

## Female Smoking, Devil in Disguise

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Wearing neatly trimmed bangs and sitting comfortably in a sofa at Starbucks, Huang Yi looked fresh and focused.

Explaining why she chose to be interviewed at Starbucks, Huang said, “Now I prefer non-smoking places like Starbucks and McDonald’s when I want to hang out. This is my way of staying out of smoking.”

Only 25 years old, Huang had a history of smoking for five years. Back in college, where she got into smoking, Huang would sneak around with a handful of cigarettes, sometimes tucked into folded newspapers, and smoked at a nook on campus.

“At first I felt smoking was novel and exciting. And then I had a hard time in my relationship. Smoking gave me comfort and solace,” said Huang.

Back then, she smoked a brand of made-for-men cigarettes called “Three Five,” which only cost 13 yuan per packet. On average, she smoked one packet per week.

By graduation time, more pressure came along with job hunting. Huang felt even more depressed and smoked much more than usual. Two packets day was her routine. “After smoking a cigarette, I would feel relieved and relaxed. It seemed that my pressure and depression had all gone,” said Huang.

After entering the work field, smoking became one of her indispensable habits. She also upgraded the quality and cost of her cigarettes to those costing 20 yuan per packet. Whenever she hung out with her friends, at KTV, bars, or tea houses, she would light up a cigarette. Holding a cigarette between her lips and carrying a goblet, Huang felt she was fashionable and cool.

But the fashion and coolness did not last long. In the winter of 2007, Huang started to cough frequently. She could not speak or sleep and her throat was dry and itchy. She was later diagnosed as having an infection of the respiratory tract.

It was at that time that she started to see the downside of smoking, but she could not just quit. She only replaced the made-for-men cigarettes with milder ones made for women. In the following year, she was admitted to the hospital four times because of the infection. Each time, she needed blood transfusions to ease the inflammation.

### Female Smoking in China

Huang Yi is just one of the 30 million female smokers in China. Nowadays, one out of every four adult Chinese smokes, even though smoking takes an average of 14.5 years off their lives, according to the National Tobacco Control Office.

China has the largest smoking population in the world, about 350 million smokers, three times the number of smokers in the United States, or more than the entire population of the United States. Some 66% of men and 3% of women smoke. Average cigarette consumption per person per year in China has risen from 739 in 1970 to 1,290 in 1980, and then to 1,900 in 1990, statistics from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention revealed

In year 2000 alone, one million men and women in China died prematurely as a result of smoking, testifies Kong Lingzhi, head of the Disease Control Office under the Ministry of Public Health.

This number accounted for 12 percent of the total deaths that year, more than the number of deaths caused by AIDS, tuberculosis, traffic accidents and suicides combined. If no cigarette control measures were taken, Kong added, in year 2020, smoking will result in 30 percent of total deaths. Smoking is even more harmful to women than to men. Imagine, with every three ticks of the clock, one woman on this earth dies of smoking-related diseases.

A report released by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) showed when women smoke, they are risking twice the danger of lung cancer than male smokers, even if they are of the same age and smoke the same amount of cigarettes. If a woman smokes and takes birth control pills, she is ten times more vulnerable to coronary heart disease than those who do not smoke.

Also, smoking exposes women to greater risk of sterility and miscarriage. According to research figures released by the China Medical Forum, daily consumption of over 10 cigarettes will increase the risk of premature delivery by 44.8 percent, twice the risk posed to non-smoking women, and 66.7 percent of newborn babies born to smoking mothers weigh less than 2500 grams, significantly raising their risk of mental retardation. Even if they successfully give birth, the impact of their smoking habits may already permanently impair their babies' health.

Despite all these disadvantages of smoking, women smokers, especially young women smokers, are prevalent particularly in big cities. Six out of 100 women in Shanghai and five out of 100 in Beijing smoke, around twice the average female level of 2.6 percent in rural areas, according to a report on Xinhua net.

What is more striking is that 99 percent of women smokers are well aware of the harm of smoking, according to a survey conducted in May by the authors among 194 Chinese women. The survey results also indicated that failed relationships and high pressure in life are the two most important reasons why women smoke.

### Smoking to Ease Emotional Pain

About 62 percent of women participating in the survey claim they smoke as a way to “forgive and forget their failed relationship”.

Miss Chen picked up her first cigarette when a relationship came to an end. She considered smoking as her last solace and a way of letting out pain.

Back in 2001, she broke up with her boyfriend. Brokenhearted, she secluded herself at home and wept for several days. One day, her best friend came to comfort her. While chatting, she offered a cigarette to Miss Chen and said, “Whenever you are depressed, smoke one. You will feel much better.”

So she lit up the cigarette and smoked. Although the first inhale got her coughing, she continued to smoke until one cigarette was finished. “After that, I felt a little dizzy but much relaxed. All my displeasure seemed to have fled away with the thin smoke I spit out,” said Chen. From that time on, she could not help but rely on cigarettes to fight her sorrow.

