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**Bronx syringe disposal boxes
only collect 15 percent of needles:
150k annual harm reduction efforts encounter
challenges**

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On a Wednesday afternoon in January, outside a residential playground on East 143rd Street and Third Avenue in the South Bronx, a few blue plastic syringes lay on the sidewalk. Students from the Children's Pride Daycare Center across the street were getting out of the center.



A blue plastic syringe container was lying on the sidewalk, while the pupils from the Children's Pride Daycare Center were getting out of the school on January 22, 2020 in Mott Haven neighborhood of Bronx, New York. Photo: Frida Cai

Outside Patterson Playground on College Avenue and East 148th Street, Edwin Delgado, a homeless man, disposed of a bunch of needles into a garbage can.

"I do this twice every day. It [needles littering] got so much worse since 2017. It could be because of 'The Hole'. People hang out at places they are not supposed to be at."

In 2017, the [New York Police Department](#) led a multi-agency operation to clear "The Hole", an abandoned railway track near St. Mary's Park in the Mott Haven neighborhood, which had become a hub for opioid use and homelessness. The New York City Department of Parks & Recreation and the Department of Health participated in the operation as well.

"I picked them up to the garbage bin because people are stupid. They don't pay me for that. I used my gloves. I do not do that raw [with my bare hands]," said Delgado.

However, The Hole cleanup drove syringe users from the deserted track to playgrounds and parks in the South Bronx, where they kept publicly injecting drugs and leave needles on the ground. Government agencies (including the Health Department, homeless services, the police department, harm reduction organizations, healthcare and treatment providers, housing advocates and community residents) that collaborated on this operation did not expect the spread of drug injectors from The Hole to the parks, according to Monique Wright, manager of the New York Harm Reduction Educators (NYHRE) at the City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

Facing the new problem of public syringe littering, the Parks Department announced a plan in May 2018 to begin installing [more than 60 safe disposal kiosks](#) in 16 parks throughout the South Bronx. The NYHRE

staff would empty the kiosks and assist in picking up syringes where the boxes were located. But in effect, only 38 were installed in 12 parks in the Bronx by January 2020, disclosed by the Parks Department.

"60 syringe kiosks was an estimate," said Dan Kastanis, press officer of NYC Parks. "We scaled back the total number after fully assessing the need with the DOHMH." Some of the kiosks are located in parks currently under construction, such as Patterson Playground.

The exacerbation spread to Washington Heights as well. Since 2014, syringe litter collection requests for the Sanitation Department have increased by nearly 300 percent. The department has conducted more than 200 syringe litter responses since last July, collecting more than 8,800 syringes, which are mostly focused in the South Bronx and Upper Manhattan.

Right across 181st Street and Amsterdam Avenue in Upper Manhattan, on a small hill outside the highway isolation belt, the ground is covered with countless orange syringe rubber pluggers and used needles. A syringe is straightly stabbed into a tree trunk. This corner is also one of the mobile sites of Washington Heights CORNER Project, which offers free sterile syringes and disposal on a daily basis. Facing the hill, two 25-story luxury office buildings are being erected.



On February 4, 2020, at Highbridge Park between 181st Street and Amsterdam Avenue in Washington Heights, New York, orange syringe rubber pluggers, used needles and other medical waste covered the ground. A syringe is straightly stabbed into a tree trunk. Photo: Frida Cai

"On a scale of one to ten, I would say 11," said Rey Balcacer, a Washington Heights resident since 1984.

"The syringe [littering] became a lot worse since 2017," he added. "There are a lot of syringes on the ground before the street cleaners came in the morning. You see them [syringes] by the church, on the floor, everywhere."

According to Wright of the DOHMH, the foremost goal of the syringe disposal boxes was to just get the needles off the ground. Because addressing the root cause would take too long and too many resources, what the government could do right now is to focus on syringes on the ground.

"It was an immediate benefit to the local community by increasing public health. And a short-term harm reduction to reduce the risks to people who use drugs and people who engage in the parks," said Wright. "After The Hole was closed, we noticed immediate worsening [of needles littering] in the parks. We had been receiving complaints from the employees of the City Parks Department ever since."

"We try to regulate something already happening, not to encourage [drug use]," said Wright. "People [who] inject drugs would always inject them. This [syringe box] is one piece of the puzzle to resolve the risky behavior. We are encouraging to protect the community that is impacted by the opioid crisis."

"It is not just about overdose deaths," she added. "Syringe disposal is one perspective of the opioid crisis."

According to the Parks Department, since the pilot program in June 2018, more than 158,000 syringes have been disposed of in kiosks. But in terms of disposal rates, parks in the Bronx are still littered with dangerous hypodermic needles.

For instance, St. Mary's Park in the Mott Haven neighborhood has collected 56,945 needles, only 6 percent of which have been safely discarded. At the second-worst drug spot, Tremont Park, workers have collected a total 26,760 needles, of which 13.3 percent have been dropped inside the kiosks. At Claremont Park and Richman (Echo) Park, the kiosks have only collected 1.2 percent and 5.2 percent, respectively.

Needle collection Percent with Bronx Parks Kiosks: June 2018 - November 2019

The total collection of syringes and those by the 38 syringe safety disposal kiosks in the 12 parks and playgrounds in the South Bronx by January 2020. Here, Clark Playground and Nelson Playground stand out as both of their collection rates are over three times the total average, 15.2. At Nelson Playground, only 25 needles have been collected out of the 37 total count.

