



## Low tar cigarette marketing driving a boom in sales in China

Deceptive health appeals using tactics developed by Western tobacco companies are helping China Tobacco grow sales. By Jason McLure and Jude Chan.

For the National Cancer Institute's report on "low-tar" cigarettes see [https://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/m13\\_complete.pdf](https://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/m13_complete.pdf)

A deceptive and deadly marketing approach that Western tobacco companies were forced to disavow is propelling cigarette sales in China to new heights. Smokers buy half a trillion low tar cigarettes in China each year, accounting for 20% of all sales in the world's biggest tobacco market, according to data from *TobaccoChina*, a trade magazine. Sales are rising, up 50% in 2022 from 6 years earlier.

Although cigarette packages do not actually display the words "low tar", they prominently display their tar content, and some incorporate the tar levels in their name. Zhongnanhai, a popular China Tobacco brand developed for the chain-smoking Chairman Mao Zedong, sells lines named "Black Eight" and "Five"—a reference to their machine-measured levels of tar in milligrams.

"The Chinese state tobacco monopoly started late but is following Big Tobacco's low tar marketing strategy from the 20th century", said Mary Assunta, a senior policy adviser at the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance. "It's not surprising smokers

would choose Chinese-branded low tar cigarettes. Many smokers mistakenly think they are safer."

**"Total cigarette sales increased in China for a fourth consecutive year in 2023, even as they declined globally...Low tar sales accounted for this growth."**

The marketing of low tar cigarettes as a less risky alternative was a major part of the business model of Western tobacco companies for decades as they sought to dissuade smokers from quitting. But the science ultimately did not support the claims. Lung cancer rates among older smokers kept rising in the USA even after low tar cigarette use became widespread, and the National Cancer Institute concluded in 2001 that there was no evidence such cigarettes brought any public health benefits. One anti-smoking group, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, described the approach as "one of the deadliest consumer frauds

of our time". By the early 2000s, governments began banning such deceptive marketing. The US Food and Drug Administration, one of the most globally influential regulators, followed suit in 2010.

However, in China, this business strategy is driving growth at China National Tobacco Corporation, commonly known as China Tobacco, a state-run monopoly that controls 99% of the world's largest cigarette market. Total cigarette sales increased in China for a fourth consecutive year in 2023, even as they declined globally, according to the market research firm Euro-monitor International. Low tar sales accounted for this growth.

New documents obtained by The Examination show that China Tobacco continues to invest in low tar research. China Tobacco's subsidiaries have applied for at least 24 new Chinese patents related to low tar cigarettes since July, 2023. These include a new method for punching holes in filters to allow smoke to escape, a new tar-reducing filter design, and numerous additives designed to improve the taste and smell of low tar cigarettes.

Such research will have "zero" positive effect on the health of Chinese smokers and amounts to the same tactics used by Western tobacco scientists in the past, said Alan Blum, Director of the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, who reviewed the patent applications obtained by The Examination. Instead, it is "a tragic waste of time and lives in quest of money through more deception", Blum said. "All the sadder because the government is the engine driving this disgraceful perpetuation of death and disease."



Vernon Yuen/NurPhoto via Getty Images

China Tobacco's branding approach circumvents the country's obligations under WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, a 21-year-old global treaty that requires or recommends a range of anti-tobacco measures, including banning the use of the terms low tar or light on cigarette packages, enacting restrictions on sales to children, and raising cigarette taxes. Previous reporting by The Examination and media partners found that China Tobacco has waged a highly effective two-decade campaign to undermine the treaty.

The treaty also calls for signatories to "undertake a comprehensive ban of all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship"—China itself banned online tobacco advertising in 2015. While China Tobacco itself appears not to directly advertise on social media, numerous accounts owned by retailers and others exist wholly or in part to promote the state monopoly's products. Leading China Tobacco brands such as Nanjing, Liqun, and Taishan all produce varieties that retailers market online as "low tar", as does Yunyan, the world's third bestselling cigarette brand after Marlboro and Winston. One advert on Douyin, China's version of TikTok, released last year for Zhongnanhai's "Five" brand, calls it "a new generation of low-hazard products that leads the world", noting that it is low in tar and "good for smokers who want to protect their throat while smoking". Another, for Nanjing Yuhua Stone cigarettes, claims that "after seven years of research and development, a new breakthrough" has produced "the first ultra low-tar" cigarette.

