieved immediately. His doctor told him it was only the problem of teeth caused by long time smoking and his other organs functioned well. Chen told his doctor he would definitely quit smoking because after searching online and reading some books, he realized smoking could lead to so many diseases, not only lung cancer but also brain cancer or pharyngitis disease. Smoking was also harmful to secondhand smokers such as his wife. "There is no good reason to smoke. I'm lucky I'm as healthy as before," he said to the doctor.

Chen still cannot get over how terrified he was one year ago. Sometimes when he gets a cold or a little dizzy, he cannot help wondering whether this is a sign of some incurable disease. But he still believes that as long as he quit smoking forever, he could live up to 80 or even 90 to see his daughter get married and see his daughter's children. Chen decides to keep his restaurant smoking free, even if he realized it might lose some customers.

"It is a kind of human nature. Only when people get burned by fire, do they believe the fire is burning. But sometimes it would be too late to realize it," Chen said seriously. "It is like my second life. Not everyone has the same luck with me. It takes time for people to fight against cigs."