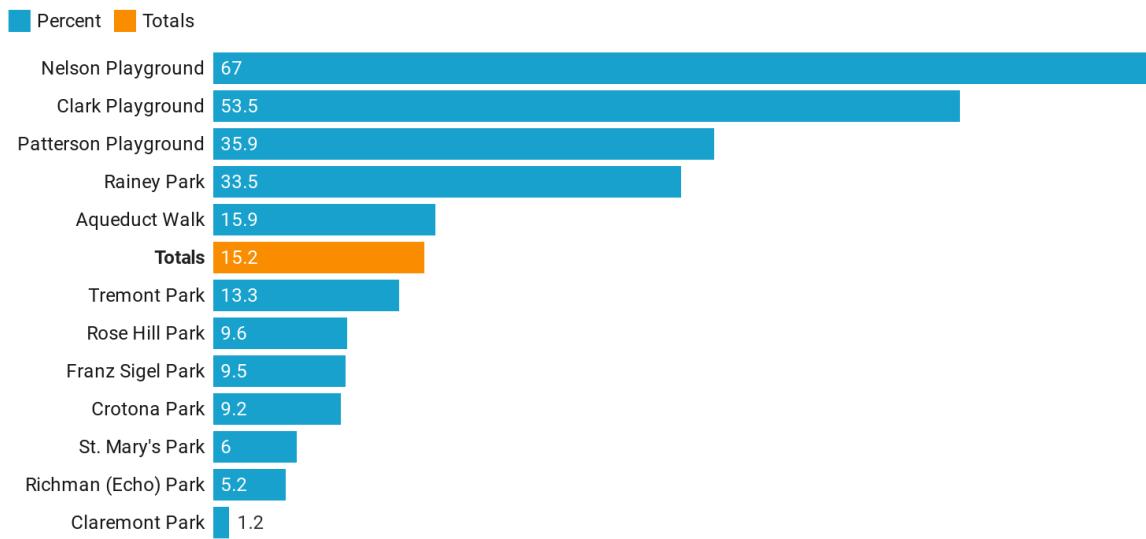


Chart: Frida Cai • Source: The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation • Created with Datawrapper

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"This syringe collection is designed to fail, because they [the government] are pushing the responsibility to another segment," said Geoffrey Croft, an NYC Park advocate. "Drug users do not have to nicely tell you that they need to dispose [of] their needles. They are high."

Because only a few percent of needles have been collected, the agencies are not significantly reducing the drug-related infection rates, Croft believed. He added that the government is not addressing the drug use with proper resources and probably would not expand the program.

"It is completely irresponsible," said Croft.

Why have the kiosks been so unpopular?

To begin with, the bins are not very visible outdoors and the local residents are barely aware of them. A considerable percentage of the syringe dropoff boxes are locked inside of the public bathrooms all the time in cold weather, each of which, according to the City Parks, costs [25](#) cents for 15 minutes of use.

"It could be that the government wants to make sure they [needle users] do not break into the boxes for the syringes." said Maureen Miller, adjunct associate professor of epidemiology at Columbia. "But people could still be responsible. People are not perpetually high. They do care about physical health and community health."

"They do not want others to know about the injection. It is kind of private," she added. As a result, drug injectors seek "quiet, secure and chill" places, like residential playgrounds instead of plainly open parks, which is less private, said Miller.

Moreover, regarding the impact of the kiosks, the community has divided opinions.

"I have not seen anything [kiosk]," said Julio Pabon, a South Bronx community activist and a candidate for Congressional District 15. According to him, neither the Parks or Health department informed the community before the installation.

"Not that I know of," said the candidate.

All around the BOOM! Health Harm Reduction Agency on East 144th Street, used syringes littered the block, even though a large black syringe disposal box stands right outside the building. Inside, a syringe access booth also exchanges used needles with sterile ones.



Outside of the BOOM! Health Harm Reduction Agency on East 144th Street in the South Bronx, New York, a big black needle disposal box stood outside of the building on January 22, 2020. Photo: Frida Cai

“Lazy. My guess is just that they [drug injectors] are playing lazy, walk over here and drop it [syringe] off [on the ground],” said Wilfredo Colon, the floor manager of the Harm Reduction Agency. “It [the box] is there for a purpose. A good idea to have it. But it would be better if people use it more often.”

“I do not know where else has kiosks,” said Colon. “It [the box] has been [installed], like, over two years from 2018.”

Boris Aryafar, manager of Amazing Pharmacy across the street from the east side of Tremont Park, said that he did not know about this syringe kiosk program at all.

“You give me the address [of the kiosk] and I am gonna pass it around. It is supposed to be that way [to install kiosks],” said Aryafar. “The government thinks these people [who inject drugs] are disposable people. You don’t see a clinic [to provide syringes] to walk in, do your stuff and come out.”

But how could the residents be aware of all this information? Even the local community and relevant government agencies hardly talk to each other or among themselves regarding the boxes, though it was initially proposed as a multi-forced operation.

Clara Desantis, Training and Promotions Coordinator of AIDS Institute at the Department of Health, said that the Institute does not talk to the Parks Department. “Some kiosks are not from the Health Department, but from the Parks [department].”

“We usually ask the [syringe] providers for the number of disposals and collections. There are many more out there, so the collection is not centralized,” said Decanstic. “We do not have a consistent count here. It would be severely underreported.”

Pabon mentioned the lack of communication as well. “They [the government] just came and installed them [kiosks],” said Pabon. “The government and the community will have a public forum to expose these issues.”

When asked about the date of the forum, Pabon responded: “We do not know yet.”

He believes that the box is a double-edged sword.

“People are definitely still using drugs and injecting themselves. The situation is worse when the weather is warmer. Needles are just openly disposed of on the street or people are using used needles. Sometimes a kiosk could eliminate diseases or children could pick it [a needle] up,” said Pabon, “But on the other hand, the government is permitting and encouraging rather than dealing with drug use. If you provide the kiosk, you should also try to educate people to get off the drugs. It is much better.”

