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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Social Science and Medicine*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Davey, G., Zhao, X. (2012)

'A real man smells of tobacco smoke'—Chinese youth's interpretation of smoking imagery in film

Social Science and Medicine, 74(10): 1552-1559

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.01.024>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-92866>

'A real man smells of tobacco smoke'—Chinese youth's interpretation of smoking imagery in film

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A B S T R A C T

Previous studies have associated youth's exposure to filmic images of smoking with real-life smoking acquisition; initial research in low- and middle-income countries confirms this relationship. The present study in Yunnan, southwest China sought answers to the following questions: How do young people in China make sense of smoking imagery they have seen in film? How are these perceptions shaped by the cultural and social context of images? How do these understandings relate to real-life tobacco use? A study with focus groups and grounded theory was conducted in 2010 and 2011 (Sept–Jan) with middle-school students ages 12 and 13 ($n = 68$, focus groups = 12, schools = 6). Films and media literacy were important means through which knowledge about smoking was constructed and communicated. Film representations of smoking concurred with Chinese social behaviour (Confucian social networks, face-making, and the notion of society as a harmonious social unit), and were interpreted as congruent with real-life smoking. This pattern, in turn, was intertwined with perceived gender identities of smokers, gender-specific social behaviour, and willingness of girls to explore issues of gender equity. These findings lend new insights into interaction between smoking imagery in film and Chinese youth's smoking beliefs. Tobacco control programs in China should consider young people's interpretations of smoking and the ways they are nested in cultural and social milieu.

Keywords:

China
Adolescents
Smoking
Health promotion
Tobacco
Youth
Masculinity
Gender-identity

Introduction

Tobacco smoking is a major public health challenge in China, and the country is the world's largest tobacco consumer and producer. Surveys in various Chinese cities report a high prevalence of smoking among youth, and a high rate of smoking initiation has been shown to occur between ages 10 and 15 (Yang, Fan, & Tan, 1999; Yang et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2000; Unger, Li, Chen, et al., 2001; Zhu, Liu, Shelton, Liu, & Giovino, 1996). Research on the smoking habits of young people in China is limited; the main thrust of studies hitherto has been quantitative population surveys of self-reported smoking behaviour, and few qualitative studies have been conducted (Hesketh, Qu, & Tomkins, 2002; Wang et al., 2000; Weiss, Palmer, Chou, Mouttapa, & Johnson, 2008; Yang et al., 2004; Zhang, Wang, Zhao, & Vartiainen, 2000). Research has associated adolescent's smoking in China with variables such as age, sex, socio-economic status, parental supervision, quality of family relationships, peer

smoking and psychological factors such as anxiety, depression and hostility (Chen, Unger, Cruz, & Johnson, 1999; Hesketh et al., 2002; Unger, Li, Johnson, et al., 2001; Weiss et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2000). However, further research is needed.

There has been increasing interest in smoking imagery in popular media and its relation to smoking beliefs and behaviour (Lum, Polansky, Jackler, & Glantz, 2008; McCool, Cameron, & Petrie, 2003; Pierce, Gilpin, & Choi, 1999). The tobacco industry promotes its brands in films, adding powerful meanings to smoking which are watched by many young people (Lum et al., 2008). Tobacco depiction in film is now highly prevalent, and has been studied extensively in the context of viewer's smoking habits (National Cancer Institute, 2008). Studies demonstrate that exposure to smoking in movies promotes youth smoking uptake in high-income countries, and greater levels of exposure are associated with increased probability of smoking initiation; initial research in low- and middle-income countries suggests this relationship is consistent across countries (Arora et al., in press; National Cancer Institute, 2008; Thrasher, Jackson, Arillo-Santillan, & Sargent, 2008; Thrasher et al., 2009). However, research on this topic in China is limited, despite the substantial burden of tobacco use.

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China has the fastest growing new cohort of smokers globally, and opportunities for market growth are not missed by the tobacco industry which uses media in marketing strategies. Research in China (published nationally, in Chinese language journals) reports a high frequency of smoking scenes in animations, cartoons, dramas and movies watched by young people. For example, junior middle-school students surveyed by Huang et al. (2002) in four Chinese cities considered smoking scenes important and noticeable aspects of the films they had watched. An analysis by Er, Liu, Gao, and Niu (2008) of smoking scenes in 15 movies identified 134 scenes with a total duration of 70.7 min; their comparison of Chinese- and foreign-made movies revealed higher frequencies and durations of smoking scenes in the former. Research by Zhang and Duan (2008) and Lv, Duan, Wang, and Zeng (2010) reported a high frequency of smoking scenes in animations and cartoons watched by youth. Consequently, Chinese scholars have raised concerns about the possible influence of media on adolescent's smoking habits, which calls for research into interpretations of smoking scenes in film.

