

Wen Wei Po Newspaper Profile on Dr Judith Mackay  
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## Resident tobacco control think tank "save" 30 years

■ Hong Kong Wen Wei Po newspaper reporter Yu Ka Cheong

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■ Dr Judith Mackay, on seeing the harm of tobacco, decided to start an anti-smoking campaign in 1984.  
Reporters Yu Ka Cheong

Newspaper interview 72-year-old Dr Judith Mackay

Before the handover, many Britons came to take root in Hong Kong, and Dr Judith Mackay, who has been engaged in tobacco control for more than 30 years, was one of them. Over the years she has been active in making suggestions for governments' tobacco control efforts in Hong Kong and in Asia, and was invited to Beijing to participate in the Central Party School Tobacco Control Research.

She is labelled by the tobacco industry as one of the "three most dangerous people in the world." She believes in cooperation with government officials, patiently explaining the stakes, commenting in line with the interests of the other party, and not just telling either government or people what they "should" do; that way promoting and ensuring the smooth development of policy.

Dr Mackay was born in Yorkshire, read medicine at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and was working in a hospital there when she met her future husband (a Scottish doctor who had been working in Hong Kong). They married and returned to Hong Kong in early October 1967, in the middle of the Hong Kong riots. Working in hospital, she saw in the wards the plight of that tobacco harm could bring, so in 1984, gave up her hospital post and a steady income, and started an anti-smoking campaign.

Dr Judith Mackay is a busy woman: recently, just following a visit to the Central Party School in Beijing, she was invited to go immediately to Hangzhou. Although already 72 years old, Dr Judith Mackay spirits never tire as long as there is need

for tobacco control, and she would always answer the call to try to reduce the number of victims of smoking. She believes that tobacco control efforts should be both top-down and bottom-up, but her own work is mostly at the most senior level with government and leaders.

Travelling to the north and south of Asia, Dr Mackay over the years traveled to dozens of countries, including Mongolia, Vietnam, Cuba and the Middle East. She keeps a distance from politics, focusing on the issue of tobacco. She always works on the basis of respecting others.

### **Three current measures: advertising bans, tax increases plus packet warning**

Dr Judith Mackay discusses three main issues related to tobacco: tobacco tax increases, bans on tobacco advertising, and tobacco pack warnings. Many years ago in Cambodia, the authorities did not want to ban advertising, so she suggested a phased ban on advertising like Hong Kong; in Indonesia, she suggested to the Minister of the Islamic religious teachings that the Imams could assist in tobacco control; in Thailand, she suggested prohibiting monks from receiving cigarettes in their alms bowls. She said that some in the West working in Asia are pointed, and tell nations what they should do. "I would never say that they "should" do, my dictionary does not include the "should" word, and I believe this is the reason I am accepted in all countries."

### **Age, sex Strengths**

Dr Mackay finds her foreign nationality, combined with living in Asia and understanding Asia, and being a woman is a good combination. "If I were Malaysian, I believe China or North Korea will not ask me for advice." Also age plays a part, as Asians will respect and believe older people, and also prefer to deal with a woman, finding a woman is easier to talk to."

In Hong Kong since 2007, after the commencement of the newly revised "Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance," there has been no major legislation. Dr Judith Mackay believes that the 1980s and 1990s were the golden age of Hong Kong's tobacco control movement, but with the percentage of smokers slowly declining in recent years, public interest in tobacco control has gone down, so that while Beijing and other mainland cities are introducing more stringent tobacco control while Hong Kong appears to stand still.

### **Smoking control advocate**

Dr Judith Mackay said that the new proposed tobacco bill in Hong Kong will be very difficult to pass through the Legislative Council. She believes that the managers and owners of restaurants should be fined, in addition to the smoker, if smoking

occurs in premises that are by law smoke-free. This would ensure the law would be better observed.

### **Dr Judith Mackay Profile**

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- 1943 was born in Yorkshire, a medical graduate of the University of Edinburgh, and in 1967 married her husband from Scotland and moved to Hong Kong, initially working in Queen Mary and the United Christian Hospitals.
- 1984 gave up practicing clinical medicine, and moved into tobacco control, and since then has even received death threats.
- now senior advisor for the Bloomberg Foundation's initiative (Vital Strategies) to reduce tobacco use in low- and middle-income countries
- 2007 named by "Time" magazine as one of the world's 100 most influential people; then an OBE honour, and in 2009 received the British Medical Journal Group Lifetime Achievement Award.

### **Central Party School ideas "Yes" to change everything**

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- 1989 Dr Mackay presenting Premier Li Peng (front row from left) and his wife Zhu Lin (front row, second from left), with her first "State of Health Atlas." Photos provided by the respondent

Dr Judith Mackay believes that China is the most important country in the world for smoking because of the huge number of smokers, so has been working in China since 1985, meeting with Li Peng, Jiang Zemin and other central leaders, as well as more recently with the China Central Party School in Beijing to participate in tobacco control policy research.

Dr Judith Mackay was very honoured and excited to work with the Central Party School, discussing tobacco with their lawyers, philosophers and historians.