“We do not make any claim that the box would stop people from injecting in public,” said Wright in response, “That is not the intention.”

According to the City Parks, the parks’ syringe disposal program in the South Bronx is part of [HealingNYC](#), a city initiative created in March 2017 to tackle the opioid epidemic in an area that is known to be disproportionately affected by fatal drug overdoses.

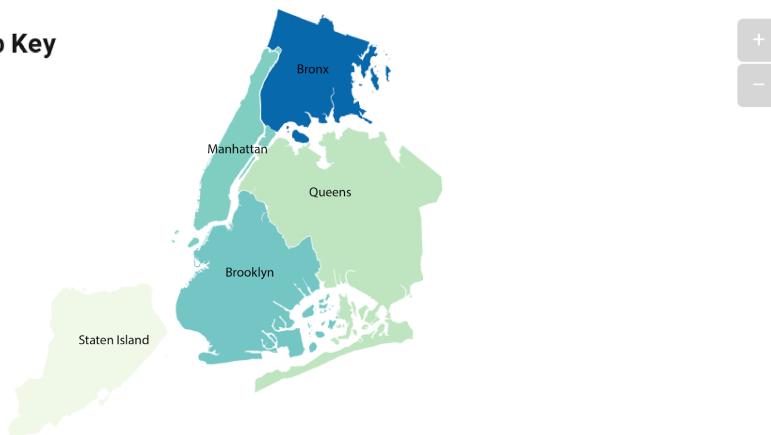
While overdose deaths rates citywide began to flatten to three percent in 2018, the number in Bronx increased nine percent from 2017 to 2018. It is also the only neighborhood with a consecutive rising number of unintentional overdose deaths since 2015. In 2018, Bronx had 391 overdose fatalities, making it the borough with the highest rate of overdose death in New York City.

2018 Overdose Death Rates by Boroughs of Residence

While The number and rate of overdose deaths decreased in New York City in 2018 after seven consecutive years of increases in overdose deaths, Bronx reported an increase of 9% leading the city in overdose deaths with 391 fatalities, making it not just the borough with the highest rate of overdose death in the city but also the borough to record the most deaths as a result of overdoses.

Overdose Death Rates Map Key

- 150.0
- 200.0
- 250.0
- 300.0
- 350.0



Map: Frida Cai • Source: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene • Created with Datawrapper

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Six of seven Bronx neighborhoods are in the top 15 with the highest rates of overdose deaths in the city. Particularly in Crotona-Tremont, Hunts Point-Mott Haven and Fordham-Bronx Park, overdose death rates were more than twice the city average; these three neighborhoods reported respectively 49.5, 49.2 and 40.5 unintentional drug poisoning (overdose) deaths per 100,000 residents, while the city average was 20.5, according to DOHMH.

Top 15 rates of unintentional drug overdose death rates by neighborhood in the New York City that exceed the city average, 2018

Out of the 15 neighborhoods with the highest rates of drug overdose deaths that higher than the city average, 6 are Bronx neighborhoods, which are marked in deep blue. Particularly in Crotona-Tremont, Hunts Point-Mott Haven and Fordham-Bronx Park, overdose death rates were more than double the city average. On the y-axis, the rates are per 100,000 residents.

