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### **Preventing Drug Abuse in China: Anti-Drug Media Campaigns Through the Eyes of a Drug User**

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MSc in Media and Communications

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# **Preventing Drug Abuse in China: Anti-Drug Media Campaigns Through the Eyes of a Drug User**

Bo Li

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study critically examines the frequently employed strategies in the currently launched Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse through the perspective of their audience, specifically focusing on those who do not follow the campaign messages – the drug users. Based on depth interviews conducted with nine drug users in rehabilitation centres, this study identifies the problems with the Chinese anti-drug media campaigns and seeks to offer policy recommendations for the improvement of these campaigns.

Informed by social psychology theories of behaviour prediction and change, and the active audience literature in the field of media and communications, a reception analysis of the Chinese anti-drug campaigns is carried out in this study, exploring the diverse ways in which different groups of audience interpret the same health-promoting campaign message and trying to find explanations for their different interpretive behaviours. The results prove the validity of these Western theories when applied to the Chinese context, while other factors like political culture, media ideology and cultural traditions play significant roles influencing the outcomes. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the development of Chinese anti-drug media campaigns is still on the primary stage, and there are problems with the definition of the drug abuse behaviour, the drug rehabilitation process and the target audience. Moreover, the trustworthiness of the campaigners, the audience's access to campaign information as well as the negative influences of other media representations of the drug issue are important factors that should be taken into consideration in the development of effective campaign messages.

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## **Introduction**

The history of drug problem in mainland China is not so long as it is in Western societies, but the number of drug users has been increasing at a rapid speed over the last decade. According to the statistics released by the central government of China, up until now the number of drug users registered at rehabilitations is approximately 901,000 compared to 540,000 in 1997 (Li et al., 2007). There is the possibility that the real situation is even worse than this because those registered at the rehabilitation centres only represent part of the total population of drug users in China. Moreover, with the history of concealing true statistics of the SARS situation in spring 2003, the credibility of the official data issued by the central government of China is in question. Among the registered drug users, 72% are young people aged below 25 (Li et al., 2007), demonstrating strong association between the drug abuse problem and Chinese youth. Due to their lack of knowledge and experience, vulnerability, curiosity and peer pressure, young people aged between 13 and 25 are far more susceptible to drug misuse than other age group (Xia, 2006). It is extremely distressful to see such huge number of addicted youth suffering from negative consequences of drug misuse and having their lives ruined, therefore developing effective media campaigns against drug abuse has always been a most important task for the Chinese government and media organisations.

As Blumer (1969: 11) points out, people may be living side by side yet living in different worlds. This is precisely the situation for drug users and non-users in China. The number of light drug users or rare users is quite small contrary to non-users and heavy users, and this user group turn into heavy users or quit shortly after starting drug use. The non-users consider the drug problem as totally irrelevant to their lives and social contacts, thus reveals indifference towards this issue and the anti-drug media campaigns. Meanwhile, due to their own experience of drug use, the heavy drug users are sensitive to media representations of this issue, but still they are most problematic audience who apparently do not follow the campaign messages, despite the usefulness of these messages for their rehabilitation.

The development of Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse is still on the primary stage, and most of the academic efforts on the topic of anti-drug campaigns in China are focused on the content and design of these campaigns, striving to find strategies that are new and effective in promoting healthy behaviours (e.g. Gu, 2004; Liu, 2004; Yuan, 2004). It is worth noticing that there is little evaluative research on the effects of these anti-drug

media campaigns, and studies of these campaigns through the audience perspective are extremely rare. Drawing from social psychology theories of behaviour prediction and change, and active audience literature in the field of media and communications, this study will critically examine the frequently used strategies in Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse through the perspective of the fraction of audience who resist these messages – the drug users. Methodologically, depth interview is selected as the research method according to the research objectives, and nine interviews were conducted with drug users in two rehabilitation centres in Anhui Province of China. Based on the analysis of the interview data, problems of the currently launched Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse will be identified, specifically focusing on issues like stereotyped image of the drug user, public trust in the government and the media, definition of the drug abuse behaviour and target audience, use of celebrity cases and so forth. Finally, according to the problems identified, relevant policy recommendations will be offered for the improvement of these anti-drug media campaigns.

## **CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Approaching Campaign Design – Theories of Behaviour Prediction***

Mass media campaigns have long been an important tool for promoting public health. As Rogers and Storey (1987: 821) define it, 'a campaign intends to generate specific outcomes or effects in a relative large number of individuals, usually within a specified period of time, and through an organized set of communication activities.' Over the past decades, there has been a growing recognition of the role of theory in developing campaign messages. Theories of behaviour prediction and behaviour change serve as the conceptual foundation of many media campaigns and are proved to be of vital importance to campaign success (e.g. Cappella et al., 2001; Noar, 2006; Slater, 1999). Among them the most frequently applied ones include the Health Belief Model (Becker, 1974; Rosenstock, Strecher and Becker, 1994), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1991, 1994), Theory of Reasoned Action (Farrelly et al., 2002; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), Theory of Planned Behaviour (Stead et al., 2005), the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (Prochaska and DiClememnte, 1986; Prochaska et al, 1994), and so forth.