Studies conducted in other countries reveal insights into this topic. McCool, Cameron, and Petrie's (2001) study in New Zealand with 12- and 13-year-olds found that filmic images of smoking were perceived to be highly prevalent and recognisable. Stereotypical images of smokers symbolised glamour, toughness and sexiness; and smoking scenes were associated with stress relief and maturity. In a subsequent study of older teenagers (ages 16 and 17; McCool et al., 2003), film was interpreted as a credible portrayal of emotion, subculture and lifestyle. The older adolescents' experiences of tobacco held greater credibility than the stereotyped images which the younger group regarded accessible and meaningful. Further studies are now needed in other countries, especially in China where research is sparse. Therefore, the present study examines Chinese youth's interpretation of smoking in film.

The foundation of this study is Social Representations Theory which has been influential in social science since its development by Moscovici in the 1960s and 1970s as an extension of Durkheim's notion of representations (Flick, 1998; Moscovici, 1976). Social representations are the shared beliefs, identities, practices, and subculture affiliations among members of groups, and demarcate the social world as a system of common understanding and meaning (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Moscovici, 1976). Social representations hinge on a semiotic triangle of the object being represented, the person making the representation, and the social group in which they are positioned (Moscovici, 1984). Meaning denotes collective representation of naming and understanding which is created through social negotiation with others and social milieu. Therefore, social representations emphasise the socially dynamic, dialectical and hybrid nature of social knowledge embedded and distributed in social and interactive process. The media and media literacy are relevant to social representations because they constitute an important means through which information and knowledge are communicated. From this perspective, the viewer is an active participant in production and interpretation of meaning through social processes, providing a code for social exchange embedded in inter-group communication (Flick, 1998; Morgenson, 1992; Sommer, 1998).

Building on this rationale, the present study investigates Chinese adolescent's interpretations of smoking imagery in film from a social representations perspective. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions: How do young people in China make sense of smoking imagery in film? How are these perceptions shaped by the context of images as portrayed in their culture and society? How do these understandings relate to real-life tobacco use? Through answering these questions we develop a grounded theory of adolescent's understandings of smoking imagery in

relation to their smoking beliefs and behaviours, underpinned by their cultural and social milieu.

Method

Design

A study design consisting of focus group interviews and grounded theory methodology was used to explore participants' interpretations of smoking imagery in everyday film experiences.

Participants & sampling

The study was conducted in Kunming, which is the cultural, economic and political centre of Yunnan Province, southwest China. This location was chosen because it is a major metropolitan area, and there is a lack of localised information of youth's smoking which hampers development of tobacco control strategies. A total of 80 students (ages 12 and 13; 40 boys, 40 girls), Han Chinese (the dominant group in Kunming) with Mandarin as their first language, was recruited. The age-range and ethnicity of participants was restricted because earlier studies (McCool et al., 2001, 2003) reported demographic differences in appraisals of filmic images. Although participants' media usage was not quantitatively surveyed in the present study, they reported that they had spent a significant proportion of their week watching films (Chinese and Western films).

The sampling method was sequential, with selective sampling, to investigate socio-demographic nuances of film interpretation, followed by theoretical sampling. The selective sampling covered Kunming's five urban districts, and district average income was used as a proxy measure of social economic status. Schools in each district were then ranked according to academic performance, and every *n*th school was selected on rank lists (two from each district). These ten schools were invited to participate in the study, and six agreed. Within each school, students were selected randomly from classes. Two focus groups (one with females; another with males) were conducted per school on the same day. The final sample consisted of 68 students, six middle schools, and twelve focus groups with 5–6 students per group.

Theoretical sampling began in the earliest stages of data collection with modification of questions to explore emergent themes. However, the main thrust of theoretical sampling took place towards the end of the study, and after all schools had been sampled, to clarify and develop concepts. This included follow-up meetings with 9 participants, and subsequent recruitment of 12 new participants. For example, transcripts collected during selective sampling revealed associations of interpretations of stress and the *gaokao* (an exam which the students will sit in the future) but not current academic performance; therefore, the "Image and realities of stress" category was saturated by asking participants to clarify this apparent contradiction.