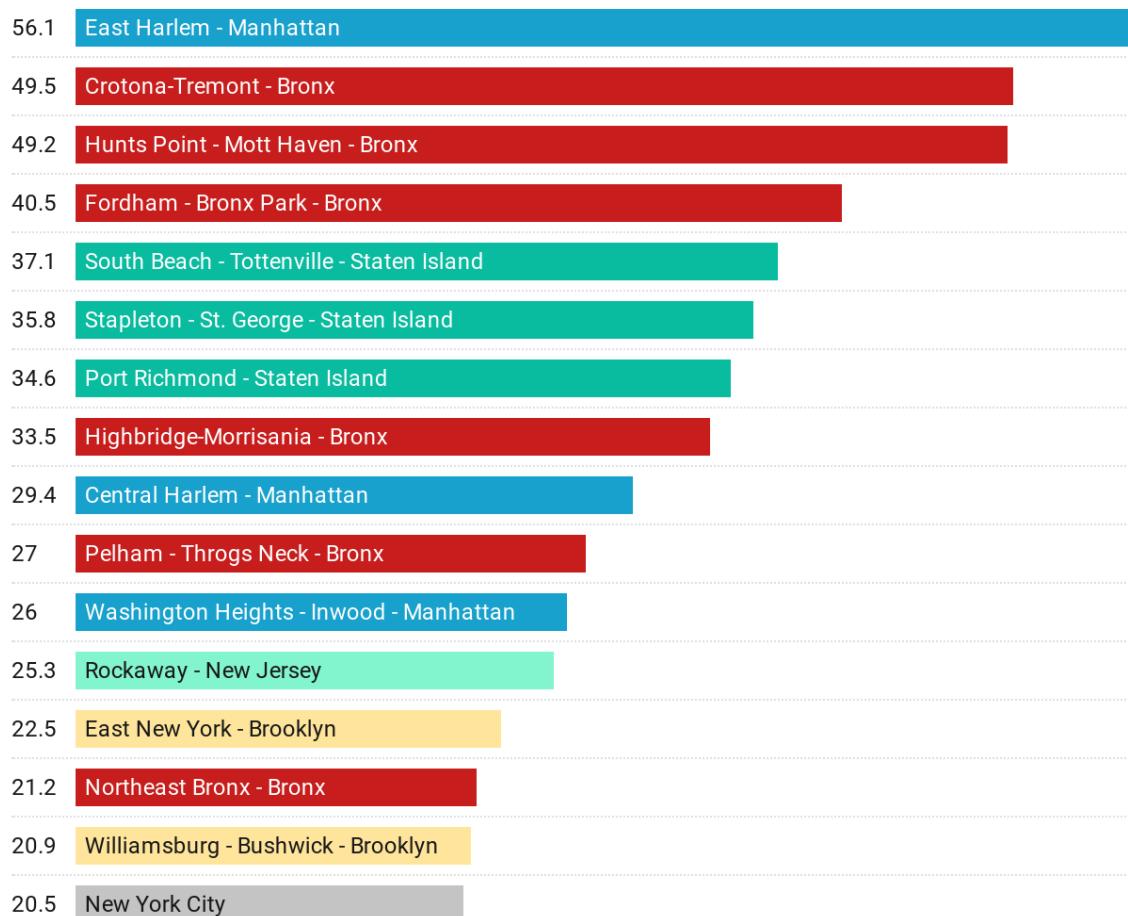


Chart: Frida Cai • Source: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene • Created with Datawrapper

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Wright explained that the relevant government agencies in New York City had talked to many places where the kiosks also exist beforehand and that deal with similar issues, namely syringe litter, substance use, homelessness and gentrification. Over the past few years, more and more cities began to install kiosks to collect used needles. Places include Boston, Miami, Eureka in California, Louisville in Kentucky and Charleston in West Virginia.

In San Francisco, the Department of Public Health (SFDPH) began to [install two](#) kiosks starting in May 2017, a year before Bronx adopted the same apparatus. There are currently [ten](#) kiosks and nine boxes in San Francisco to lower drug-related infection rates. After the installation, [new HIV diagnoses](#) declined 13% from 227 in 2017 to 197 in 2018.

According to Sharon Pipkin of San Francisco Department of Public Health HIV Epidemiology Section, the city does not have an analysis that estimates an attributable factor of how much needle kiosks contribute to the diminishing HIV diagnosis.

“Because the needle exchange and disposal program in San Francisco is quite dynamic, not all of them are operated by the Department of Public Health.” said Pipkin, “Some are by agencies who work with HIV prevention.”

According to her, there are many population-based programs that the city health department attribute to the decline of HIV diagnosis, like the availability of Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a new HIV prevention approach.

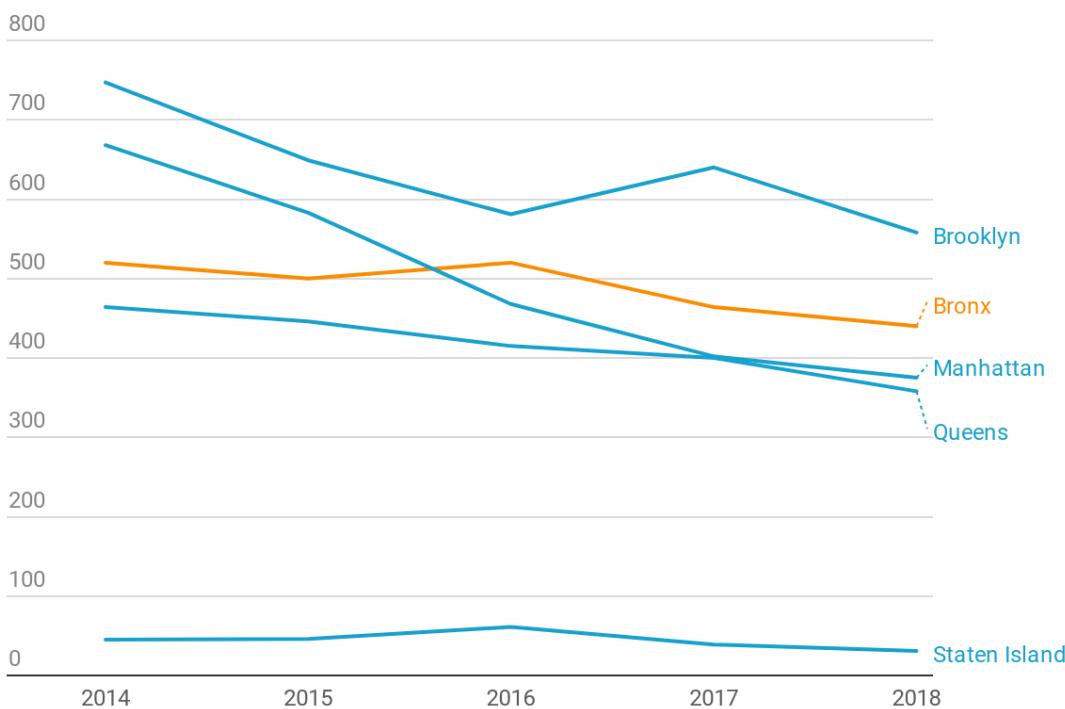
“PrEP does not belong to anyone,” said Pipkin, “It is a strategy towards helping people not become infected with HIV.”

In the Bronx, drug-related infection rates also declined after the kiosks program initiated.

In the neighborhood where [17](#) percent of the city population reside in, Hepatitis C infection rates dropped over 20% from 2017 to 2018; the most common reason people have Hepatitis C is because of sharing drug-use equipment. Moreover, HIV diagnoses from 2017 to 2018, though still amounts to almost 23 percent of the city total, edged down five percent to 440.

New HIV Diagnosis by boroughs of residences in New York City, 2014 - 2018

The annual number of new HIV diagnoses fell below 2000 in the city for the first time, with 1917 new HIV diagnoses in 2018 (an 11.1% decrease from 2017). In Bronx, where 17 percent of the city population reside in, HIV diagnoses from 2017 to 2018, though still amounts to almost 23 percent of the city total, edged down five percent to 440.



Brooklyn had been ranking the highest in new HIV diagnosis throughout the past five years, because of its largest population as a borough in the city. It has a population over double the Bronx's.