Low tar marketing is "a crucial part of the industry's overall strategy", said Yang Gonghuan, an epidemiologist and former Deputy Director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Beijing. "The tobacco industry is not just a business but also a government department."

China Tobacco is both the country's sole producer of cigarettes and the government's tobacco regulator, with a large role in determining tobacco control policy.

**"As China's middle class has grown, the state monopoly has tapped growing concern about the health effects of smoking to deceptively push a product that is not safer"**

China Tobacco's influence stems from its financial might: In 2023, the company paid US\$214 billion in profit and tax to Beijing. That is more than the \$199 billion Saudi Aramco—a state-owned oil giant—contributed to Saudi Arabia in 2023. Moreover, China Tobacco's top executive is a powerful figure in the Communist Party, with a rank equivalent to that of mayors of major cities such as Guangzhou or Shenzhen. As a result, the company often gets formal support from other elements of the Chinese Government.

In Chongqing, a sprawling megacity whose population now rivals that of Shanghai and Beijing, the municipal government identified the production of high quality, low tar, low hazard cigarettes as a key point of development in its most recent

5-year economic plan. In Yunnan, the country's tobacco heartland, China Tobacco's local office recently reported the provincial government "has given strong support to the sales of low-tar...cigarettes" and that the sales of such cigarettes more than doubled between 2017 and 2021.

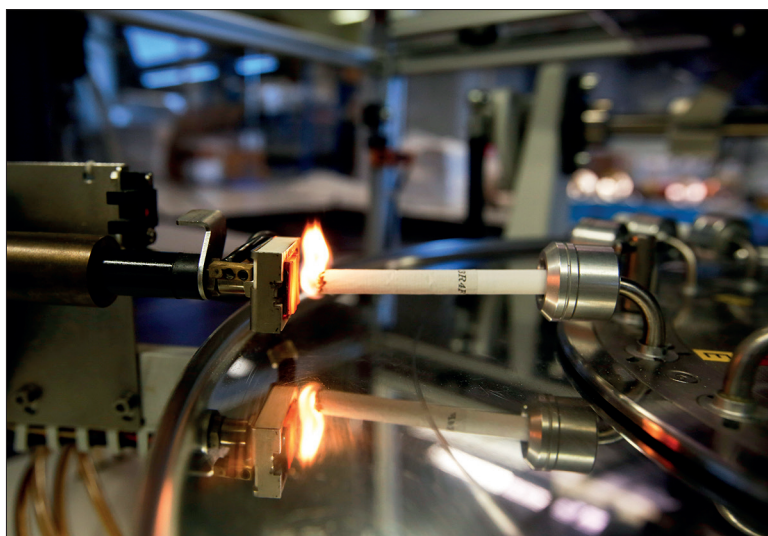
The focus on supporting the state cigarette-maker comes at an enormous cost to health. China consumed more cigarettes in 2023 than the next 85 countries combined, according to Euromonitor data. The government does not release statistics on tobacco mortality, but WHO estimates that 3000 people in the country die each day from smoking-related diseases—a figure that one study projected could triple by 2050.

As China's middle class has grown, the state monopoly has tapped growing concern about the health effects of smoking to deceptively push a product that is not safer, said Robert Proctor, a Stanford University historian who co-edited *Poisonous Pandas*, a 2018 history of China Tobacco.

The response echoes that undertaken by US tobacco companies decades ago. "Most of what is happening in China now with regards to cigarettes is playing out a story

For more on how China Tobacco has tried to undermine the FCTC see <https://www.theexamination.org/articles/how-china-became-addicted-to-its-tobacco-monopoly>

For more on China Tobacco see <https://www.theexamination.org/articles/china-tobacco-by-the-numbers>



Luke MacGregor/Bloomberg via Getty Images



Zhang Peng/LightRocket via Getty Images

that occurred in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in the US", Proctor said. "It's strikingly similar." China Tobacco did not respond to detailed questions for this article.