“I know people usually think smoking girls are not good girls, and smoking may cause some diseases. But I was desperate at that time and smoking was my meat and drink,” she said.

Now Miss Chen has thrown herself into another relationship with a caring and considerate boyfriend. She naturally stopped smoking. “When I am falling in love again, I totally forget the cigarettes,” she said. For her, the dependence on cigarettes is more psychological than physical.

“When faced with emotional setbacks and unable to dispel their sorrow in a short time, women would fall upon on smoking as a way of evading their problems. But combating pain with smoking is a very negative way of dealing with emotional problems. We call it ‘self-destruction’ in psychological terms,” said Xu Xiaolian, director of the Psychological Research Center of Peking University.

Sun suggested that women should face their problems bravely. They can pour their sorrows out to friends, relatives and even psychological doctors. These people can give them care and solace to help them cast off distress and rebuild self-confidence.

### Smoking to Relieve Pressure

The survey also indicated that 27 percent of women identified “pressure” to explain their smoking habits. In women’s restrooms in office buildings, cigarette butts are no longer a rarity.

Mrs. Feng is one of the women who take up smoking to seek emotional relief when they reach the low points of their life or experience huge pressure.

Mrs. Feng came to Beijing to start her own business in 1998. After several years of hard work, she accumulated some savings and started to speculate in the stock market. At first, she was lucky and made some money, but good times did not last long. In 2001 when the stock market slumped and values plunged, she was very depressed but could do nothing about it.

One day she had tea with her friends and one of them lit up a cigarette. She picked up another one and learned to smoke. “After smoking one cigarette, I feel much less exhausted and confused. My mind suddenly clears up,” Mrs. Feng recalled.

From then on, she always kept a packet of cigarettes at hand when she was home reviewing the price index. After losing most of her savings on the stock market, she finally quit speculation and found a secretarial job.

The work pressure was huge and she would smoke a while every night after returning home. “Sitting on the couch, seeing the smoke rings coming out of my mouth, I have a special feeling, calm and relaxed,” Mrs. Feng said.

Every day she smokes one packet of Yinbaisha at a price of 10 yuan. Thus, she spends 300 yuan each month on cigarettes. It is not a very big amount of money considering her monthly salary of 4000 yuan, according to Mrs. Feng.

“Smoking has become an indispensable part of my life. Whenever I am in a bad mood, I will smoke. I am addictive to smoking. It can help me restore my peace of mind, relieve anxiety and reduce pressure,” she said.

Being asked about the harm of smoking to women, Mrs. Chen said, “I admit that smoking is harmful to women’s health. Every time I smoke, my skin will become rougher. But when I am lonely and stressful, only cigarettes are there to accompany me. Only cigarettes will never betray me.”

Although many working women believe that smoking can help them get rid of pressure, it is not true. “Like other physically addictive drugs, nicotine may produce a mild sedative effect and temporally relieve pressure but it won’t work in the long run,” said Xiao Dan, Deputy Chief Officer of The WHO Collaborating Centre for Tobacco. “What’s worse, its addictive nature has the potential to cause dependence, so even some so-called low-nicotine cigarettes are toxic and can damage the health.”

## Smoking for Glamour

Although most women resort to smoking when they are experiencing hardships, some are proud of it and enjoy the glamour.

Twenty two-year-old Gu Xiaoyu, an art design junior at China Communications University, attributes her motivation to smoke to “feel equal with men”. “Smoking is very much part of Chinese culture, which is dominated by men,” said Gu. “It’s wrong, so now I smoke. To me it’s a sign of equality.”

Gu said she would quit someday when she doesn’t like smoking any more. “I think every one has his or her own way of living, and smoking is just a way of living. If you like you can choose it, if not, drop it. I don’t like the idea of me giving up just because other people decide it for me,” said Gu.

“But women should know where to smoke and heed what other people think of smoking, otherwise it will not only damage a woman’s image, but will also stir repulsion among other people,” Gu added.

“Most young female smokers are urban yuppies in the art circle--playwrights, actresses, directors,” observed Yang Gonghuan, research fellow at the National Disease Control Center. “These people have a certain leadership role among young women, especially among college students. For many female smokers, imitation is usually the starter, after which they felt hard to get rid of it,” he added.

According to Dr. Yang, the experiences of some developed countries show that when a country is undergoing massive urbanization and breaking with tradition, the population of female smokers will increase. Tobacco advertisement and promotion will seed up this rise. “China is going through this transcending period, so the female smoking problem will be really worrisome in the following years,” said Yang.

Sun Shiji, director of Psychology Studies Center of Fudan University, observed that China is going through enormous social transition, and women are exceptionally susceptible to different changes and pressure. “It is necessary to set up a psychological support system to facilitate aid access for women,” said Sun.