Chart: Frida Cai • Source: NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
• Created with Datawrapper

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The city invested a [total of \\$60 million annually](#) in HealingNYC with the goal to reduce opioid overdose deaths by 35% over the next five years, starting in 2020. Out of the \$60 million, [\\$8 million](#) was allocated to

the South Bronx to enhance HealingNYC and ThriveNYC strategies starting in January 2019 as a new program called Bronx Action Plan.

“ThriveNYC is about bringing in mental health services and resources to historically underserved populations,” said Wright. “Mental health and risky injections are always related.” The government packaged syringe disposal boxes and this initiative together based on their relevance with behavioral health and from a funding perspective, she added.

According to the Parks Department, the cost of the syringe disposal boxes program is \$150,000 per year, transferred from the Parks to the DOHMH. Each outdoor kiosk costs \$1,500 to install and bathroom drop-off box \$175.



The syringe disposal kiosk at St. Mary’s Park in Mott Haven Neighborhood of Bronx, New York. This was also the only one the author spotted in the park on January 20, 2020. Photo: Frida Cai

In December 2018, the Parks announced an expenditure of [\\$350,000](#) a year to hire [six](#) people to pick up used needles, starting in the beginning of 2019. It would also spend \$450,000 annually for specially trained mental-health workers to clean out the boxes and “provide life-saving services and connections to treatment and other care” to the addicts they meet in the parks. The Department of Sanitation would also address syringe litter in heavily affected areas outside of parks.

In October 2019, the Sanitation Department announced the addition of [six officers](#) to its Environmental Police Unit, the team responsible for picking up syringes from public sidewalks and streets among other duties in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan. The full team was on-board in December.

The hiring is a second phase to reinforce the kiosk program after the installation. “After some more conversations to see what is needed, we got extra funding and received more resources,” said Wright. She believed that it is still too early to tell if the program is successful.

"We need to follow the places where the intervention is effective and where not, following what is happening," said Wright. "The actual boxes only address one particular issue. But syringe exchange and access program also helps with what happens outside the park from a community perspective."

Public health experts hold a stand that harm reduction, though helpful, is not designed to solve all the problems completely. The approach refers to [public health policies](#) projected to lessen the negative social and/or physical consequences associated with various human behaviors, both legal and illegal.

A comprehensive 2004 [study](#) by the WHO found that "needle and syringe programs (NSPs) substantially and cost effectively reduce the spread of HIV among injection drug users (IDUs) and do so without evidence of exacerbating injecting drug use at either the individual or societal level."

Its antithesis is [abstinence-based model](#), which refers to the complete cessation of drug or alcohol use. Opponents point to low success rates. According to a national survey by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [data](#) from 2010 to 2013 shows that 24.5 percent of those who needed addiction treatment but didn't get it cited not being ready to stop using.

Another [study](#) in 2011 spearheaded by Hansel Tookes, an assistant professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine compared the syringe disposal rates among IDUs between San Francisco and Miami, the former with NSP, the latter without.

Both of them have sizable IDU populations and HIV prevalence estimates among IDUs. But the difference was that back then while San Francisco installed four NSPs which supplied an estimated 2.4 million sterile syringes annually, NSPs were forbidden in Miami.

After visual inspection walkthroughs, researchers found eight times the number of syringes on walkthroughs in Miami as in San Francisco. IDUs in San Francisco disposed of the majority of used syringes at NSPs.

The researchers therefore suggested that NSPs are a significant means of collecting used syringes and do not increase the amount of publically discarded used syringes. Further, given prior studies that NSPs help reduce the risk of viral transmission among IDUs, this study suggests that NSPs may also help reduce the risk of transmission to community members at large.

Dr. Silvia Martins, the director of the Substance Use Epidemiology Unit of the Department of Epidemiology at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and of the Policy and Health Initiatives on Opioids and other Substances interdisciplinary group (PHIOS), thinks that the syringe disposal kiosks are good harm reduction strategies.

"A syringe disposal box would help to counter the opioid epidemic. The approach of harm reduction should be considered constructive," said Dr. Martins.

But when asked about the low usage rate of the collection kiosks, Martins said there might be a stigma towards using them. "I am also not aware of how well advertised they were among locals."

Miller reinforced the idea of community fear towards the kiosks. "People are instinctively nervous that there are drug users living in their neighborhood. They are afraid of the idea of syringe disposal or even low costs of syringes that would increase HIV infections or drug use."

Meanwhile, Dr. Guohua Li, the Finster Professor of Epidemiology and Anesthesiology and the founding director of the Center for Injury Epidemiology and Prevention at Columbia, holds a more conservative opinion regarding the effectiveness of kiosks.

Li affirmatively agreed that the problem of drug usage could be alleviated if the policymakers offer sterile needles and safety disposal apparatuses, based on evidence accumulated from research in the past three

decades. But he thinks the impact is limited and he does not have an answer on how to increase the impact of syringe programs.