Procedure

Students were recruited by appropriate staff in each school. The focus groups took place in 2010 and 2011 (Sept–Jan); each focus group consisted of five or six students, and was 55–65 min. They were facilitated by a native Chinese postgraduate student (who is also a registered counsellor) and an assistant. School staff and teachers were not present during data collection so that students felt more at ease at discussion. The focus groups commenced with an informal warm-up discussion of participant's interests, which then moved on to imagery in films. The grounded theory presented in this paper was based largely on emergent themes which stemmed from the data, constructed by the participants, rather than

predetermined concepts. However, the topic of smoking imagery in films was raised in discussions via a theme list, based on the authors' literature review, which provided a context for the grounded theory. The theme list included: Awareness and recall of smoking images and tobacco promotion in film, credibility of imagery, opinions on smoking imagery, symbolic significance of images of smokers and smoking in film, and perceived prevalence of smoking in real life. These topics, listed in an interview schedule, directed each focus group, but were kept to a minimum to identify topics of theoretical significance; also, to ensure that participants conjured salient and available imagery, they were not shown any imagery from film in the focus groups. The smoking status of participants was not systematically surveyed, but several interviewees made reference to the prevalence of real-life smoking among their peers, which they estimated to be 3% for girls and 5% for boys in their age group.

Prior to the study, pilot work ensured that the methodology was suitable. It included an enquiry into the acceptance and understanding of the focus group process. No major difficulties were reported during the pilot work and actual data collection.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from participants, their parents and school. An information sheet clarified the purpose of the study, expectations of participants, and assured anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences and requirements to explain their decision. Participants acknowledged their understanding of the information. The information sheet was also read out to the students in each group, and they were reassured that they could skip any topic and questions they preferred not to answer. Ethical approval was granted for the study by the Research Subcommittee of the Counselling & Psychology Department, Hong Kong Shue Yan University. Risk of harm was assessed and not deemed an issue.

Data analysis

The focus group transcripts were recorded and transcribed in Chinese (all quotes in the next sections have been translated into English). Transcripts were searched and re-read for repeated patterns of meaning. Open, axial, and selective coding were used to sort codes and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008): Open coding divided the transcript into similarities and differences; axial coding developed emerging categories; and selective coding refined categories and the theoretical framework. This coding process was inductive and recursive, and revealed a rich thematic description of the participants' interpretations of filmic images.

Results

This section begins with an outline of the grounded theory, followed by an in-depth description of each category embedded within an analytic narrative. Five concepts were categorised: (1) Social norms of smoking, which represent tobacco consumption in film as prevalent, normal and realistic; (2) Stereotypes of smokers, which characterise personal traits commonly associated with smokers in film; (3) Smoking and authority, which describes the participants' interpretation of smoking imagery as resistance and submission to authority; (4) Images of stress, which associate smoking imagery with characterisations of stress, particularly mediation of stressful situations; and (5) Smoking as social harmony, the core category, which represents a framework of cultural and social factors which wed together the other categories. Collectively, these categories comprise a preliminary model, and are described below as group- and individual-mediated responses. Appraisals of smokers in film were not patterned much by

participants' demographic and socio-economic differences; therefore, all quotes represent the broader consensus unless described as otherwise.

Social norms of smoking

The participants reported images of smoking in film to be prevalent, and in the majority of films they had watched. These included genres for adult, adolescent, and child audiences. The high prevalence of smoking in film was said to mirror real-world smoking—widespread and something they took for granted. The representation of smoking as a common occurrence in film and everyday life is exemplified in the extract below:

INTERVIEWER: So you are saying that the smoking you have seen in film is similar to everyday life?

XIAOYI: Yes. It is easy to see smokers in films. Almost every film I watch has smoking. For example, last week I watched *Sherlock Holmes*; he smoked. He smoked like my grandpa. I watched another film a few days ago, and there was smoking.

CHENCHEN: It is normal. There are many cigarette butts around Little Nameless Lake [a place in their school]. Many people smoke on the street, and in parks and restaurants.