### American import

In 1964, the US Surgeon General released a report definitively linking smoking with lung cancer. In response, Philip Morris Co., R J Reynolds Tobacco Co., and others unveiled low tar brands such as Carlton, Winston Lights, and Merit. The appeal was straightforward and, in its early days, encouraged by public health authorities. Tar, a sticky brown or yellow substance that is captured in smokers' lungs, contains toxic particles. Therefore, smoking a cigarette that produced less of it was both desirable and a reasonable alternative to quitting. At least that was the idea.

Adverts for the cigarettes often featured precise measurements of tar content in milligrams, calculations that had been made by testing the cigarettes on robotic smoking machines. Some even hinted directly at fears of cancer with appeals such as, "Considering all I'd heard, I decided to either quit or smoke True. I smoke True." Although such cigarettes were sometimes marketed as technologically advanced, the engineering behind them was often

relatively simple. One of the most frequently used techniques was cutting tiny holes in the cigarette paper to let more smoke escape before it could be drawn through the filter and into the testing machines.

**"China Tobacco was undeterred in this pursuit even as the Western tobacco companies' efforts to sell low tar cigarettes were dealt several setbacks."**

Robotic smoking machines measured these cigarettes as being lower in tar, but in real life, human smokers compensated in their quest for nicotine. As the National Cancer Institute would later detail extensively, human smokers covered the tiny ventilation holes with their fingertips, inhaled the smoke more deeply, and smoked more cigarettes.

In 1999, the US Justice Department filed a civil racketeering lawsuit against the major Western tobacco companies. Among the allegations: that the companies deliberately designed low tar cigarettes so that they would deliver similar levels of nicotine and tar as regular cigarettes when used by people, but that machines would measure them as having much lower levels of tar.

In the USA, a federal judge ruled in 2006 that Philip Morris, Reynolds, and others had violated racketeering

laws by conspiring to hide the health risks of smoking. The decision found that the goal of low tar cigarettes had been to "keep smokers smoking; to stop smokers from quitting; to encourage people, especially young people, to start smoking". By 2010, more than 50 countries had banned the use of descriptors like low tar and light.

R J Reynolds, maker of Dorals and Camel Lights, was among those sued for deception. Even as it was mounting its legal defence in the USA in 1999 and 2000, China Tobacco was pursuing a partnership in this area with Reynolds, according to documents released through US litigation. "I am very optimistic on our future cooperation on development of low-tar blended cigarettes", wrote Ren Min, the director of the tobacco monopoly's science, technology, and education office, in a 1999 letter to Reynolds' representative in China.

### "Whole hog" for "low tar"

After Reynolds inked a cooperative agreement with China Tobacco, it provided detailed information to its new partners on testing methods and standards for tar and nicotine. China Tobacco was looking to adopt Western practices to ramp up production of what it called "Chinese-style cigarettes", which the company characterised as "fragrant, low-tar, low-harm".

China Tobacco was undeterred in this pursuit even as the Western tobacco companies' efforts to sell low tar cigarettes were dealt several setbacks. 2011 was the year its low tar investment began paying off. Sales that year increased 366% compared with the year before, and a company scientist was elected to the country's prestigious Chinese Academy of Engineering for his work developing low tar cigarettes. Growth briefly stalled between 2015 and 2016 after an increase in tobacco taxes, but since then has been "stable and sustained", according to *TobaccoChina*.

“Chinese manufacturers adopted virtually whole hog the robot method of measuring tar and nicotine values from foreign manufacturers, something that public health scholars now recognize as fraudulent”, wrote the Stanford historian Matthew Kohrman, and colleagues, in *Poisonous Pandas*.

An absence of public health messages also might have aided sales: a 2018 survey of 19 000 people by China’s National Health Commission found that just 18% of respondents knew that low tar cigarettes were not less harmful than other cigarettes.