A major contribution of these theories to the development of health-promoting media campaigns is that they can help to identify key determinants of a particular behaviour, which is essentially the first step in designing interventions to change this behaviour (Cappella et al., 2001). For example, the Health Belief Model (HBM) identifies two factors as primary determinants of someone's performance of a health protective behaviour – first, the individual feels threatened by, or susceptible to a disease or an unhealthy behaviour with negative consequences; second, the individual believes that benefits of taking the preventive action outweigh the barriers to or cost of taking that action (Rosenstock, Strecher and Becker, 1994). For Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the critical factors underlying a person's initiation and persistence of a particular behaviour are self-efficacy and the person's incentive of performing the behaviour (Bandura, 1994). The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) emphasises the role of the individual's subjective attitudes and the social norms in the formation of the intention to perform or not perform a particular behaviour. It also considers the factors that influence the person's attitude and social norms, including the person's behavioural beliefs, evaluation of the positive and negative outcomes, normative beliefs and the motivation to comply (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Based on these theories and other considerations, Fishbein (2000) proposed an integrative model of behaviour prediction. In this model, the individual's intention to perform a behaviour, his skills or efficacy to perform it, and the environmental constraints are the three primary determinants of the performance of the behaviour. More specifically, the formation of intention is the most important aspect for the development of intervention strategies, which is shaped by the person's behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and self-efficacy beliefs (Fishbein, 2000). One immediate implication of this model is that different types of interventions need be designed for people with or without the intention to perform the particular behaviour. Take designing campaign messages against marijuana use as an example, if the target population already have the intention to use marijuana, efficient interventions should be focused on the control of skill building and environmental constraints. While for people who have not formed a strong intention to use marijuana, interventions should be directed at identifying the key factor influencing the population's formation of intention and designing attitudinal, normative or efficacy control strategies accordingly. Second, it is vital to distinguish between behaviours, behavioural categories and goals (Cappella et al., 2001) and clarify the target population when applying the model to campaign design. For instance, snorting cocaine is a different behaviour compared to injecting cocaine, although they both fall into the category of drug use. Also, different campaigns should be designed for heavy drug users, light users and non-users. Their degree of engagement with drugs has determined that they have different needs in terms of information and assistance. The definition of target audience also influences the goal of the campaign, as for non-drug users, the campaign should be aimed at persuading them to stay away from drugs, while for regular drug users the campaign should be centred on helping them rehabilitate or preventing them from heavier drug use. Third, the integrative model examines the performance of behaviour in an individualistic and psychological perspective. Demographic factors, personality traits and other individual differences as well as the context of the research subject are regarded as external factors that may play an indirect role in shaping the intention. There is great potential to study to what extent and how these external factors influence the formation of intention, and the correlation between these factors, especially when applying the theoretical model to a different cultural context.

Another influential behavioural prediction model is Prochaska et al. (1994)'s transtheoretical model of behavioural change (TTM). Based on two decades of research, the TTM describes the individuals' intentional behaviour change as moving through five stages: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance (Prochaska et al.,

1994). The process of adopting healthy behaviours or quitting unhealthy ones is divided according to temporal dimensions that utilise both cognitive and performance-based components (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997). For campaigners, this model examines the process between formation of intention and behavioural performance in a more detailed way, showing reliability and consistency of different stages in the process of behavioural change. It implies that although intervention in the traditional sense tends to focus on the action stage, it is only one segment of the chain. In the design of health promoting campaigns, different strategies should be tailored to the needs of people in different stages of behaviour change. For example, attention should also be paid to the maintenance of a healthy behaviour, for the maintenance stage may be as important as, and even more difficult than, taking action to adopt the healthy behaviour or stop unhealthy ones in the whole process.

Nevertheless, in cases like addiction recovery, the behaviour change process may not always follow the linear process as presented in the model. There are several studies examining the occurrence of relapse, which moves the stages backwards and the whole process may cycle more than once (Milkman, Weiner and Sunderwirth, 1983; Gerwe, 2000). For instance, in the rehabilitation of alcoholic or drug addiction when relapse frequently takes place, the process of behaviour change may follow a spiral model that cycles several times. Therefore rather than solely persuading people to quit drugs or alcohol, more effort should be made to the development of maintenance-oriented approaches and assistance for the patients' recovery from relapse.

To sum up, the literature on theories and models of behaviour prediction and change reviewed above are essential to the development of health promoting media campaigns. They explore the interactions of key determinants such as the individual's behavioural attitude, normative beliefs, self-efficacy in the formation of intention to perform particular behaviours, and the correlated stages through which behaviour change progresses. Prior to this, the specific definition of the behaviour and target audience is of vital importance to the success of a media campaign. Besides these, it is worth noticing that the theories and models assume the process of behaviour change as rationalised according to certain scientific patterns. While in real-life situations when emotional impacts, illnesses like mental disorder and other unpredictable factors are involved, the process of behaviour change may go beyond rationality and cannot be explained by any given pattern. In cases like this, it would be important to give more accounts to demographic factors, personal traits and other

individualistic difference, and to conduct contextual analysis. Moreover, the theories and models reviewed in this section are constructed in Western cultural frameworks, but there is enormous scope for the development of transnational studies. When applied to another national context, variables like cultural traditions, media ideology and ethnic characteristics will come into play, and lead to significantly different ways of understanding and constructing health-promoting campaign messages.

### ***Resisting the Message – Active Audience***

The previous part of this chapter focused on theories and models of behaviour prediction and change that inform the design of health-promoting media campaigns. However, the campaign designers' use of theory and development of campaign messages are all based on the premise that the media have direct and measurable effects on the audience. So when designed and implemented appropriately, their messages will lead to the audience's behaviour change and performance of healthy behaviours. However, media are only one component in the complexity of social reality. As Morley (1992) argues, 'the meanings themselves and their salience for different individuals, groups and institutions were the product of a more subtle process of social construction than those stressing effects and influence would normally grant'. The media effects approach has long been challenged for its assumption of the audience as fixed, passive and simple in structure by approaches like uses and gratification (Blumler and Katz, 1974), cultural studies (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992) and reception analysis (Eco, 1979). For active audience theorists, the social location, personal preferences of the audience and the unpredictability, non-rationality and indeterminacy in the reception process are important factors that can break the linearity and directness of the so-called media effects.

Contrary to the media effects approach that focuses on how the media influence the audience, the uses and gratification theory examines how audience make motivated choices and use the media to satisfy their own needs. From a functionalist perspective, it emphasises 'the differential needs, orientations and interpretive activities of the audience with differential social and individual traits' (Jesen and Rosengren, 1990). For example, in her study of the romance genre, Janice Radway (1984) distinguishes the female readers from mindless dulls, arguing that the fans of romance gain pleasure in the production of escapist fantasies from romance reading, because this can fulfil their wishes and desires that have been rendered impossible in everyday lives due to their caring role of the family. However, Blumler and Katz (1987) acknowledge that paralleling that of textual analysis school's 'disappearing of

audience', the uses and gratification approach has the problem of 'disappearing of message'. It has also been criticised as being over individualistic and psychological, neglecting the socio-cultural context of the reader (Morley, 1992). Moreover, the uses and gratification approach assumes the audience's rational choice and pre-determined motivation in the reading process, while the fact is that the audience may choose media text at random, or may not pay attention to the content although the TV set is on.