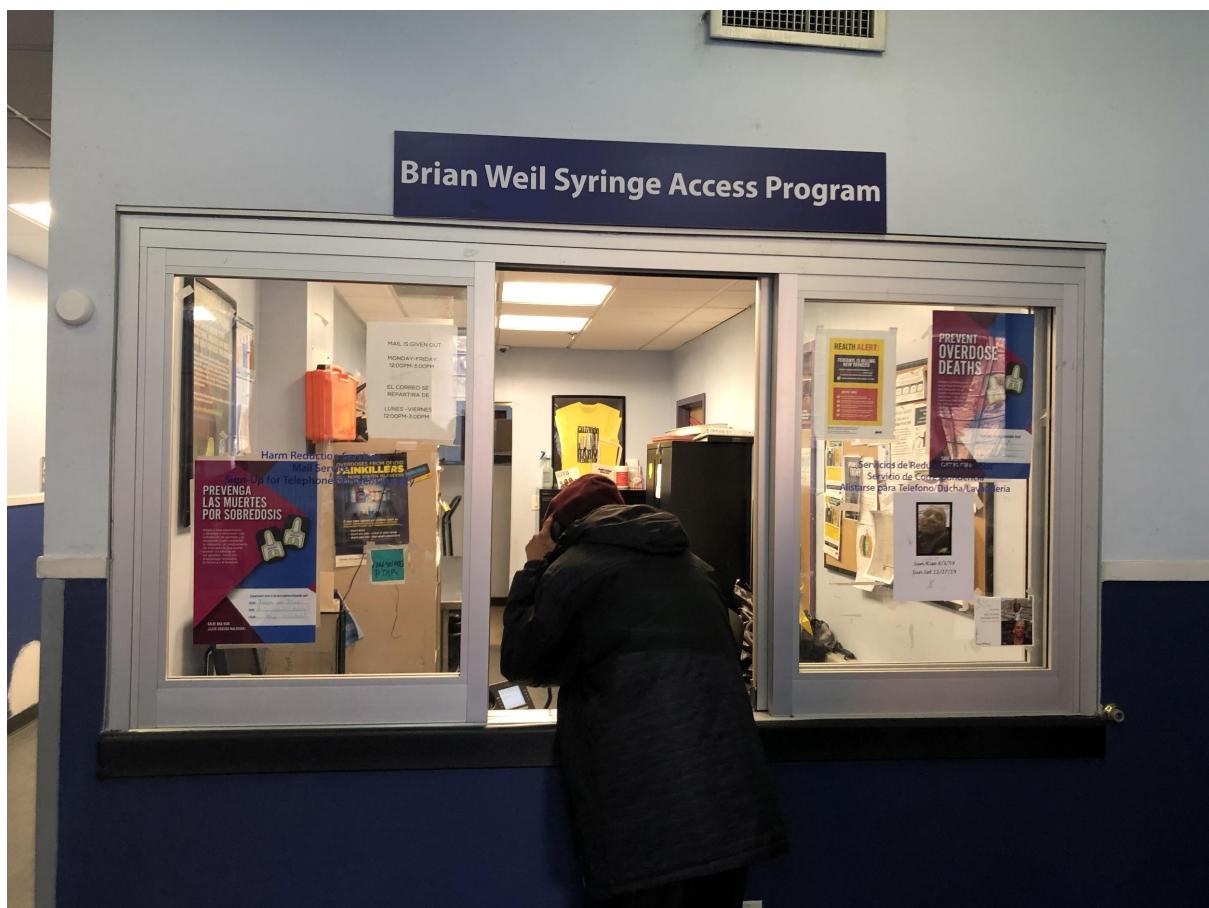
"I doubt there is anyone who does (have the answer)," said Li, "To increase its impact, you need to overcome at least two challenges. First, pervasive social stigma attached to the drug use problem, which is the underlying reason for community resistance to syringe exchange/disposal programs. Second, it is hard to reach drug user population groups."

He believes that the two challenges are interrelated. "A lot of drug users are hidden in the 'closet'. It is difficult for any public health interventions to reach them."

Li further explained that in general, harm reduction is a practical public health approach with proven effectiveness. Use of seatbelts and airbags to mitigate injury severity in car crashes is a good example.

"Safety syringe disposal kiosks could be one of the multifaceted solutions to the drug use problem. It should be part of a wider harm reduction program, namely needle exchanges where people can get clean needles and safe injection spaces."

But this harm reduction program is not a silver bullet and its effectiveness is quite modest, said Li.



Inside the BOOM! Health Harm Reduction Agency on East 144th Street in the South Bronx, New York, a syringe access booth offered clean syringes and exchanges used needles with sterile ones on January 24, 2020. Photo: Frida Cai

[Syringe Service Programs \(SSPs\)](#) in New York City operate in all five boroughs and provides services at 14 storefront locations, on 33 mobile vans, and via Peer Delivered Syringe Exchange (PDSE). Most participants resided in either Manhattan (38%) or the Bronx (29%).

In May 2018, Mayor De Blasio announced to open four [safe injection sites](#) in the City as a one-year pilot program to reduce the number of opioid overdose deaths. Located in Washington Heights, Midtown West, Longwood in the Bronx, and Park Slope in Brooklyn, the four sites would be built into existing needle exchanges without city funding. The sites have yet to be opened.

"The syringe exchange and disposal program gets a lot of attention because of the controversy," Li explained, "It affects only a small number of drug users, as indicated by the Parks Department."

"There has been an increase in drug use, many of which is related to the opioid crisis. It makes drugs cheap and easy. Moreover the substance is transitioning to different drugs. Meth is coming back and it is not under control," said Professor Miller.

Miller believes that the government's harm reduction unit is scaling up their presence, including the syringe disposal containers, because of the increasing use of heroin. "Heroin is the most cost-effective way of using drugs. This round of injection is at an increasing level, not just in Bronx, but nationwide. It really hit hard."

"Over the last year in the Bronx, there has been a big increase in hospitalization among injecting drug users. I mean, how sick do you have to be to be admitted to a hospital these days? Because there is no syringe exchange, we have to start all over again. People need community outreach."

"People still litter and smoke, but a lot of people try to do the right thing," said Miller, "You cannot say that you find needles outside, so there are no good things inside."

"You are meeting people where they are right now. They do not want to get sick or HIV. They want clean syringes and a place to put used needles. We need an integrated approach into treatments right where they are. It all depends on where they are. The syringe disposal program would have a huge impact on disease transmission."

