

## Anthropology in China's health promotion and tobacco

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Health problems vex many residents of China, as they do people elsewhere. These problems need attention from medical professionals and public-health funders. They also require academic inquiry, including that offered by medical anthropologists. Medical anthropology addresses the way in which links between illness, culture, politics, and economics unfold over time.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps no problem is a better example than tobacco, which is wreaking a sizable social, emotional, and political-economic toll on Chinese people today and is one of the greatest causes of premature death. Anthropological study holds practical value for the development of

innovative interventions to reduce China's smoking epidemic and attenuate other causes of ill-health.

Health researchers have written many articles about tobacco in China over the past few years, mostly describing smoking behaviours and their biological damage. Of special note is the finding that 3% of women in China smoke cigarettes daily compared with nearly 60% of men.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists immediately ask what generated this stark contrast. The answer is not a sexist application of tobacco-control policies, because such policies began only a few years ago. More important has been processes that position cigarette smoking as a key gender differentiator that encourages men to smoke as a sign of masculinity and discourages women lest they be regarded as dissolute.<sup>3</sup> These processes began in the early 1900s, when cigarette companies such as American Tobacco and Nanyang Brothers Tobacco were battling to capture initial market share in China. Budding Chinese nationalist and feminist reformers bridled at the way in which the companies inundated cities with sexually charged advertising copy that promoted cigarette use by women. The reformers argued that women needed to show they were progressive and morally upright beacons of "New China" by spurning the advertisements and abstaining from smoking.<sup>2</sup> This protective ethic has existed ever since, most strongly expressed through antiprostitution narratives in which the female smoker and commercial sex worker are portrayed as one.

Meanwhile, various sectors of Chinese society have encouraged smoking among men as a means of development, both economic and personal.<sup>4</sup> This encouragement has involved expansionist practices by



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the tobacco industry (first supervised by private firms, after 1949 by provincial administrators, and from the 1980s onwards by the state's China National Tobacco Corporation—today the world's largest cigarette manufacturer).<sup>5</sup> Such encouragement has also involved the insinuation of cigarette use into concepts of the male good life.

During the 20th century, heroic men of the revolution, such as Lu Xun, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping, were regularly depicted as cigarette smokers. Provincial offices eased mimicry of these heroes between 1949 and 1976 by designing packaging with male revolutionary imagery and by issuing cigarette ration coupons to family heads.<sup>6,7</sup> Since then, to meet the escalating earnings targets set by Beijing, employees of the China National Tobacco Corporation have positioned cigarettes as an index of male economic success and a convenient tool in social exchange. Keeping tax rates per pack low,<sup>8</sup> the Corporation encouraged stratified cigarette pricing (the cheapest pack of domestic cigarettes today sells for US\$0.14, the most expensive for \$33) under hundreds of brand names like Fierce Lion, Red Pagoda, Five Bulls, Meeting of Heroes, and Emperor. Add social custom and stir. When men interact today, strong pressure exists for each to flaunt his preferred brand and “courteously” exchange cigarettes, creating cycles of reciprocity that fuel nicotine addiction and impede quitting.

By the end of the millennium, a million citizens were dying every year from tobacco-related diseases, and if the present smoking rates continue, 100 million Chinese men will die between 2000 and 2050, with many of their family members squandering life savings in desperate attempts at treatment.<sup>9</sup> In response, Beijing ratified WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2005 and members of the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Ministry of Health, and local health offices have begun an uphill, inadequately funded drive to help citizens avoid cigarettes.

Medical anthropology is no panacea. What it offers are distinct methods for perceiving problems and imagining new ways to act. For men and cigarette smoking in China, many interventions are needed, including ones that follow best practices rigorously studied in other countries—eg, legislation on smoke-free public places, uniformly high cigarette prices, and tobacco advertising bans.<sup>10</sup> Other interventions could

be more experimental. Anthropological approaches suggest that these experiments should use local male symbols to counter positive views of smoking among young people, from encouraging iconic Chinese men today (eg, basketball star Yao Ming) to take public pledges against cigarettes to distributing computer games with tobacco giants represented as villains. Such approaches further suggest use of public-service announcements to depict cigarette swapping as odious, encouragement of women to organise support for their imperiled families, promotion of smoking-cessation drugs and programmes enticingly packaged for Chinese men, and campaigns that redirect local narratives about fulfilling commitments to the Framework Convention from that of “threatening” regional development to that of “enabling” one's father, brother, son, or self to live a long modern life without cigarettes.

Praise was fittingly showered on Beijing for running a smoke-free Olympics. It is time now for men and women of vision to embrace a smoke-free China.

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