In order to avoid the uses and gratification theory's problem as being over cognitive and individualistic, cultural studies stresses the importance of cultural framework and contextual analysis. According to the encoding/decoding model proposed by Stuart Hall (1980), the meaning of a media text is not single and fixed, instead, it goes through transformation in the process of production, circulation, consumption and reproduction and is determined by a set of cultural, professional and other factors. The meanings coded by media producers may not be decoded by the audience in the same way, and misunderstandings or distortions are the results of imbalance between the two sides of communicational exchange. Morley (1992)'s successful application of Hall's model in his study of *Nationwide* audiences analyses the audience's reading in relation to their cultural and social context. For Morley (1992), the audience's viewing of *Nationwide* is not an individualistic behaviour, but rather a diverse process embedded in domestic, social and normative practices. The approach of cultural studies is valuable as it explains why the same media text can be interpreted in diverse ways by different audiences. According to Hall (1980) and Morley (1992), the audience actively negotiates with the 'preferred reading', resulting in different modes of decoding – it can be dominant, negotiated or oppositional. This is framed by the individual's socio-demographic background and involvement in different sub-cultures. While the audience's interpretation of the media text is argued as determined by their individual needs and desires in the uses and gratification approach, cultural studies identify the primary determinant as the audience's context, as it not only has an influence on the audience's choice and viewing habits, but also provides them with cultural tools and conceptual framework through which they decode the message.

Another important approach in the active audience literature is reception analysis. Reception analysis focuses on the moment when the text encounters its reader, and makes a comparative analysis of media discourses and audience discourses (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990). It explores the audience's contribution to the social construction of textual meanings and seeks to explain it in cultural and social terms. Therefore reception analysis is similar to

the uses and gratification approach in the sense that it also recognises the audience as active agents selecting and interpreting media texts in diverse ways for their own purposes; it can also be linked to cultural studies as the importance of contextual factors are adopted so as to find explanation to the audience's interpretive behaviour. The reception analysis approach is most relevant to the conceptual framework of this study because this study aims to make a comparative reading between campaign designers' health promoting messages and the meanings actively produced by the audience, which may or may not be the same as the campaign designers' intentions. This study also seeks to link the audience's reading of the media text to demographic factors, personal experiences and individual traits, in order to explain why they have such diverse, and sometimes deviated readings compared to the meanings encoded by the campaigners.

### ***Background and Objectives of the Research***

As mentioned in the introduction, the development of Chinese anti-drug media campaigns began in late 1990s, and is still on the primary stage. In China, all health-promoting media campaigns are government-sponsored and non-profit in nature. Consequently they have a strong connection with the credibility and efforts of the central government. Focusing on the content, the most frequently used strategies in Chinese anti-drug media campaigns include: offering knowledge about drugs and explaining the physical damage of using drugs in scientific ways; showing striking images of devastated drug users, usually accompanied by news stories about tragedies caused by drug abuse; using celebrity cases as role models of quitting drugs or 'bad examples' of how drugs ruined their career; introducing relevant laws and regulations along with big criminal cases on drug trafficking or abuse solved by the police, and so forth.

It can be observed that these Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse have drawn from Western theories of behaviour prediction and change. The strategies employed aim at demonstrating the negative consequences of using drugs in terms of personal health, social image and violation of laws, which is in accordance with the attitudinal, normative and efficacy control strategies for the prevention of intention formation suggested in the integrative model (Fishbein, 2000). Furthermore, these campaign messages are primarily designed to persuade ordinary people to stay away from drugs, indicating that despite the campaigners' claims that these campaigns are 'launched for all', the real target population is the non-users. As a result, there is little effort made to help the people who are already drug users. Even when a drug user is persuaded by the campaign and takes action to quit drugs,

little information or assistance can be found in the campaigns for the maintenance and relapse stages. Overall, the Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse do not have a clear definition of the behaviour of drug abuse and the specification of the target audience. The designers are trying to incorporate information about all types of drugs within one campaign and influence a population as large as possible, but how likely is this going to happen?

On the audience side, even without the inhuman depictions of drug users in the anti-drug campaigns and in other media representations, drug abuse has always been regarded as a socially and morally unacceptable behaviour. Because of the conservativeness of the culture, ordinary Chinese, especially the older people, tend to have extremely negative attitudes towards drug users. For them, a drug user equals a criminal or monster, and the behaviour of drug use is often thought of as inseparable from other crimes like theft or prostitution (Xu, Wang and Ma, 2007). Moreover, the drug rehabilitation systems in China are quite different from those in Western countries. Generally speaking, there are two types of rehabilitation – voluntary and enforced. A drug user can choose to go to the rehabilitation section in hospitals or clinics where they can receive medication, psychological therapy and other clinical services, but the treatment usually takes a long duration and is very expensive. For young drug users who got arrested by the police but could not afford to receive such treatment, they are usually sent to large drug rehabilitation centres, which are administered by the police department of the government with prison-like management systems. Treated as violators of the Anti-drug Law, these drug users' imprisonment lasts one to four years, during which heavy labour is required to be done on a daily basis as the punishment. In this study, all research subjects are drug users living a hard life in rehabilitation centres, and a lot of them have deep reflections on their experiences in the past and the issue of drug abuse after years of rehabilitation.

So far I have reviewed social psychology theories of behaviour prediction and change, and active audience literature in the media and communications field, followed by a brief introduction of the Chinese anti-drug media campaigns and the situation for Chinese drug users. This study aims to critically analyse and evaluate the Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse through the perspective of their audience, specifically focusing on the most problematic ones of them – the young drug users in drug rehabilitation centres. Comparisons will be made between the campaigners' intentions and the drug users' diverse interpretations of the same anti-drug message, in order to answer the following questions:

What do the young drug users think of these campaigns? Why wouldn't they listen to them? If for them the strategies employed in the campaigns do not work, what do they think are the possible solutions to the campaigns' problems?