Earlier the Beijing Think Tank released a report that the number of smokers had recently increased in China by 15 million compared with 2010, a total of 316 million people. Dr Judith Mackay believes that this is mainly due to the population increase in China, and that the percentage of smokers has actually not changed.

During the visit, Dr Mackay repeatedly appreciated that the Central Party School will be exceptionally influential in terms of tobacco control.

She said that Chinese doctors have been proposing tobacco control measures since 1984, with modest successes over the years, but since the Central Party School published in Tobacco Control Research report, a lot of things have started moving. 'Yes, but' has changed to 'Yes.'

Dr Judith Mackay believes that one day the smoking rate will decline on the mainland, but more work needs to be done before that. She considers it necessary to pass and implement national smoke-free legislation, currently before the National People's Congress; the second is a substantial tax increase as cigarettes are too cheap so that young people can afford them; the third point is mandatory pictorial warnings on tobacco packaging, but these are being opposed by the state tobacco monopoly.

Dr Judith Mackay has met only once with the Mainland China Tobacco Corporation tobacco industry and that was decades ago, "when the health authorities wanted to ban tobacco advertising." I persuaded the tobacco monopoly that it was in their best interest to support a ban on advertising, as overseas tobacco companies had very sophisticated marketing and promotion, and China would not be able to compete. The monopoly supported the ban with the result the ban passed.

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Over the years promoting tobacco control in many countries, Dr Mackay has experienced many thrilling moments. She remembers one time when she was giving a speech in Cambodia, when there was a sudden huge explosion, with debris from the ceiling falling down, and everyone hiding under the tables or running out to escape. Dr Mackay remained unruffled, and merely said, in a very British way "Next slide please!" The explosion turned out to be the government, without prior notice, detonating a rebels' arms cache in the central square of Phnom Penh.

In the early 1990s, Dr Mackay visited Mongolia, arriving among chaos at the airport the very day that the Russian troops withdrew, and the new national Mongolian parliament was convened. She was staying at the official government guest house, and on returning one night on her own, suddenly two Mongolian guards pointed at gun at her. Neither could speak the others language, but Dr Mackay, with her hands in the air, spoke softly in English to defuse the situation, saying "You have probably not seen a Western woman before, but it does not matter, it's all right."

Years later the Mongolian government officials told her that when she first visited, the government wondered if she was a spy, "Because I had no interest in schools smoking plans, but was concerned only with tobacco taxes and border smuggling – and these were then "state secrets'."

Dr Mackay has twice been invited to North Korea. She said, as a member state of the WHO, North Korea has complied with many WHO health policy guidelines. She suggested that before the harmful effects of smoking could be taught to students there, the campus must first implement a non-smoking policy for staff as well as students. Pyongyang promptly put smoke-free legislation in place in

educational establishments, and at this point she was very impressed, "just like in the golden age of Hong Kong Tobacco Control! "

### **Elsie Tu cheer: do what you think is the right thing**

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■ In 2007, Dr Mackay won the "Time" as one of the world's 100 most influential people. Photos provided by the respondent

Dr Mackay has not always been low-key in Hong Kong but she spoke at a press conference and also the funeral service of her longtime friend Mrs ElsieTu.

Talking about Elsie Tu, "Yip Sek Yan," Dr Judith Mackay said that she had often been attacked for her work to promote tobacco control and women's rights, but Mrs Elsie TU told her a "do what you think is the right thing" which made Dr Mackay

determined to continue.

Dr Judith Mackay remember first saw Elsie Tu on television, when she exposed the triads in Kowloon collecting "protection money" from the mini-bus drivers, with the police turning a blind eye to the problem, and when a senior police denied the incident. "After two days, another senior police force officer was interviewed on television, acknowledging the minibus racket. I remember I said to my husband: "Mrs Tu was right!"

After this, Dr Mackay's became close friends with Mrs Tu, accompanying her to hospital or to doctors' visits.

### **Grateful husband supported Dr Mackay's unpaid work**

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■ Dr Mackay's writings and journal publications.

In 1984 Dr Judith Mackay abandoned practicing medicine to devote herself to tobacco control efforts. Her husband supported the family until 2006, when she started working with then- New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Philanthropy organisation to reduce tobacco use in low and middle income countries.

Dr Mackay noted that at that time, her husband supported her, but "now he is retired, so it is my turn to support him."

Dr Judith Mackay and her husband live in Saikung, spending two to three months in

Scotland every summer, but she always believes that "Hong Kong is home" and not planning to go back to the UK to retire. When she joined the Bloomberg Foundation, one condition was that she continue to be based in Hong Kong, the second was to travel business class on long-haul trips - she could not help but laugh: "This was one of the smartest decisions in my life."

### **Enjoy the quiet - love tai chi**

Most of her life is helping to improve other people's health, but for her own health she has practiced Tai Chi for a full 10 years. She enjoys the peace of practicing tai chi, and particularly likes the tai chi sword programme. Once former Secretary for Food and Health, Dr York Chow, asked her, is there any benefit in practicing tai chi? Dr Judith Mackay laughed and replied: "At least it does no harm."