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# 'Carcinogens in a puff': smoking in Hong Kong movies

Sai-Yin Ho, Man-Ping Wang, Hak-Kan Lai, Anthony J Hedley, Tai-Hing Lam

School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

## Correspondence to

Dr SY Ho, School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong; [syho@hku.hk](mailto:syho@hku.hk)

All authors contributed to the final draft of the paper

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## ABSTRACT

Smoking scenes in movies, exploited by the tobacco industry to circumvent advertisement bans, are linked to adolescent smoking. Recently, a Hong Kong romantic comedy *Love in a puff* put smoking at centre stage, with numerous smoking scenes and words that glamourise smoking. Although WHO has issued guidelines on reducing the exposure of children to smoking in movies, none is adopted in Hong Kong. Comprehensive tobacco control strategies are urgently needed to protect young people in Hong Kong from cigarette promotion in movies.

The film abounds with smoking scenes and it also glamorises smoking as 'breathing in loneliness' and 'breathing out love and happiness'. However, carcinogens are what are truly carried in the puffs. The principal actress, Miriam Yeung, is a celebrity artist with many young fans and a youthful, healthy image. Having popular artists smoking in movies has detrimental effects on adolescent smoking,<sup>4</sup> and Yeung's impact is likely to be substantial especially among girls in Hong Kong.

With the banning of smoking advertisements in print and electronic media in Hong Kong since 2000, movies have been exploited as a loophole for

Mounting evidence in the West links smoking scenes in movies to the promotion of smoking in adolescents.<sup>1</sup> In Hong Kong, adolescent smoking and intention to smoke were also found to increase with exposure to smoking in movies.<sup>2</sup> However, many movies continue to depict smoking imagery, a documented strategy sponsored by the tobacco industry to promote nicotine addiction in young people.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, a Hong Kong romantic comedy *Love in a Puff* put smoking at centre stage and portrayed how two young working adults met and dated through cigarette breaks in an alleyway (figure 1).

## What this paper adds

- ▶ Despite tobacco advertisements having been banned in Hong Kong since 2000, many movies continue to portray smoking imagery.
- ▶ A recent popular movie putting smoking at the centre stage highlighted the urgent need for Hong Kong to implement a more comprehensive control on indirect tobacco advertisements.

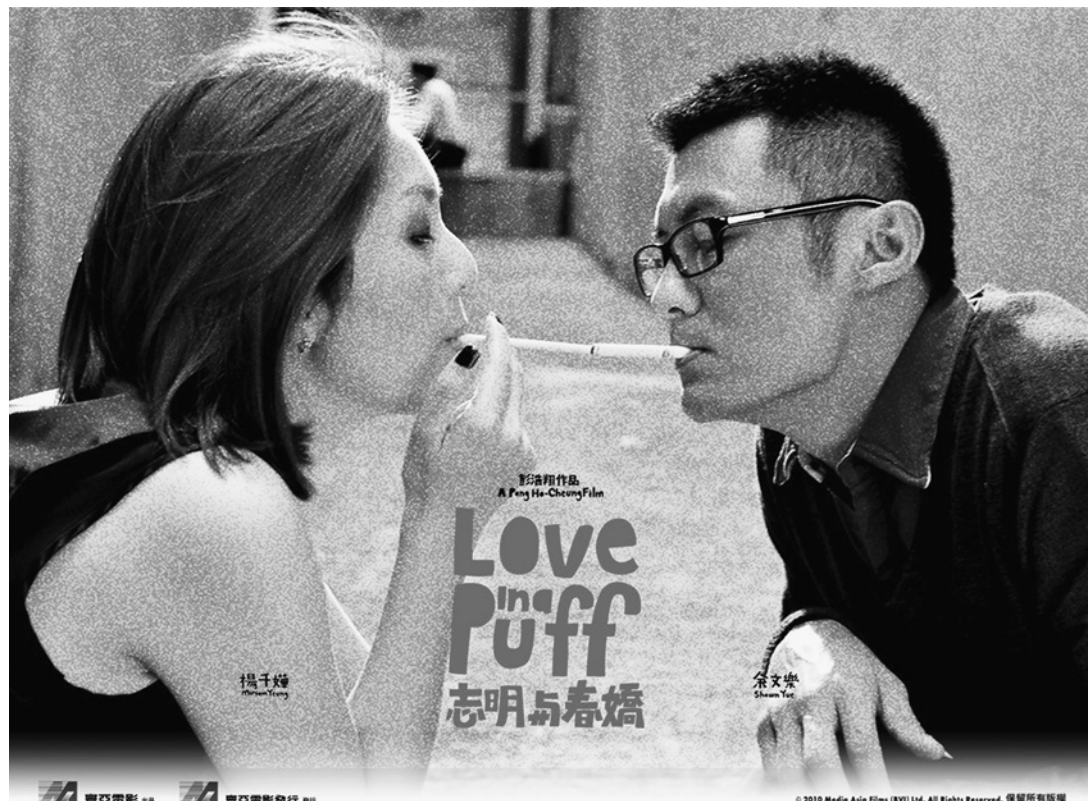


Figure 1 Poster for the movie *Love in a Puff*.

## Special communication

promoting tobacco. The tobacco industry is known to have sponsored many films such as those in Hollywood.<sup>5</sup> Yeung has also been a smoke-free ambassador for the Committee on Youth Smoking Prevention, an organisation supported by tobacco companies and condemned by the Western Pacific Region Office of the WHO<sup>5</sup> and other health authorities.

The WHO has urged policymakers to reduce the exposure of adolescents and children to smoking movies by implementing comprehensive tobacco control strategies.<sup>6</sup> The movies should certify that there are no payoffs from the tobacco industry, stop identifying tobacco brands, show strong anti-tobacco advertisements and be rated for adults only when any tobacco imagery is present.<sup>7</sup> In Hong Kong, the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority mainly considers violence, sex and foul language in film categorisation, but ignores smoking scenes. *Love in a Puff* was assigned Category III (US: NC-17, UK: 18/R18) because of the foul language used. This has limited teenagers' exposure to trailers meanwhile, but soon the full movie will likely be available to them through video discs and the internet. Hong Kong should implement a smoke-free movie policy urgently to protect our youth from exposure to the tobacco industry's use of movie to promote cigarettes to young people.

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