Theoretically, this study integrates Western theories into the context of China and Chinese culture. Informed by theories of behaviour prediction and change in the analysis of anti-drug campaigns, and active audience approaches in the examination of the drug users' reproduction of meanings, this study will attempt to test the validity of these theories when they are applied to another national context, and explore the role of different media ideologies and cultural traditions in the audience's interpretive behaviours.

## **CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Concluded in the previous chapter, the aim of this study is to critically examine the Chinese anti-drug media campaigns through the perspective of young drug users. In order to gain insights into the drug users' life world, which is very different from the researcher's own, also because of the qualitative nature of this study, depth interview was selected as the method of research. After two small-scale pilot studies and some revision of the interview schedule, nine depth interviews were conducted with young drug users in two drug rehabilitation centres in Anhui Province of China.

### ***Selection of Interviewees***

The most challenging part of this study is that the research subjects are all young drug users in rehabilitation centres, but it is not unprecedented – in 1987, Barry Glassner and Julia Loughlin conducted a large-scale study of American adolescents' perceptions and uses of drugs. Methodologically, depth interviews with pre-tested questions were carried out with 100 randomly selected American adolescents aged between 12 and 20. The interviews lasted 4 to 12 hours, and the researchers claimed to have shown genuine interest in understanding the interviewees and have been accepted as peer group members (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987). Having spent a great amount of time with the respondent, Glassner and Loughlin (1987) talks about the uniqueness of their study as 'understanding particular social phenomena by way of their position within social worlds'. In this way, they distinguish the drug users' perception of their behaviour from the stereotype, and try to understand the social meanings of drug use for user themselves. Similar to their 'methodology of listening', this study also aims to go beyond the stereotyped perceptions of drug users and to hear their perceptions of and advice for the media campaigns against drug abuse.

In the Glassner and Loughlin study, interviewees were selected at random, and the 100 adolescents included drug users, non-users and rare users. However, as introduced in the previous chapter, in China the drug user and non-users' worlds are distinctive from each other. At first, a survey questionnaire among university students who are non-drug users was considered, but the pilot research failed as the respondents saw drug abuse as totally irrelevant to their own lives and social contacts. They showed little interest in anti-drug media campaigns and gave similar answers. The selection of young drug users in rehabilitation centres as research subjects ensures the respondents' concerns of the drug issue and sensitivity to anti-drug media campaigns because they themselves are 'inside the

problem'. Furthermore, it is expected that they can offer viewpoints that are more critical than others' due to their deep reflections of the issue and their own behaviours. The insights and policy recommendations that they have might be very different from the ordinary people including the campaign designers, but it will be valuable to hear their opinions because these opinions are based on the experiences of their own and their peers' as drug users.

### ***Depth Interview***

According to Berger (2005), depth interview is conducted 'to get particular issues, such as hidden feelings or attitudes and beliefs of which a respondent may not be aware of or that are only dimly in his or her consciousness'. Different from survey interviews, depth interviews often take hours because it is necessary to penetrate the defence people put up to prevent their hidden belief, whether they are conscious of or not (Berger, 2005). Moreover, compared to surveys, more detailed information can be obtained through depth interviews because the long duration of time allows for follow-up questions and unexpected topics that interest the researcher (Silverman, 1993). For this study, the drug users' perception of their behaviour and the anti-drug media messages are based upon their personal histories, media experiences and changing peer cultures, so the interviews have to start with the respondents telling their own stories. This will take a long time and because of their differences in personal experience and the degree of interest in media campaigns, the question order may vary in different interviews and follow-up questions might come up at any time. As a result, each of the interviews will generate a large amount of information, which cannot be achieved through survey interviews or questionnaires that ask simple and fixed questions. Also, it is understandable that some of the respondents may be reluctant or afraid to talk about the experiences that they are not proud of in front of a stranger. The researcher will need to spend time with them as long as possible to get to know them, understand them so as to communicate with mutual trust.

As another type of interview, initially focus group was also considered to be part of the methodology. Livingstone and Lunt (1993) argue focus groups generate diversity and difference, 'and so reveal what Billig has called the dilemmatic nature of everyday arguments'. Focus group was considered for this study because it has the advantage of generating discussions, in which diverse meanings will be brought into debate and negotiation. In the examination of anti-drug media campaigns, more diverse viewpoints from the drug users and their process of negotiation will contribute to a more critical understanding of how and why different individuals interpret a same media message in

different ways. Nevertheless, this idea was later abandoned because first, the researcher was aware that it was not easy for the drug users to talk about their personal, sometimes painful experiences, even in a one-to-one conversation. It may be too difficult for them to talk in front of a group of others and express their opinions without self-defence. Second, as pointed out by Gaskell (2000), with a single interviewee, richer details of the individual's action sequences and change of attitude can be elicited, and related to his or her personal traits. However, when the interview takes the form of a group discussion, it is not possible to focus on a particular individual in the same way that can be achieved in a one-to-one interview. In focus groups there may be critical debates, but the researcher's attention is dispersed, and might not be able to make connections between the points and the person who makes them, or to conduct contextual analysis.

### ***Procedure***

The research of this study started with collecting materials of Chinese anti-drug media campaigns, other media coverage of drug abuse and relevant reports issued by the central government of China. An interview schedule was designed based on these materials. Questions were divided into three parts: socio-demographic information about the respondent including age, educational level, occupation and family environment; the respondent's personal experience about using drugs and perception of this behaviour; and the respondent's viewpoints about the frequently used strategies in anti-drug campaigns and other forms of media coverage on the drug issues. In the third part of the questions, in case that the respondent had little interest in the media or viewing experience, campaign materials, photos and posters relevant to the research topic were prepared and shown to the them so as to elicit their comments. Then the researcher contacted several rehabilitation centres with detailed research plan and interview schedule, was granted access by two of them and finished the selection of interviewees with the help of the rehabilitation staff. After this, a pilot research composed of interviews with two drug users and a non-user was conducted. The result of this pilot research confirmed that the non-drug user was indifferent about this issue saying that drug abuse was too distant from his life, while the interviews with drug users turned out to be offering useful and surprising insights into the issue. According to the results of the pilot research, the research plan and interview schedule were slightly revised. Then the interviews began in early April 2007, in two drug rehabilitation centres administered by People's Government of Anhui Province. The research processed lasted two weeks and nine depth interviews were successfully transcribed in the end. The respondents aged between 16 and 25 and each interview was one to two hours in length. In

order to ensure confidentiality and to make it more comfortable for the respondents to talk, the researcher took notes and transcribed them right after each interview instead of using tape recorders. Finally, the data collected were categorized and summarized systematically, getting prepared for further analysis.