XIAOYI: When I had military training in school this semester [in China, middle-school and university students undergo military training], some boys smoked in the toilet on the ground floor. On the bus after school, they often smoke. In my home, they smoke all the time.

INTERVIEWER: Who smokes?

XIAOYI: Many people, everywhere.

(Boys, non-smokers). In this quotation, the boys began with recollection of smoking scenes in film, and then shifted their talk to personal experiences in school, leisure time and home, which reflects the perceived congruence of smoking prevalence in filmic images and real life. Few participants distanced themselves from the idea of smoking as a prevalent and socially acceptable behaviour.

Their interpretations of tobacco consumption in film centred on cigarettes and cigars, and also paraphernalia such as ashtrays and lighters; images of other forms of tobacco were infrequent. They had seen a variety of cigarette brands, logos and trademarks in filmic images; some films had one or more brands, others none. The appearance of brands in film was said to give them a certain distinction or superiority; and the handling of tobacco by an actor was interpreted as brand endorsement. The brands they had seen in film were the same as those advertised elsewhere in everyday life on billboards and store-front advertising.

They said that most of their friends had tried a cigarette out of curiosity. Those participants who considered themselves to be smokers, or had similar-age friends that smoked, did not regard smoking imagery in film a major factor in smoking initiation and continuation. Smoking itself was not deemed important in their lives; rather, it was regarded to be a minor issue, peripheral to life's priorities. The interpretations described above were similar for all demographic groups in the sample.

Stereotypes of smokers

The participants' appraisals of actors that smoke were generally positive, characterised as cool, glamorous, powerful, sexy, stylish, successful, and wealthy. Smoking was associated with social

acceptance and fashionable accessories such as clothing, good health, good looks, youth, and vigour. These traits were perceived as highly attractive and desirable. Smokers in film were also described empathetically (as happy and relaxed), and emotional drama was linked to tobacco use. The following quotations show how smokers in film were identified by these stereotypical traits:

INTERVIEWER: So you said that the smoker in *Shanghai Beach* had a certain style?

YINGYING: Of course. He was the hero: Gorgeous, brave and awesome.

MEI: How should I say? He sort of looked like a boss. He wore a suit and tie, put his feet on the desk, and ordered his secretary and workers.

YINGYING: Don't forget, he was surrounded by many beautiful women. Women love a man who smokes.

MEI: A 'real man' is someone who smells of tobacco smoke, someone confident and brave. I want a boyfriend like that!

(Girls, non-smokers)

INTERVIEWER: Why did you say that the smoker in the movie was powerful?

RUAN: He was very strong and had big muscles.

CHI: He raced in a sports car, and flew a plane.

SHAOBIN: All the stars behave the same way when they have a cigarette.

INTERVIEWER: How do they 'behave the same way'?

CHI: They beat the bad guys; they save the world.

(Boys, non-smokers). These dialogues judged smokers in film in terms of attractiveness, heroism, power and desirability. They also associated smoking with masculinity.

There was incongruence in interpretations of smoker's health in film and real life. Real-life smokers were described with negative labels (yellow stains on fingers, stench of breath, and wheezing cough) whereas those in film were associated with good health. This was explained in terms of drawing a line between two different worlds: The glamorous world, modelled in films, which they admire and desire, versus the not-so-glamorous real world. However, the participants did not discuss these competing messages directly, and did not use experiences of real-life smokers to deconstruct or critique their stereotypes. Whilst they recognised that association of smoking in film and fashionable accessories is stylised, the stereotypes were also perceived as somewhat reliable and real. Also, they did not offer reasons for smoking imagery in film; only a few suggested that the images could be a form of advertising or image enhancement by the media and tobacco industries.

Although boys and girls reported image stereotypes, the boys tended to appraise images as 'cool' and 'fashionable'. This difference hinged on restriction of stereotypes to media portrayals of the desirable 'macho' male character (aggressive, fighting with other men, independent, and successful with women) whereas girls based their discussions on a diversity of on-screen portrayals of men and women and their relationships. Also, girls reported emotional-based stereotypes which characterised actors according to presumed feelings and likes and dislikes. The following narration reported the emotional stereotypes described by a participant:

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell us more about why you think the actress was bored?

DONG: I remember that she was sitting down, slumped back in the chair, with her head on her hand. She looked bored and miserable.

INTERVIEWER: Was she smoking?

DONG: Yes. They smoke when they unhappy.