Master's project postscript

Frida Cai

During the end of 2019 and January 2020, I was working on my second MP proposal: the highly-vacant skyscrapers in China and their impact on the world economy. However, after extensive research and local investigations, I decided, along with my advisor, to let go of this story, because it was not practical and did not have an outline clear enough.

Given that there was only two months away from my final draft submission, my advisor suggested me to look into the datasets at NYC Open Data for a local story. We eventually chose the syringe disposal kiosks by the City Parks Department over restaurant inspection results.

Fortunately, it turned out that the dataset was interesting and practical enough to generate a compelling story. After some research, I interviewed extensively in the local neighborhoods in the South Bronx and talked to local residents, government agencies and community leaders. I also got enormous help from academic experts on substance use and epidemiology.

But most importantly, I could not complete my project without the help from my advisor, Noya, and Associate Dean, Melanie, even though the school had imposed an academic warning on me. I cried hard when I got the warning first, but later realized that my failure in reaching out for help was the ultimate reason for a warning. So that is a really meaningful lesson and probably one of the most important takeaways from my graduate education.

If there is anything I would like to share with the future students, it would be: never be afraid of asking stupid questions or sharing incomplete work for feedback. There is no such thing like perfection. Finally, work on your imposter syndrome. You are smart and hardworking enough to be admitted, so do not be impeded by your own fear.

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Mistakes DidiChuxing made that may fuel crimes against women

by TONGXU CAI

url: <https://alltechasia.com/mistakes-didichuxing-made-may-fuel-crimes-women/>



A recent murder of a 21-year-old stewardess during a carpool leads the ride hailing giant Didi Chuxing to overhaul its services.

Since May 12, Didi temporarily suspended its carpool service, Didi Hitch, after a 21-year-old Li Mingzhu was murdered using the service and later found with more than 20 stab wounds in central Zhengzhou. Two days later, police found a body in a local river belonging to the driver suspected of killing the woman.

On May 16, Didi added safety measures for carpooling, limiting the services to only be available during the daytime. Hitch will also hide both the drivers' and passengers' personal data and profile pictures. In addition, not only will facial recognition be compulsory to verify the drivers' identity, but also a potential video recording feature might be introduced.

Most importantly, personalized tags and ratings features will be axed. Previously, Hitch let drivers and passengers rate each others' profile pictures and tag images with labels such as "beauties", "college girl", "not dressing much", "low self-defense." There have

been repeated posts from female passengers, including minors, reporting harassment from drivers, to whom the passenger ratings are exclusively shared.

When Didi launched its carpool service for the first time in 2015, there were reviews comparing Didi Hitch with China's largest dating app Momo, musing that Didi's consumption scenario combined with its social demand is the next trendy O2O business model.

For instance, on a past Chinese valentine's day Qixi Festival, Didi published posters with slogans, saying "Let's date: how carpool should be played", "Be yours sooner or later", etc. On all these posters, drivers were all portrayed as men, since this is the only way to encourage part-time drivers to accept hitch requests that are less rewarding money-wise.

In the above slogans Didi misplaced its position in the carpool service as a platform enabling drivers to interact with female passengers. Hence, what truly got Didi into trouble is that by including users in an enclosed consumption scenario, it acts like an accomplice to these crimes against female passengers.

On the other hand, there are also some controversial measures in this overhaul, specifically the non-optional recording is being deemed debatable.

According to Didi's statement, not only will a video recording potentially be installed during rides but also these recordings could be in the pipeline too. Though the company insists the encrypted data will be stored only on its servers and will be deleted after 72 hours, this approach fuels a privacy concern, which is already being widely discussed given that both the state and enterprise are massively integrating big-data technology. Thus, is Didi violating privacy in order to protect privacy? By overly catering to consumers with flamboyant functions, does shared economy realize or substantially protect user interests?

After all, this case poses a real challenge for Didi, who has already been facing competition from Meituan Dianping, which recently entered the ride-sharing market and acquired bike-sharing startup Mobike in April. While being occupied with its ambitious overseas expansion, how could Didi maintain its trust with its already-existent 450 million users?

(Top photo from unsplash.com)

Jul 01, 2017 01:28 PM

Hunger for Homegrown Content Helps Chinese Reality TV Shows Edge Past Foreign Rivals

By Cai Tongxu



A screenshot of the first episode of the second season of "Stand By Me," with an advertisement for Vitasoy appearing in the bottom-right corner. At the time of the screenshot, the episode had been viewed 120 million times.

Would a Victoria's Secret supermodel take good care of your pet while you're away from home for a few days? This is the tough question being tackled in "Stand by Me," China's hottest online variety show that has attracted hundreds of millions of yuan in investment.

After years of being accused of ripping off foreign television hits, Chinese variety show producers have started scripting their own templates to feed the hunger for homegrown content.

"Chinese variety shows are now shifting from making copycat shows or purchasing foreign templates to creating original content," said Cao Zhigao, chief operating officer of Star China Media. "Now the time and conditions are right for locally made variety shows to make their mark."

Dwindling viewership for foreign adaptations and favorable policies supporting domestic production houses are fueling this trend. Investors have also turned variety shows into their new battleground after China's cinema box office sales flatlined in 2016 amid stiff competition from online video-streaming sites.

But attempts by advertisers to control the storyline and celebrities who demand a lion's share of the production budget threaten to snub out this creative spark.

The variety genre that includes reality TV shows, quizzes, debates and celebrity gossip has exploded on small screens across the country over the past decade. There were just such 10 shows in 2005, but the number jumped to more than 250 last year, according to Chinese media outlet Film and TV Observer. After the government allowed state-backed satellite TV channels to outsource production to private studios at the turn of

the century, Chinese producers have tried to replicate the success of international franchises such as "The Voice" and "Running Man" at home.