### ***Limitations***

Methodologically, there are a few limitations in the research design of this study. First, Glassner and Loughlin (1987: 32-38) raised the question 'can we trust the kids' in their study of American adolescents' perception and usage of drugs. The researcher of this study is also aware of this problem. Efforts have been made in schedule design and the interview process in order to create a non-judgemental, sincere and friendly atmosphere encouraging the respondents to talk. However, it cannot be fully guaranteed that all the interviewees are telling the truth, especially when it comes to questions about personal history and their beliefs or determination about quitting drugs. Second, it is difficult to handle the large amount of information generated by these interviews. Transcription of the data was done manually and was a very time-consuming process, although ideally this study will be more promising when carried out on a larger scale.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ***Access and Credibility of the Campaigners***

The annual report on China's anti-drug progress released by the central government – The China Anti-drug White Book was first issued in 2000, indicating that although the problem of drug abuse began to spread inland from the Southeast coast of China since early 1990s, China's war against drug abuse does not have a long history. It was surprising to hear from the respondents that some of them knew nothing about drugs at all when they first tried it. According to them, the media campaigns against drug abuse were launched after drug abuse became pervasive in China, which was already too late for a lot of young people who were lack of knowledge about drug abuse:

*"I remember it was in 2003...all of a sudden the media campaigns, slogans and posters were everywhere, but before that there were nothing that I could recall. But 2003 is already too late." (Interviewee #3, 22)*

*"I had no ideas what the white powder was at all when my friend asked me to try it. At that time, there were no media campaigns, no where to learn about drugs except from my friends, but you know, they don't really know much about it either. In the small town where I was from, people thought of drug abuse as totally irrelevant from their lives. When my dad called the police and told them that I did drugs, it was ridiculous that even the police wouldn't believe it. If I knew a little bit about drugs at beginning, I would never be that stupid to try it. The media should have done more." (Interviewee #2, 25)*

The anti-drug media campaigns in China were also criticized as being only "seasonal", which means most media campaigns are only launched around June 26<sup>th</sup> – the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Trafficking. At other times of the year, there are few campaigns or the strength of the campaigns is insufficient. As one respondent noted:

*"Before getting in here, I only knew about June 26<sup>th</sup>. Around this day you can see a lot of useful exhibitions, television programs and strong slogans. But at other times of the year I could not feel the existence of media campaigns at all." (Interviewee #5, 19)*

In China, the government's control over media organisations is a taken-for-granted fact, although a lot of Chinese, especially the youth are cynical about it. The concealment of the true statistics of the SARS situation in 2003 has resulted in a reduction in the public's trust of the government, especially regarding issues of public health (Li, 2007). For many respondents, the credibility of the campaigns sponsored by the government was at question. They were sceptical about the validity of the officially released data and statistics, and expressed discontent about the Chinese government's exaggerated claims of their efforts and achievements. For example:

*"I know a small place named Linqun not far from my hometown, it is an open secret that over 60% of the population there are drug users. Can you believe it? In bigger cities it was not that bad but the situation is definitely worse than that reported in the White Book. I don't know whether the campaigners know about this, or they are just working with the government to hide it." (Interviewee #5, 19)*

To sum up, although most of the respondents have seen or heard about the anti-drug media campaigns, their degree of exposure to them differs and is significantly lower than the campaigners' expectations. Second, distrust in the campaigners directly leads to their resistance of the campaign messages. The issues of access and credibility of the campaigners are not included in the theoretical models of behaviour change, but they play a significant role in this study because for some respondents, the formation of intention to use drugs is largely caused by the lack of knowledge about the behaviour, which is due to the lack of access to or distrust in the medic campaigns. The audience's activeness is demonstrated when they form deviated, even oppositional readings to the dominant codes, and this study is an illustration of how particular national context and political culture come to influence the individual's reading of media messages. Although the problem of distrust in the government is not easy to solve, what the campaigners can do is to develop more anti-drug media campaigns and to make sure that they are available throughout the year, so that the youth will have no access problem to the campaign information that they need.

### ***Image of a Drug User***

In Chinese media campaigns, a most commonly employed strategy is to use photos of heavy drug users, showing how severe they suffer from the physical and mental pain caused by drug abuse. According to Boholm (1998), visual materials are far more evocative of emotion than text because of their strong capacity to represent risks that are remote from everyday

experience. In Chinese anti-drug campaigns, the photos of drug users are often accompanied by news stories themed on how drug misuse can turn human beings into demons, leading to tragedies like murder or suicide. To make the story short, the image of a drug user is shaped as extremely inhuman, miserable and ridiculous in media campaigns, in order to raise the public's cautiousness about the serious consequences of drug abuse. Some of the respondents found this strategy effective:

*"I was really shocked when I saw the image of a skinny drug user. The photos with a lot of blood or incomplete bodies were disgusting, cruel and worse than death. I feel scared because I know if I keep doing drugs, it can be me some day." (Interviewee #8, 17)*

*"I am a girl, so I am more concerned about my body and would think more about issues related to health than the 'brave' boys. The images and stories work for me, they really really scare me." (Interviewee #6, 20)*

Although all of the respondents agree that the visual materials and extreme cases in the campaigns are what impress them most, some made comparisons between these materials and their own experience, and found the 'truth value' of the materials doubtful.