(Girl, non-smoker)

Even so, discussions by boys and girls were dominated more by image than emotive stereotypes. Although the girls recognised a range of smoker stereotypes in film, the most persuasive images centred on physical image. Moreover, they were unable to describe detailed examples of actors and emotional drama associated with tobacco use, except well-known and memorable examples.

Smoking and authority

Smoking imagery was also interpreted in terms of authority and privilege, based on a common sense view of vertically-arrayed power. This involved perceived superiority of smokers in film: Smokers were associated with positions of influence such as bosses, elites, heroes, political leaders, gangsters, and the wealthy. The dialogue below emphasises smoking in film as an indicator of authority and privilege:

WU: Not all the smokers I see on the street are rich guys. Generally speaking, a packet of cigarettes can cost only 10 Yuan; that's not a lot of money, even several packets a day.

XIAO: Yes, anyone can be a smoker. But in films they smoke the expensive, foreign brands such as Marlboro.

ZHENG: Also, smokers are powerful. Mao Zedong smoked when he addressed the people. Deng Xiaoping smoked in meetings.

XIAO: In a war film I watched recently, the Red Army smoked, and they were victorious.

WU: If a leader speaks to his people, he is with a cigarette. Heroes smoke.

(Boys, non-smokers)

Though smokers in film were associated with wealth, real-life smokers were said to be rich or poor because cigarettes range from expensive to inexpensive. Moreover, real-life smokers of expensive brands were seen as adherents of materialism; displays of expensive cigarettes represent a conspicuous and deliberate sign of fashion, social status and money.

Smoking imagery was also interpreted as resistance and submission to authority. Resistance was constructed as interplay between the perceived authority of smokers in film, which embody characteristics the participants deemed desirable, and real-life resistance to parents and teachers. That smokers in film were associated with stature and traits which met their parents' and teachers' disapproval—such as 'tough', 'naughty', and 'notorious'—enhanced the perceived desirability of smoking. It also legitimised incongruities in their interpretations of smoking, especially the ambivalence of smoking as both healthy and harmful, and the contradiction between on-screen heroes legitimately smoking Marlboro versus off-screen smokers of the same brand engaged in materialist self-aggrandisement. In other words, perceived rebellion and risk-taking legitimised smoking and the display of expensive brands, as appropriate, proper, and just. The boys, more often than girls, aligned themselves with these interpretations of smoking and rebellion.

A power differential was apparent in interpretations of men and women smokers in film. The boys' talk of smokers as holders of

authority was confined mostly to male actors and their scenes. Women smokers were described in terms of passivity, subordination, and dependence on men. Moreover, women in film were inferred as passive smokers, and men as direct smokers, objectifying women as deferent and men as superior. This power differential was linked to gender norms and roles in Chinese society at large—the historical subordination of women in a male-dominated society. The boys considered smoking to be the behaviour of Chinese men who smoke to actively demonstrate and reinforce their power. This is exemplified in the following statements from two boys:

“The young women stars who smoke want to look good. Then they can use their beauty to get a rich man”

“I don’t think the women smokers on television are like ladies; they are different. They are like bad girls, very vicious. It seems they are also flirting...and pretend to be sexy...maybe prostitutes”.

(Boys, non-smokers). In these statements, the men were described in positions of dominance and entitlement to sexual desires, whereas women were described in terms of subordination and sexual objectification to meet the desires of men.

However, rather than relegation to non-smokers, the girls’ comments reconciled the status of Chinese women as relational and reciprocal. They did not resist notions of smoking, gender and power; they also talked of similar, stylised norms of men and women smokers, and acknowledged that most smokers in film and real life are men. But they more willingly gave positive portrayals of women smokers in films, including examples of women in positions of success and power. Smoking in film by powerful women was interpreted as readdressing the balance of power between women and men, and as a symbol of the diluting tradition of male dominance in Chinese society amidst empowerment of women and increasing gender equality. This is illustrated in the interview extract below:

ANZHI: China is no longer a man’s world. My mother is a manager in a foreign enterprise. She earns more than my father...women can now have good jobs.

CHI: We can see it in the movies too. I remember the female police chief in a movie...a strict woman always with a cigar...the men feared her.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about that image?

CHI: It shows that women can now order the men to do their work!

FEI: Men and women are more alike. Women can also be more intelligent than men. I want to be a scientist when I am older.

