

CHP Seminar Series
Dr. Susan Greenhalgh, March 12, 2019

**Coca-Cola in China – the Role of Foreign Industry Funding in
China’s Health Science and Policy**

On March 12, 2019, China Health Partnership hosted Dr. Susan Greenhalgh, John King and Wilma Cannon Fairbank Research Professor of Chinese Society at Harvard University. Her work on Chinese science and policy has spanned more than three decades, with obesity being the focus for the last five years. Capstone articles from this body of work finally were published in the BMJ and the Journal of Public Health Policy on January 9, 2019. These two articles uncovered how the Coca-Cola Company was able to quietly influence obesity policies in China. Her work has been reported by major news outlets around the world.



The central question that guides Dr. Greenhalgh’s research is who governs the health of China’s people. Dr. Greenhalgh analyzed the full set of newsletters issued by the non-profit organization, International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI)-Focal Point in China between 1999 and 2015. ILSI-China is a branch of a global organization, ILSI, which was founded by then-Coca-Cola’s Vice President in 1978. She found that obesity science and policies gradually shifted to emphasizing physical activity over dietary solutions, and ILSI played a critical role in enabling this change as promoting physical activity became a central theme in the scientific events and health interventions that ILSI-China supported.

Although the findings of Dr. Greenhalgh’s work have been widely publicized, the story of implementing her research remains little known to the public. Though she was warmly welcomed by the obesity science and policy community in China, the questions on corporate funding made for some awkward conversations, and officials from the National Commission on Health were reluctant to commit to being interviewed.

Faced with these challenges, Dr. Greenhalgh showed a tremendous amount of perseverance. As a China veteran, she began her study on China's science and technology policies by examining the one child policy. It was her deep commitment to alleviating social injustice that continuously drove her to carry on this crusade. The sufferings from the lives lost because of unjust policies had a profound influence on Dr. Greenhalgh's work. This passion has ultimately led to excellent scholarship and true social impact.

Different from most of the previous speakers at the China Health Partnership seminars, Dr. Greenhalgh examines public health issues from the perspective of an anthropologist. Instead of aiming to make recommendations as an economist or policy expert, Dr. Greenhalgh's goal is to empathize and understand. Her research and her seminar created space for the audience to reflect on many important questions that policy makers face in China.

During the seminar, Dr. Greenhalgh's findings resonated with many in the audience who have worked extensively in China. Contrary to the belief that as a one-party state, the authoritarian regime in China can simply create policies as they wish, many in the audience have experienced that policy formulation in China is a complex process involving negotiation among many stakeholders. Dr. Greenhalgh showed us the incredibly intricate web of relationships that collectively shaped policies on obesity and related chronic diseases in China. Her nuanced observations offer an important lesson for all who aspire to contribute to improving health policies in China.