*"When I look at the pictures I don't believe them. Just take a look at me – I use cocaine, I am healthy, and all of my addicted friends are healthy. We don't kill people or do other ridiculous things. We don't look different from you at all. I have no idea how they found those fake pictures." (Interviewee #9, 16)*

A female respondent had strong emotional reactions when talking about the news stories, and condemned the campaigns for producing a stereotyped image of the drug user that is not true:

*"I am the victim of these media stories! Perhaps some of the drug addicts do immoral things but not all of us are demons. I knew nothing about drugs when I got addicted, then I wasted my own money on drug, damaged my own body, and got myself in trouble. I harmed no one else but still people judged me, isolated me and called me names like junkie and prostitute. Although I have done wrong things, I believe I am*

*still a good person. It is the media that dehumanized me and made the others treat me like that.” (Interviewee #2, 25)*

Other respondents commented on the image of a drug user produced by the media campaigns in more rational ways, from perspectives like the political economy of these media campaigns and the conservativeness of Chinese culture.

*“I understand the media although they don’t understand us. What the media do is that they attract attention, as much as possible. They entertain so they can sell their products. After all there are far more non drug users than drug users in the society. It is natural that they put the task of scaring them away from drugs prior to the drug users’ feelings.” (Interviewee #7, 22)*

*“I think the stereotype thing has something to do with our culture. The level of tolerance and openness to social problems like drug use in China is much lower than in Western countries. I heard that in Western countries people treat drug users as patients, not criminals.” (Interviewee #6, 20)*

*“The news stories are true. I know what it feels like to be controlled by drugs. The drugs can make you as ridiculous, inhuman and dangerous as described in the news stories, although the extreme cases like that rarely occur around us.” (Interviewee #3, 22)*

The respondent went on to give policy suggestions to solve the problem of trustworthiness of the striking materials for the experienced drug users:

*“I think the campaigners should just be honest. They should let the public know that extremes cases are rare but there is the possibility for them to happen. It would be useful to include some ordinary drug users’ stories, how we got addicted to drugs and ruined our lives. The most painful consequence is actually the loss of freedom and years of labour in rehabilitation centres. I think it would work because for everybody this is what will truly happen when you get addicted to drugs.” (Interviewee #3, 22)*

The respondents’ viewpoints in this section revealed a dilemma in Chinese media campaigners’ production of the drug user’s image. The inhuman images and news stories

have the advantage to attract attention and to evoke fearful emotions among the general audience, thus prevent them from forming the intention to use drugs. However, for most audience even the regular drug users, the image of a drug user shown in the campaigns is too distant from their everyday lives and sometimes too extreme to believe. One possible consequence is that it may lead to greater distrust in the media and an increase in the youth's curiosity of trying drugs, thus goes against the campaigners' primary intentions. To solve the problem, as suggested by the respondent, it may also be useful to incorporate ordinary drug user's experiences and tell the public the truth rather than dehumanise the image of a drug user. In this way the stories will be easier for the audience including drug users to identify with, emotionally comforting for drug users and therefore more persuasive.

### ***Stages of Behaviour Change***

As discussed before, Chinese anti-drug media campaigns tend to intervene on the action stage, in other words, most campaigns are focused on preventing the non-users from becoming drug users. However, the process of behaviour change regarding drug abuse is never as simple as the dichotomy of drug user/non-drug user indicates. The respondents claimed that they have tried to stop using drugs several times, but all of them have the experience of relapse. When asked the question "do you think you can quit drugs after getting out of here", the respondents seemed uncertain and confused:

*"It is my third time getting in here. Five years ago when I left the rehabilitation centre for the first time I never thought that I would go back here. The second time I got arrested I really made up my mind to stop using drugs, but still it didn't work. So now if you ask me whether I can quit this time, I'm not confident to say yes." (Interviewee #6, 20)*

*"I am too frustrated to think of the future after several times of relapse. All I want to have is a normal life when leaving here, but how can that be possible?" (Interviewee #4, 18)*

The respondents' experience demonstrated the complexity of the drug rehabilitation process. According to them, the physical discomfort of quitting drugs lasts no longer than one week, and it is the psychological addiction to drug that is difficult to quit and may a long duration of time to recover from. They criticised the media campaigns for being too generalised introducing the process of drug rehabilitation, and little advice can be found on

the maintenance and relapse stages that follow the action stage of quitting drugs physically, despite the fact that these stages are of vital importance for a lot of drug users.

*"To me it seems that the media campaigns have defined drug use as the issue of a lifetime. They are delivering the message 'do not touch drugs, otherwise you'll never get out of them'. For people like me who are already drug users, this kind of message too frustrating. We know it is difficult to quit, so we need to know there is still hope."* (Interviewee #1, 17)

*"I think they should divide the drug rehabilitation process into different stages. The currently launched campaigns may work for non-users as they are warning them about the serious consequences of getting involved with drugs. If I were the designer, I would design different messages. For example, for light/rare users, it'll be 'the more drugs you do, the more difficult it is to quit, so get started now'; while for heavy users I would make more efforts in cheering them up."* (Interviewee #5, 19)

The respondent did offer useful suggestions based on his own experiences. The underlying reason that leads to the drug users' frustration and confusion is the Chinese media campaigns' generalised definition of the drug use behaviour and the rehabilitation process. The identification of target audience in these media campaigns is especially problematic in the sense that with the claim to be launched for all, the campaigns are actually designed for non-drug users. The campaign designers neglected the fact that for different audience groups the same message may carry very different meanings – while the message is designed to be a warning notice for the non-drug users, it is ruining the drug users confidence in quitting drugs at the same time. According to Prochaska's transtheoretical model of behaviour change, there should be different types of campaigns designed for different stages of drug rehabilitation, especially the maintenance and relapse stages. Putting it differently, while most of the campaigns are intended for non-users, it is also of necessity to develop media campaigns that are tailored to the needs of drug users in China.

