

In China, smoking permeates daily life

By James Cox
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BEIJING — In his quest for new markets, North Carolina tobacco baron James B. Duke once ordered an aide to fetch him an atlas.

On opening it, he ignored the expanse of distant continents and the blue of the great oceans. He fixed his gaze instead on a table that listed the population of each country. One country stood out.

"That is where we're going to go sell cigarettes," he said, pointing to China. "The possibilities can hardly be overestimated."

Today, more than a century later, there are 320 million cigarette smokers in China. One out of every 3 cigarettes in the world is puffed by a Chinese person. And China is by far the top tobacco-producing nation, growing four times as much of the leaf as the No. 2 producer, the USA.

China's anti-smoking movement is barely in its infancy, still largely the preserve of a few obscure doctors and researchers. The government is torn between the need to protect its largest single revenue source and the health of its 1.3 billion people. Meanwhile, more and more Chinese smokers are switching from cheaper, harsher-tasting domestic smokes to imported brands that offer milder flavor and more cachet.

A smoking ethic pervades China, where a cigarette is still the best icebreaker. Traditionally, it has been unwise to approach anyone in authority — the boss, a bureaucrat, a police officer — without being prepared to offer a cigarette before discussing important matters.

"Offering them a smoke is a way of making friends. It's a necessity of social intercourse," says Zhao Zhonwen, 35, a Beijing construction worker with a pack-a-day habit.

A whopping 67% of Chinese men over age 15 are smokers. A 1996 study found that only

4% of Chinese women regularly take a drag, but researchers say the study almost certainly low-balled the rate of smoking among women, now believed on the rise.

In China's heavily industrial northeast, it is common to find children under age 10 puffing away in schoolyards. In poor southern provinces such as Yunnan and Guizhou, provincial governments derive as much as 60% of their revenue from tobacco.

British American Tobacco — now B.A.T. Industries, par-

ent of Duke's Brown & Williamson — is believed to have introduced cigarette tobacco to China in the 1880s.

Following its victory in China's civil war in 1949, the communist government booted out B.A.T. and other foreign tobacco companies, nationalizing their assets and encouraging domestic brands to flower.

Mao Zedong was a heavy smoker. The late patriarch Deng Xiaoping chain-smoked unfiltered Panda cigarettes from his native Sichuan Province. Deng, who died in February at age 92, credited the habit for his good health and longevity.

Today, there is only one known smoker — an army general — among China's seven-man ruling politburo, and he is careful not to smoke in public. Both President Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng have condemned the habit.

Li, who has had heart problems, went so far as to announce a recent ban on smoking in the cavernous Great Hall of the People, which in the past would disappear into a thick haze of smoke whenever Communist Party cadres met there.

Even so, China remains hooked. A study of peasants outside Shanghai found that the average farmer spent

more on tobacco and rice wine than on grain, pork and fruit. A second study, of 2,716 households, indicated that smokers in one city spent 60% of their personal income — equal to 17% of household income — on cigarettes.

Jin Shuigao, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Preventative Medicine, estimates that 13% of the country's medical expenses go to treat smoking-related disease and illness.

Still, the central government is content to straddle the smoking issue for now.

"The government is caught between the reality that they've got huge revenues from tobacco and the fact that tobacco is killing their people," says Judith Mackay, who heads the Hong Kong-based Asian Consultancy on Tobacco Control.

China has banned tobacco advertising in print and on radio and TV. It has outlawed smoking on airplanes, buses, subways, ferries, cable cars and in taxis. It has encouraged health education programs and the designation of many primary and middle schools as smoke-free facilities for adults and children. Chinese brands, which go for as little as 20 cents a pack, carry the warning, "Smoking is harmful to health."

Smoking "is more and more inconvenient," says smoker Qu Jie, a university instructor in Beijing. "Many places you go nowadays are nonsmoking areas, so you risk a fine. And there are more and more people who don't smoke."

Still, attempts to coax the government into stronger measures have met resistance. The National People's Congress, China's parliament, has twice rejected a tax of 0.6 cents a pack. Smoking-cessation programs remain in the experimental stages at a handful of hospitals. Billboards, table umbrellas, sports sponsorships and promotions are mushrooming everywhere.

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And the government has inexplicably avoided a large-scale crackdown on the sale of smuggled imports, even though they hurt the state monopoly known as the China National Tobacco Corp.

China's tight restrictions on the formation of grass-roots organizations — for any cause, no matter how worthy or innocent — have forced anti-smoking crusaders to take a cautious, by-the-book approach. The Chinese Association on Smoking & Health, established seven years ago, is the one lobby with the government's stamp of approval.

"It's being done top-down in

China, as everything is, rather than from the bottom up, as you'd see in many Western countries," Mackay says.

Part of the reason for the government's caution, notes physician and anti-smoking crusader Weng Xinzhi, has to do with its other worries. Economic reforms have already thrown millions out of work; the government is wary of adding to the upheaval by limiting production among the country's 10 million tobacco farmers or imposing taxes that would hurt sales at the 3 million outlets where cigarettes are peddled.

Weng, 78, is considered the

father of China's anti-smoking movement. He is especially critical of the United States for failing to discourage Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds from entering the Chinese market.

Legal imports have only about 1% of the Chinese market, but leading brands of both tobacco giants are manufactured in China.

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"As a world leader, you must be concerned with the health of other countries, not just your own," Weng says.

Researchers say they are beginning to see more signs of change. A recent survey found that 4 of every 5 workers in the country's cigarette factories smoke — but 70% want their children to be nonsmokers.

"Our society has realized the serious consequences of smoking. The government realizes the economic cost of disease caused by smoking. We just haven't had enough laws passed," says Zhang Jian, an official with the World Health Organization office in Beijing.

Qu, who puffs a pack a day, says he no longer automatically offers a cigarette when approaching someone for a favor.

In the past, "it was considered courtesy. The act would produce a softened response from otherwise cold faces," Qu says. "But today, you have to check if smoking is allowed in that particular office, if the person smokes, if his colleagues in the room object to smoking."

A wrong move, Qu sighs, "and you will evoke an even colder response."

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