(Girls, non-smokers). This dialogue, which includes positive portrayals of women smokers in film and real life, highlights the girls’ recognition of improved gender equity in China. Further discussions revealed perceived changes in the portrayal of women in the Chinese media, which, in recent years, has shifted to cast women more positively. Film was understood as playing a role in helping women to assert their equality with men; smoking in film, and the Chinese media generally, was said to offer girls a means to operate on an equal footing with boys.

Images and realities of stress

Smoking in film was associated with anxiety and stress, particularly mediation of stressful situations, and mirrored their

personal understanding of stress. Participants that smoked or had friends that smoked said that a cigarette offered them a particular vantage point from which to cope with school-related stress. Similarly, actors and real-life smokers were observed to use cigarettes to calm themselves, as shown in the following extracts:

“The man in *Jin Daban* really suffered; he had experienced a lot of stress. So every time he smoked, it was a stress release.”

“A woman in *Romance in the Rain* wanted to have an abortion, and it’s a dilemma for a Chinese woman. She smoked a popular brand of cigarette when she was anxious. I think she was hesitating about the abortion...and maybe she was sad.”

(Girls, non-smoker)

“I don’t smoke, but my older cousin does. He will take the gaokao next year, and he is very worried. He smokes to feel better.

“If I’m upset, I’ll have a cigarette; that’s the first thing I want to do, but I don’t tell my parents. Cigarettes help me to calm down, clear my mind, and to relax. As you know, being a school student in China is very difficult”.

(Girls, non-smoker and smoker). Although talk of stress was negative, smoking in this context was regarded as positive—as a stress relief. They understood smoking as therapeutic, and as an appropriate coping strategy. But none of them questioned whether smoking reduces stress; it was assumed definitive and taken for granted. They did, however, complain of limited options to manage stress in school and at home.

They talked about school-related stress, especially the college entrance exam (*gaokao*) which will determine their progression from school to university. They said some of their older peers were stressed when preparing for the exam, and used smoking as a stress relief. Our participants saw themselves trapped between the impossibility of the *gaokao* and the unthinkable consequences of failure. They face considerable pressure from parents and teachers to begin preparation because the exam is very competitive. However, they referenced an expected reality, rather than a current experience, because they will not sit the *gaokao* until age 18. Also, they did not associate stress and smoking with performance in their current exams even though academic performance in middle school determines entry into high school. This is because they considered the *gaokao* to be the most important exam they will ever sit, crucial to determining their future; also, entry into specific high schools is not only based on academic merit.

Smoking as social harmony

This core category tied together the participants’ interpretations of smoking imagery as everyday social behaviour and society, especially social harmony. Above all, smoking behaviour was situated in social practice, and cigarettes were described as social tools and facilitators of engagement between smokers, especially men.

However, this core category denotes more than social smoking; participants’ interpretations of the sociality of smoking concurred with their beliefs of Chinese social behaviour, based on a Confucian heritage of social networks. In contrast to Western individualism, China is a collectivistic society, characterised by high conformity of its members; a close-knit, harmonious social unit in which everyday life is conducted with peers. The students emphasised the importance of social harmony, and avoidance of open confrontation and public expressions of opinion, and the important role of smoking and cigarettes in this process. Those participants that had friends and family members who smoke cited social desirability as

a major determinant of smoking, more salient than other factors; most of the smokers they knew were social smokers. In their view, smoking with others engenders harmony by conforming to social behaviour, and building and maintaining social ties, which leads to shared identification with peers. Important here is the concept of 'face' (*mian*, *mian zi*, *lian*) whereby social interaction in China requires crafting an attractive and desirable image. Enhancing one's face, and that of others, involves understanding the qualities prized in one's social network, and then honing them to maximise impression. Therefore, social smoking is a collaborative process of face-saving. Non-smoking, refusal to smoke, or refusal of a cigarette among acquaintances who smoke could be interpreted as a social confrontation, an undesirable and disrespectful social encounter in China which runs of the risk of unpopularity and threatens the 'face' of giver and receiver. Thus the perceived importance of upholding face, and the risk of losing face, provides a powerful endorsement of social smoking.