### ***Use of Celebrity Cases***

Using celebrity cases is another commonly employed strategy of Chinese anti-drug media campaigners. Qi Luo's rehabilitation story is a most frequently adopted case in which the celebrity has been used as the role model for fighting against drugs. Qi Luo is the vocalist of

a female rock band named *the Compass*, which has been marked as a milestone in Chinese rock n' roll history. *The Compass* became famous in mid-1990s and Qi Luo gained huge popularity among the Chinese youth for her rebelliousness and uniqueness. However, she was discovered to be a heavy drug user and arrested by the police at the age of 22. Under huge pressure, the girl went through the rehabilitation process successfully, and came back to the spotlight as the spokesperson for a lot of anti-drug media campaigns. Her story was discussed during the interviews:

*"Qi Luo has always been an encouraging character for me. The point is that she's not afraid to tell people truth about her worst time as a drug addict, and proves that it's possible to quit drugs completely." (Interviewee #6, 20)*

There are different viewpoints of Qi's rehabilitation story focusing on her label as a celebrity:

*"She is not one of us – she is rich and famous. She has the support of millions of fans and the money to receive good clinical services. That is not going to happen to us anyway. So I'd prefer to see ordinary people's successful story of quitting drugs, it will be more convincing than celebrity cases." (Interviewee #7, 22)*

Contrary to Qi Luo, there are other celebrities who are used in the campaigns as 'bad examples' of how abusing drugs ruined their career. Recently in 2006, a group of Taiwanese singers and actors have been discovered with heavy heroine use. The name list was shocking as it included a lot of Chinese people's favourite artists who used to be regarded as role models. The respondents commented on these celebrities as 'stupid, money wasting, loser', and it is clear that their disapproval with these celebrities' behaviour was in accordance with the campaign designers' intention.

Apart from these celebrity cases that used by media campaigns with the function to educate, there are other representations of celebrities in the media that go against the anti-drug education, which glamorise the behaviour of drug use and label it as fashion or a personal style. For example, Jing Ouyang is a Chinese young model, actress and photographer who openly admits her bisexuality, mental depression and drug use. There are a lot of her photos themed on torture, hallucination and death getting popular among the young people on the Internet. Reading the messages in bulletin boards online it can be seen

that her fans appreciate Jing's style as an alternative type of beauty and there are a great many imitators. During the interviews, photos of Jing Ouyang were shown to the respondents. With the experience of using drugs themselves, all of the respondents' attitude was negative:

*"I started to do drugs partly because I wanted to lose some weight and become as skinny as the models. Now I know this is totally wrong and I was stupid, but still I know many girls are doing this." (Interviewee #8, 17)*

*"The mass, especially the youth, don't know about art. The young people have no idea what real beauty or art is and all they do is to worship and imitate what appears to be trendy. You can't only look at the surface of these behaviours, they may look stylish in films but smoking or using drugs in public is not the type of thing a decent person would do. This type of fashion can be very misleading." (Interviewee #2, 25)*

*"I remember seeing a group of teenage girls doing drugs in a club. By doing this they thought they were ahead of their peers in terms of fashion. I understood this because I didn't want to be left behind by my friends either. But what we failed to realise is that the special social status of the models or stars has determined that they can be regarded as glamorous or trendy by doing drugs, while for us who are ordinary youth with no money or jobs, drug use can only be linked to concepts like robbery, theft or prostitution." (Interviewee #5, 19)*

Suffering from the pain of rehabilitation, all the respondents agreed that the fashion that glamorises drug use is twisted, wrong and definitely has to be regulated. From the above analysis it can be concluded that when applied appropriately, celebrity cases are efficient in demonstrating the harm of drug abuse. Celebrity cases are also useful for drug users in the way that they provide positive role models with whom the drug users can share courage, determination and possibility to quit drugs. The respondents showed great respect to the ordinary drug users telling their own stories in anti-drug campaigns and many of them would love to be voluntarily doing this. Again the value of 'true stories' received approval as equally influential compared to celebrities because of their authenticity and easy identification. Last but not least, many respondents showed a change in the perception of 'alternative fashion' as their reflexivity grew in the rehabilitation process. The implication is that instead of being

fixed, the audience is constantly undergoing changes. The meanings of a same message reproduced by the audience can vary when they are in different periods of life.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has critically examined the frequently employed strategies in Chinese media campaigns against drug abuse through the audience perspective, specifically focusing on the drug users. Informed by social psychology theories of behaviour prediction and change, and active audience theories in the field of media and communications, this study has explored the diverse ways in which different groups of audience interpret the same health-promoting campaign message, and identified several problems with the development of Chinese anti-drug media campaigns: First, the campaigns have been criticised as being launched too late and too seasonal. Another factor that inhibits the audience's access to the campaign information is their distrust in the government and the campaigners. Second, the campaigns produce the image of a drug user as inhuman, ridiculous and miserable, which is too distant from the audiences' everyday lives and sometimes too extreme for them to believe. The image has also resulted in the drug users' disapproval of and resistance to the campaign messages. Third, the definition of the behaviour of drug abuse and rehabilitation process in these media campaigns is too generalised. With the claims to develop campaigns for all, the campaigns are actually designed only for non-drug users to prevent them from becoming drug users. There is little information on the maintenance and relapse stages of the rehabilitation process, which is of importance to drug users who attempt to quit drugs on their own. Finally, there are other media representations of the drug issue that glamorise it as fashion or a personal style, which are popular among the young people in China, jeopardising the educational function of the media.

In order to solve the problems, first of all it is necessary to clarify the target audience and develop different types of media campaigns for drug users, light/rare users and non-users tailored to their specific needs. Second, the selection of cases in these campaigns should be more realistic. Using ordinary drug user's experience can be equally influential as the extreme cases or celebrities as they are easier for the audience to identify with and more convincing. Also, it is important to formulate new regulatory policies for the media representation of social issues like drug abuse, especially the new media, so as to reduce the youth's imitations of unhealthy behaviours.

Theoretically, this study has incorporated the theories of behaviour prediction and active audience into the Chinese context and proved the validity of these Western theories when applied to a different national context. It is worth noticing that when developing international studies, there are other factors like political culture, media ideology and cultural traditions that may come to influence the outcomes of the study. Due to the context of a MSc dissertation, only nine interviews were transcribed as the data for analysis. The richness and social significance of the research topic has determined that there is great potential to carry out this study on a larger scale and offer more valuable policy recommendations to the development of Chinese anti-drug media campaigns.

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## **APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### ***Introduction***

- Introduce the context and objectives of this research
- Inform the interviewees that notes will be taken for the transcription of the interviewees, and all the data will be kept anonymous

### ***Part 1: Demographic information***

- How old are you?
- Have you finished high school/did you go to college?
- Have you ever worked, either part-time or full-time?
- Before getting into the rehabilitation centres did you live with your parents? Do they both work?
- What media are you acquainted with most? (e.g. do you like watching TV? Films? Do you like reading books? Do you go on Internet?)