Public health officials, activists, and scientists were “working hard to expose the scam of low-tar harm reduction, but the Chinese tobacco industry relies on their abundant financial resources and profit and tax chips to dominate the discourse”, wrote Wu Yiqun, a physician and leader in China’s anti-smoking movement, in her 2019 memoir, *When the Fire Burns Bright, the Smoke is Light*.

Fuelling the growth in recent years is China Tobacco’s successful marketing of so-called slim cigarettes, which are typically longer and thinner than regular cigarettes—and often have lower tar measurements because they contain less tobacco. Euromonitor International has noted that the cigarettes fit with consumers’ growing health consciousness. “Slim and superslim cigarettes typically contain lower tar levels, which many consumers consider meets their smoking needs, while minimizing harm to health”, the report said. “Although studies have shown no evidence to support this claim.”

### “Protect the throat”

China Tobacco also uses other forms of health messaging to sell its deadly

product. A long-standing selling point for Chinese-style cigarettes is their alleged medicinal properties—many are infused with herbs and fungi used in traditional Chinese medicine. Unlike herbal cigarettes in other parts of the world that are tobacco free, China Tobacco products are conventional tobacco cigarettes blended with extracts of medicinal plants. Among them are brands variously marketed as infused with ginseng, jasmine, and Lingzhi fungi, a famed mushroom traditionally used for improving heart function and energy.

**“Chinese manufacturers adopted virtually whole hog the robot method of measuring tar and nicotine values from foreign manufacturers, something that public health scholars now recognize as fraudulent.”**

Purchasing documents obtained by The Examination from one of the company’s subsidiaries, Sichuan Sanlian New Materials, show the extent of the effort to blend medicinal plants with tobacco. The subsidiary sought dozens of ingredients used in traditional Chinese medicine in a request for bids that opened on Nov 28, 2023. Of those, at least 15 were medicines traditionally used to treat lung or respiratory ailments such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder. The list includes liquorice root as well as the herbs fritillary and loquat. All three are common ingredients in Chinese cough syrups. The medicinal strategy is gaining momentum using so-called pop beads or flavour beads inserted in the cigarette filters that contain the

extracts of some medicines, which are released when the smoker squeezes the filter.

Fritillary and loquat are listed as ingredients in the brand Jiaozi (Kuanzhai Guobao), a flavour-bead cigarette made by China Tobacco’s Sichuan Industrial. One Chinese retailer posted a video on Douyin advertising the brand, saying that “...it is the first time I found out that cigarettes can clear the lungs and relieve cough”.

Such appeals make those in public health cringe. “The concept of herbal cigarettes having any health benefits is resoundingly rejected in the face of all evidence of the harm and death they cause”, said Assunta, of the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance. “But China is a society with a rich tradition of herbal medicine, and consumers may be more open to herbal cigarettes—especially if pushed by the government.”

In many cases, China Tobacco combines a medicinal herb with a low tar cigarette, essentially twinning the two health strategies. That is the case with DongChongXiaCao, a low tar cigarette named after a caterpillar fungus used to treat lung cancer and kidney ailments in traditional Chinese medicine. One recent advert on Douyin shows a smiling woman attending a presentation and reaching for a packet of DongChongXiaCao with a single stick emerging. “Low tar, low harm”, says the advertisement, posted by an account called Guangfuyuan Supermarket Guangfuxuan Red Wood. “No harm to the lungs, no harm to the throat, no coughing.”

Copyright © 2024 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an Open Access article under the CC BY 4.0 license.

Jason McLure, Jude Chan

This story is published in partnership with The Examination, a non-profit newsroom that investigates global health threats, and Initium Media. Sign up to get The Examination’s free newsletter in your inbox here: <https://www.theexamination.org/newsletter>

The reporting was supported in part by a grant from the Pulitzer Center. Jude Chan is a reporter for Initium Media. A Chinese journalist contributed reporting and is not named for security reasons.

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance receive funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies, which also supports The Examination. See The Examination’s editorial independence policy here: <https://www.theexamination.org/about/policies>