This understanding of smoking in everyday society provided a crucial foundation on which filmic images were interpreted. Expectations of social harmony and face-making were reiterated and shaped in the filmic context; smokers in film, especially Chinese film, were perceived to be in line with social convention. Actors who smoke were seen as social performers that maintain social harmony and uphold camaraderie, and more likely to smoke in the company of other actors, especially smokers. The quotes below exemplify how smoking in film was interpreted as social acceptance and as attractive and desirable images:

YUE: Sometimes they must smoke, otherwise they will be disliked.

INTERVIEWER: Please explain.

YUE: Well, there was a young man in a film. He wanted to join a bad guy's group; so he smoked. Then he was accepted by the group.

INTERVIEWER: He was accepted because he smoked? Why?

YUE: By smoking, he was similar to the others in the group.

INTERVIEWER: If he hadn't smoked, what would have happened?

YUE: Then I guess they would think he didn't agree with their way of doing, or wants to show them up.

(Boy, smoker)

INTERVIEWER: So what you have just said is that smoking in film represents social behaviour between people.

REN: Yes. Smoking is like a magic wand. With a cigarette in your hand, they can fit in and be normal; without a cigarette...well, they are just weird.

INTERVIEWER: Why? Can you give me an example?

REN: You know, my father is a businessman. He must smoke when doing business. Everyone smokes at business meetings. If he doesn't smoke, he is not like a Chinese businessman. And then he would not make money.

MING: That's true. Also, when my parents need to do official things, such as deal with bureaucracy, they need to invite them to smoke...send them a tobacco gift. You know the society...if you give them some packs [of tobacco], they will address your case quickly; if not, you will never get anywhere.

(Boys, non-smokers). The above conversation extracts interpret smoking in film in terms of social behaviour, and cigarettes as

social tools, which are congruent with their interpretations of smoking in real life. This social role of smoking was said to pervade Chinese film more than Western (Hollywood) films, but the participants did not consider it a uniquely Chinese concept. It should be noted that this theme was the only appreciable difference between Chinese and Western films in all discussions.

Though smoking was associated with social networks and peer groups, there was a low prevalence of smokers in our sample and in their social cliques with peers. They reported minimal pressure to smoke when with their own friends—indeed, non-smoking was the norm. Though the smoking status of participants was not systematically surveyed, quantitative studies across several Chinese cities (including Kunming) report that about 12% of 12- and 13-years-olds have experimented with smoking (e.g. Weiss et al., 2008).

Discussion

This study lends new insight into Chinese youth's understanding of smoking. Media and media literacy were important means through which they constructed and communicated information and knowledge about smoking. An important finding was that real-life smoking and filmic images of smoking were interpreted in the context of Chinese cultural and social milieu: Smoking in everyday Chinese society grounded their interpretations of smoking in film, and smoking images in film cultivated favourable and realistic beliefs of real-life smoking. Research in China and other countries has documented the importance of social smoking, particularly as a means of bonding with peers (Chen et al., 1999; Thrasher & Bentley, 2006; Unger, Li, Johnson, et al., 2001; Yang et al. 2004; Zhu et al., 1996). The present study extends this knowledge by unpacking the cultural and social dimensions of smoking in terms of Chinese social behaviour (social networks, face-making, and the notion of society as a harmonious social unit) that maintain social harmony and avoid confrontation and public expressions of opinion. Collectivistic aspects of Chinese culture appeared to facilitate social smoking, and therefore the meaning that Chinese adolescents ascribed to social smoking has distinctions to the findings of Western-based studies (McCool et al., 2001, 2003).

The youth's interpretation of filmic imagery revealed assumptions about gender and smoking. The boys' accounts were based on enhancement of masculine identity (Chinese men as holders of authority and dominance) and patronisation of women smokers. Though the girls also acknowledged socialised gender roles, they interpreted images in terms of gender equity; women smokers in film were depicted more positively, and in a broader context of emancipation of women in Chinese society. This could represent a growing social acceptability of smoking among girls in China, similar to other countries. However, smoking in China is still strongly associated with masculinity, as it is perceived to be normal and more prevalent among males (Chen et al., 1999; Weiss et al., 2008; Yang et al. 1999; Zhu et al., 1996). Further research, especially ethnographic research, is now needed to investigate these differences and their determinants (Amos & Bostock, 2007; Elliot, 2008).