### ***Part 2: Experience and perception of drug use***

- What was your life like before getting addicted to drugs?
- How old were you when you tried the drugs for the first time? Can you describe the situation for me?
- What did you know about the drugs when you first tried it? How did you get the knowledge? Did they make you hesitate?
- How did you spend your day after starting to use drugs?
- Describe the image of a drug addict in your mind. How did you form that image of a drug user? Did your perception change before and after you had personal experience of drugs?

### ***Part 3: Media Campaigns against Drug Abuse***

- What impresses you most in the anti-drug media campaigns?
- What do you consider as useful or useless in these media campaigns?
- If you were given the opportunity to design educational campaigns against drug abuse, what improvements would you make?
- What other media programmes or books that are relevant to the drug issue can you think of? (E.g. news, television dramas, films, books, etc.)
- There have been some media representations that glamorise the drug abuse behaviour and label it as fashion or a personal style (e.g. rock music, models, showing photos or posters that are relevant to drug use). What do you think of it?

### ***Conclusion***

- What is your plan for the future?
- Thank the interviewee for his or her participation
- What do you think of the interview? Is there any additional point that you'd like to make?
- Reassure confidentiality

(The method of this research is depth interview, so the order of the questions listed above is not fixed, and there are a great many follow-up questions coming out in each of the interviews. Therefore this interview schedule only serves as the general framework of the interviews, covering the most important questions asked in all interviews.)

## **APPENDIX TWO: SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Date: 5 April 2007

Interviewee #: 5

Q: How old are you?

A: 19.

Q: Did you finish high school? How did you spend your day before getting in here?

A: No, I dropped out after finishing junior high. Before getting addicted to drugs I spent all my days hanging out with friends or playing online games...I used to play football as well.

Q: Do you like to read the information online? What other media are you acquainted with?

A: No, I only played online games. I like newspapers, magazines, TV, films...but not very much, just using them to kill time. I was really into entertainment and celebrity news though.

Q: What about your parents? Did they both work?

A: Yes.

Q: How old were you when you first tried drugs? Can you describe the situation for me please?

A: I remember it was the end of 2003...I was 16. It was one night at a friend's place. I knew it was a bad thing but that's all. When I first tried the drugs I felt so sick that I thought I would never do it again. But after a couple of days I was thinking it was not that bad...I'm the type of person who doesn't care about what others think. Once I've made up my mind to do something, no matter what others say I wouldn't listen.

Q: After getting addicted what was your day like?

A: My life was centred on drugs. I usually got up in the afternoon, did drugs, went out to buy drugs, did it again, then went to sleep again. It was really bring.

Q: Describe the image of a drug addict in your mind. Did the image change before and after you had personal experiences of drugs?

A: Before I became a drug user, I thought of them as failed people. I don't know why but I disliked them a lot, treated them with no respect at all. When I was using drugs myself I couldn't feel anything. I completely forgot what I said and felt about other drug users. I changed, became selfish, irrational and said a lot of wrong things to my parents. Now I'm quitting, but when I think back on those days, I regret really a lot.

Q: Now let's talk about the anti-drug media campaigns. What of these campaigns impress you most?

A: Before getting in here, I only knew about June 26<sup>th</sup>. Around this day you can see a lot of useful exhibitions, television programs and strong slogans. But at other times of the year I could not feel the existence of media campaigns at all. The photos of drug users that they showed were inhuman and scary. My friends told me that they were fake. My friends were healthy, I was healthy too, so I don't know whether to believe these photos or not. Also, I know a small place named Linquan not far from my hometown, it is an open secret that over 60% of the population there are drug users. Can you believe it? In bigger cities it was not that bad but the situation is definitely worse than that reported in the White Book. I don't know whether the campaigners know about this, or they are just working with the government to hide it.

Q: what other media programmes or books that are relevant to the drug issue can you think of?

A: I was sensitive to the news stories. They described drug users as demons, it can be true but I'm sure the depiction has been exaggerated. Most of the drug users are normal people, although we have done wrong things.

Q: (Showing a photo of some rock star doing drugs) what do you think of this?

A: I watched celebrity and entertainment news a lot. Many stars and models do drugs and they make it look trendy. I knew some girls who did drugs just to imitate, or to lose weight so that they can look like models. I remember seeing a group of teenage girls doing drugs in a club. By doing this they thought they were ahead of their peers in terms of fashion. I understood this because I didn't want to be left behind by my friends either. But what we failed to realise is that the special social status of the models or stars has determined that they can be regarded as glamorous or trendy by doing drugs, while for us who are ordinary youth with no money or jobs, drug use can only be linked to concepts like robbery, theft or prostitution. This type of trend is definitely wrong, misleading and should be regulated. But the problem is that they are far more attractive than the campaign materials...

Q: If you were given the opportunity to design educational campaigns against drug abuse, what improvements would you make?

A: I think they should divide the drug rehabilitation process into different stages. The currently launched campaigns may work for non-users as they are warning them about the serious consequences of getting involved with drugs. If I were the designer, I would design different messages. For example, for light/rare users, it'll be 'the more drugs you do, the more difficult it is to quit, so get started now'; while for heavy users I would make more efforts in cheering them up. People should have confidence in themselves. Quitting drugs is difficult but not impossible. The point is that you don't give up on yourself.

Q: It is good that you have such strong faith in yourself. What is your plan for the future?

A: I've spent two years here. During the two years I really thought a lot and I think I've grown up. Being 19 is still young, I still have opportunities. I'll quit drugs, try to forget these years and be nice to my parents because I can never make through this without their forgiveness and support.

Q: OK. Thank you very much for the participation. You have offered so much valuable opinions and viewpoints. Is there anything that you'd like to add?

A: I'd love to be a volunteer telling people my stories in anti-drug campaigns. What I want to say to the young people who are not drug users most is that – do not let curiosity ruin your life.

(The transcriptions of the other 8 interviews are available upon request.)

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