## Young Female Smokers Rising

Xiao Dan is a respiratory expert in Chaoyang Hospital, Beijing. He has been following the smoking issue since the 1990s. In recent years, he discovers to his relief that the total number of smokers in China is gradually, though very slowly, decreasing, but he also found an alerting fact: the number of young female smokers is rising.

In his epidemiological surveys conducted respectively in 1996 and 2004, three age groups have countered the general trend of decrease, marking a steep rise in smoking rate among youngsters—women especially. Young women, aged from 15 to 19 and 20-24, are obviously smoking more. The other sharp increase rests with teenage boys aged from 15 to 19. “If there are not adequate precautions to check the increase in young smokers, soon our efforts in tobacco control will go down the drain.” He said.

“I began smoking since 10 for a simple reason: all my idols smoke,” said Yujie, a 16-year-old girl

who smokes one pack of cigarettes a day. Wearing a pink Mickey Mouse schoolbag and carrying a water bottle printed with the image of the robotic cat Doraemon, her husky voice sounded quite strange.

Her idols are mature, feminine women with a lyrical tone and manner who were best depicted in her idol director Wong Kar-wai's movies. One of their trademarks is a lazy, smoldering cigarette in the hand. "It looks exotic, romantic and exquisite, like nothing back home," Yujie said as an admiring look passed over her face.

Her parents, both working at international companies, are too busy to notice their daughter is a heavy smoker. They provide her with cash to buy whatever she likes but no time to spend with her. "Everyday I come back home from school and find myself all alone with nothing to do. I'm lonely, bored, so I watch movies. I like movies," Yujie said.

It has become a routine for her to get home watching her idol actress Li Jiaxin in *Fallen Angels* lighting a cigarette between sips of coffee with coldly elegance, or the beautiful heroine Maggie Cheung in *Centre Stage* lounging on a couch elegantly holding a long, thin cigarette, trying to escape from life's problems. "They are gorgeous, delicate, seductive and especially charming when holding a cigarette," she said. "Cigarettes are a necessary prop. There is no drama without smoking."

Yujie was not unaware of the harm of cigarettes, but she only got a blurred picture of that. "I know they may be harmful. I can see cigarette packs are carrying health warnings, but it won't be that serious, right?" she asked. "Because so many people are smoking."

She was right in one sense because China does have the largest smoking population in the world with a total of 350 million smokers. And again she should not be blamed for not knowing the grave damage tobacco can do to health. Her parents are too busy to give her some advice on the health risks. Schools in China by far haven't yet developed specific classes to teach children the dangers of smoking.

Despite the Chinese government announced a ban on selling tobacco to children under 18 in December 2006, today kids still have no trouble buying cigarettes. "Shop keepers don't really care," Yujie said. "They will sell to anyone." The 2008 China Tobacco Control study found that more than 90 percent of the young smokers were able to buy cigarettes freely.

The study stated that about 40 million of China's 130 million children between the ages of 13 and 18 have tried smoking, and 15 million are now addicted. Among the 130 teens, 68 percent of them have had their first whole cigarette before the age of 13. More and more girls are taking up smoking all the time and the rate of addiction among girls is much higher.

According to an independent survey carried out by the *People's Daily*, 16 percent of elementary and high school students said they were regular smokers and 33 percent had tried smoking. In some places, 60 percent of high school boys and 22 percent of girls smoke. The number of women and children smoking has been on the rise ever since the 1990s.

However, teens, especially girls, are utterly susceptible to the harm of cigarettes. In a study published in the *American Heart Association* online journal *Circulation*, researchers found that teenagers who smoke, or are exposed to second-hand smoke, face a much higher risk of developing metabolic syndromes, disorders associated with obesity that increases the chances of heart attack, stroke and diabetes. Teen girls almost double their risk of breast cancer if they take up smoking within five years of their first menstrual period.

Like other female smokers, Huang Yi, the young woman whose story inspired this report, came

back to normal after experiencing the devilish impact of smoking.

In this March, she started to cough intensely again. “I coughed over meals, at work, even during sleep. I often felt great pain in my lungs and ribs.” This time, she was hospitalized for two months, during which time she bungled her work and got fired.

The doctor told her if the inflammation in her lungs could not be cured this year, she would be repeatedly hospitalized for the rest of her life. It was then when Huang started to realize the gravity of the problem and the damages smoking has brought to her body and life. She decided to quit smoking.

Now, after recovery, Huang has landed a new job and started a new relationship. Her boyfriend is strongly opposed to female smoking and Huang is determined to stay away from her old habit and cherish her new life.

“The charm of smoking is transitory, but its damage will be everlasting. For women, the most precious thing is youth and health, and it is really not worth it to sacrifice both just for the temporary pleasure,” said Huang.