However, interpretations were subject to contrary messages. Though on-screen smoking largely mirrored off-screen smoking, in some cases it did not. These sometimes contradictory attributions showed that the adolescents held ambivalent judgements about smoking. One reason was their inability to critique and deconstruct the competing messages of smoking in the glamorous world of films versus the not-so-glamorous real world. Another reason was a counter-cultural perspective of youth culture in which smoking was positioned as rebellion and resistance against the dominant

parent culture (van der Rijt, d'Haenens, & van Straten, 2002). According to Moscovici (1984), social representations may be specific to a social group rather than universally ascribed, understood as a group-specific schema of ideas, practices and values. Studies in the West also document ambivalent smoking attitudes among young people, and propose alternative explanations such as defensive mechanisms to justify smoking in the face of unequivocal information about health risks (Denscombe, 2001; Lloyd & Lucas, 1998). These propositions should be investigated further in the Chinese context.

That the present study shows that smoking imagery in film is prevalent, and reinforces favourable beliefs and social acceptability of smoking, adds credence to calls for restricted imagery in film. It has been suggested that the only way to reduce the influence of filmic smoking imagery is to reduce or ban it (World Health Organization, 2008, 2009). Since the 1990s, Chinese anti-tobacco laws have restricted tobacco advertisements in the media, and recently China ratified the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). This framework includes a comprehensive ban on all tobacco advertising and promotion in commercial media, including hidden and indirect forms (World Health Organization, 2009). However, the Chinese tobacco industry, dominated by the Chinese National Tobacco Corporation (a state monopoly), has been blamed for China's failure to honour its pledge. Media promotion of tobacco continues, particularly as hidden and indirect forms and in other ways (e.g. recently the tobacco industry was criticised for corporate sponsorship of education, entertainment and social welfare initiatives for children; World Health Organization, 2008). Studies in other countries associate tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship with increased tobacco use among youth, and research is now needed to explore these causal links in the Chinese context (Lam et al., 2002; National Cancer Institute, 2008; Sargent, 2005; Zhang et al., 2000). Further studies should also investigate the specific prevalence of smoking imagery in Chinese films and its change over time; in the USA, for example, the number of on-screen tobacco incidents in top-grossing, youth-rated movies declined from 2005 through 2010, and more than two-thirds of movies had no tobacco incidents, which makes smoking initiation less likely (Glantz et al., 2011).

Our findings also have broader implications for tobacco control strategies in China. The significance of the cultural and social context of smoking suggests that interaction between individual and contextual factors should be considered in intervention efforts. Young people in China should be encouraged to reflect on the social norms and mediators of smoking, and on the sources of their attitudes with regard to social representations. Social representations are more likely accepted when perceived to be consistent with expectation, and lay theories about smoking can shift and change over time as new situations and explanations are encountered. Another implication was the interpretation of smoking in film as stress relief. Previous studies have reported that stress is salient among Chinese students, and predicts their smoking behaviour (Unger, Li, Johnson, et al., 2001; Weiss et al., 2008). In particular, the school exams have been described in the literature as a major stressor of middle-school students, alongside other pressures from family, school and peers (Ding & Wang, 2006; Kong, Wen, & He, 2004; Zhang, Wang, Li, & Zhang, 2005; Davey, Chuan, & Higgins, 2007). Our participants held the expectation that smoking was a form of stress relief, and none questioned it; therefore, further research should probe how Chinese adolescents develop this understanding so that it can be challenged in health promotion (Parrott, 2003). The participants complained of limited support for school-related stress, which highlights an urgent need for provision of support services as alternative means of dealing

with stress, such as counselling, stress management programs and study skills development. This can be accompanied by programmes to help students develop media literacy skills to critically analyse messages in film (Hobbs, 2006) because uncritical acceptance of images, such as in the present study, partly underpins stereotypes of smoking in film and congruence of smoking in film and real-life.

This study adds a Chinese perspective to the issue of tobacco imagery in media, and opens up new avenues for future research. Studies are now needed with other age groups and regions. Older students, with different experiences of life, tobacco use, and mediators of smoking (e.g. stress) might have different interpretations of filmic tobacco imagery (McCool et al., 2001, 2003; Weiss et al., 2008). Also, though China is geographically large, most studies of smoking have been confined to urban areas. Studies should also consider other media such as the Internet that are increasingly available and desirable for young people (Davey, 2010; Freeman & Chapman, 2010).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the participating schools and students for their cooperation. Three anonymous reviewers provided helpful comments.

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