



Shelves lined with coca cola bottles in a Chinese grocery store

IMAGE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Coca-Cola in China

How Big Corporations Control National Health Systems

BY JULIA LEVI

In 2015, the *New York Times* revealed Coca-Cola's attempt to influence public health through partnerships with nutrition researchers in an article titled "Coca-Cola Funds Scientists Who Shift Blame for Obesity Away from Bad Diets." The soda company needed a way to respond to and protect themselves from people's increasing awareness of health, especially city wide movements to regulate food and tax sugary drinks. In order to keep their profits, maintain their place in the American economy, and increase sales of their products, Coca-Cola partnered with the founders of the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN), a United States-based nonprofit organization. The GEBN was founded in 2014 by two long-time public health researchers: Dr. Steven N. Blair of the University of South Carolina and Gregory A. Hand of West Virginia University. Supported by Coca-Cola, they promoted that exercise alone, not the quality of food, determines health. The GEBN was disbanded in 2015 after their partnership with Coke was brought to the open. Coca-Cola serves as the emblematic example of big soda and fast food chain companies staking their claim over a country's people through deceptive marketing strategies that aim at refuting

what they are being attacked for—causing obesity and illness.

While large corporations' deep influence on public health and policy may come as a surprise, this episode is only one of the many instances in which Coca-Cola (and other big firms) directs research and government in order to maintain a dominant position in the market. Coca-Cola may have failed in the United States, but similar tactics have been going on in China for the past 20 years. As the first corporation to enter China in 1978 after the country's declaration of the Open Door Policy, Coca-Cola's relationship with the Chinese government is strong and distinct. Pepsi took over the USSR's soda market in 1972, and Coca-Cola's mission was to surpass its competitor by establishing itself in China. In December 1978, Coca-Cola Chairman J. Paul Austin introduced his product to China through Peter Lee, a chemical engineer who negotiated with the China Oil and Foodstuffs Corporation to allow beverage sales in tourist shops and hotels. Both Coca-Cola and China benefited: Coca-Cola could expand sales globally while China gained foreign exchange and technology. From then on, despite backlash in the early 80's to reject anything that could

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harm the domestic market, Coca-Cola's relationship with the Chinese government and its influence in the country only grew. It continues to be prominent today, with China being the soda company's third largest market.

Coca-Cola's impact on China goes beyond its product placement, close relationship to the government, and advertising. Through behind-the-scenes funding, it has actually affected health policy in the country. To respond to the growing obesity crisis, Coca-Cola has been using their tight connections with the Chinese branch of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) to determine how the government directs people in addressing their health. The ILSI, a global nonprofit organization, was founded in the United States in 1978 by Coca-Cola's senior vice president and food technology specialist, Alex Malaspina. When Coca-Cola entered the Chinese market, ILSI-China, as a non-profit, non-governmental organization, became an appealing way for a country who was short on money for public health exploration to conduct nutrition research. ILSI's Chinese branch, one of the company's 17 offshoots, became a way for China to globalize and positively influence state policy. While ILSI has other branches in emerging market countries, China is a special case because the ILSI has the most direct relationship with the government and thus determines policy from inside. But if ILSI China is a way to research and enhance the public's nutrition, examining its funders leads us to

question what exactly is going on behind the scenes. Founded by Coca-Cola representatives, this non-profit organization is also funded by similar fast food and classically unhealthy corporations like Nestle and McDonald's.

Around 2004, ILSI-China began promoting physical activity as the central preventative measure against obesity. This aligned with Coca-Cola's support for an active lifestyle as the determiner for health and their claim that the beverage is part of a healthy diet. Through several years of Coca-Cola influencing conferences where different representatives from the company were present, ILSI-China and Coca-Cola began creating exercise-based groups to solve the obesity problem. Happy 10 Minutes, a national operation to have ten-minute school day exercise breaks, spread in 2006 and was supported by Coca-Cola, eventually becoming a healthy lifestyle campaign backed by the Ministry of Health. In 2012, Coca-Cola was also one of the founding partners of Exercise Is Medicine, a project to promote exercise as a medical treatment for obesity.

In the years leading up to 2015, diet was discussed in ILSI-China conferences in ways that supported large food corporations. Susan Greenhalgh, a research professor on Chinese society at Harvard, found information from meetings in which Coca-Cola claimed that the ingredients in their sugary drinks were beneficial. In her article "Making China Safe for Coke: How Coca-Cola Shaped Obesity Science and Policy in China,"

Greenhalgh mentions a 2006 conference in which Zhang Huaying, a member of Coca-Cola's Beverage Institute Health and Wellness, claimed that the soda is a good source of water.

Coca-Cola's "Coup in China," as a 2008 *New York Times* article calls it, is only one instance of the control exerted by major food corporations over scientific research and government policy. We can see similar cases of this in the United States, where researchers have recently uncovered more and more information on the links between "big soda" and other major food companies and nutrition studies. Marion Nestle of the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University writes that she "identified 76 industry-funded studies" in her 2015 article "Corporate Funding of Food and Nutrition Research: Science or Marketing?" Seventy of these studies are in the "funder's interest," backed by sponsorship from major corporations. She brings in a 2015 study about the effects of cocoa flavanols on blood pressure and cardiovascular health, which

was funded by Mars, Inc. (the company behind M&M's). In a 2015 *New York Times* article, Mars released an advertisement stating that "Cocoa Flavanols lower blood pressure and increase blood vessel function in healthy people," even though in reality, cocoa flavanols are broken down in the process of making candy.

But is it necessarily bad for corporations to be funding research? In response, Nestle responded: "It is okay for them to fund research, but it is not okay to engage independent scientists in marketing research disguised as science." With regard to corporations interested in supporting basic science, Nestle said, "They should set up a fund run by an independent third party and never have anything further to do with the research until it is published. Otherwise, the influence is for marketing purposes."

And what about the relationship between major corporations and government policy? Who exactly is in control over how people act in a country? According to John Kane, a visiting professor in the Political Science department

at Yale, "The biggest winners in modern economic globalization, produced by intentional diminishing of international regulation, have undoubtedly been giant corporations, either transnational or multinational." This is because they have "immense resources and [are] able to maneuver across various jurisdictions to evade the regulatory controls of any particular state" but are still considered "sources of investment and employment." Professor Kane called Coca-Cola in China a "special case:" the government has a lot of power, but Coca-Cola has been in China for forty years now and has become the "prestigious symbol of modernity" in the country. However, its influence isn't necessarily a political threat; it just plays the "traditional big corporation game" through promoting exercise as the determinant of health. The Chinese government is simply "playing along with Coke" rather than resisting or submitting to it Professor Kane said.

If Coca-Cola is going to directly fund nutrition research in China through the ILSI, they should either remove their

self-promoting interests from the picture, or start to create and sell healthy products to the public. Coca-Cola's close link to the government puts the public in danger down the line if the soda company continues to deceive the public through incomplete truths about what can help tame obesity (exercise alone will not fix anything). Unfortunately, even in the United States, where Coca-Cola's influence on health research has been thwarted, food product marketing continues to use elements of nutrition to control and affect the public, causing them to buy the good. Big corporations want to stay in business, and in a world where health research and awareness increases each year, they will do whatever it takes to keep their profits and remain desirable.

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IMAGE: FLICKR