"Within five years (starting in 2005), Chinese buyers had purchased nearly all the super variety models from Europe, U.S., Japan, South Korea and some other countries," said Cao. His company helped kick start this global shopping spree with the acquisition of the successful singing show, "The Voice," that had franchises in more than 60 countries.



Judges Liu Huan, Na Ying, Jay Chou and Eason Chen appear at a press conference on June 6 for the second season of "Sing! China" in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.

But locally produced versions of Western and Korean franchises that combine the exotic with the familiarity of local aesthetics started losing their sheen starting in 2015. "Running Man," a popular South Korean show that asks celebrities to solve puzzles as they progress along an obstacle course, saw its viewer ratings drop by 40% from 2014 to 2016. That was according to ratings on Douban, a website similar to Rotten Tomatoes that relies on user reviews to rank films, books and TV shows. Viewer ratings for "Sing! China," a knock-off of "The Voice of China" series, slid from 4.4 in 2015 to 2.8 in 2016.

The fall of "Sing! China," produced by Cao, rattled advertisers and investors for another reason. Cao and his crew had broken ranks with the foreign brand owner of "The Voice" series after **a protracted legal battle** amid sky-rocketing franchising fees. The original "The Voice of China" series, produced in collaboration of Dutch company Talpa Global, had attracted more than 120 million TV viewers in China, while another 400 million streamed it online. But the spectacular crash of the copycat show after the Chinese producers went solo exposed the risks of trying to adapt Western models and pushed many investors to look for a winning formula closer to home. This was when they noticed a handful of long-established Chinese variety shows such as "Day Day Up," which promotes traditional Chinese art and handcrafting, and "Happy Camp" that had managed to sustain high viewer ratings for nearly a decade.

What started off as a quite trickle, quickly gathered momentum, pushing domestically produced shows into the limelight.

"Day Day Up" received 1 billion yuan (\$147.52 million) in sponsorship from Kans, a Shanghai skincare brand, in October 2016. Advertisers also started pouring money into less-well known program that portrayed values cherished by Chinese viewers. For example, "The Greatest Love," a reality show about filial piety, got 400 million yuan in investment last year.



Victoria's Secrets model He Sui appears in an episode of the reality television show "Running Man" in April 2016.

This wave of interest also spawned hits that delve deeper into Chinese culture, such as "The Chinese Poetry Conference." The 10-episode series made **stars of poetry lovers** who were well-versed in ancient Chinese classics and attracted nearly 1.2 billion views despite the absence of any celebrities.

Meanwhile, a government rule in mid-2016 that stopped satellite TV stations from broadcasting more than one foreign-format show each year has cleared the airwaves for local creations.

Advertising 'sugar daddies'

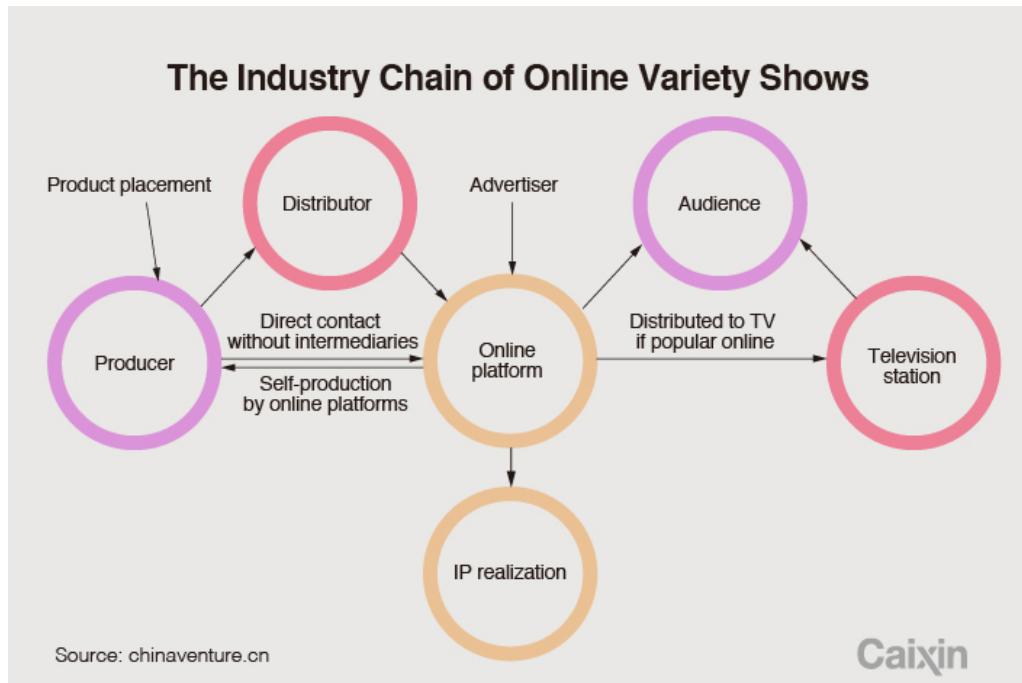
When Zhu Hukuai, the producer of "Stand by Me," was looking for the next big idea for a variety show, he didn't start by brainstorming with a group of script writers. Instead, his team did a market survey to see how Chinese consumers liked to spend money. After scanning through several sectors including fashion and cosmetics, they zeroed in on the country's pet industry.

Pet ownership in China was growing at a whopping 20% each year, with the rise of young households with dual incomes, but no children, the team found. And they were ready to splurge money on dog spas that offered a 480 yuan mud bath for their terriers.

The production team went to the drawing board and designed a variety show that not just entertains, but also helps loosen the purse strings of pet owners. The show focuses on how celebrities care for pets left under their charge. Many of the animals had their own pet castles, branded clothes and accessories. Although the show has only been aired for two weeks, it has already fueled a wave of demand. Local pet owners were asking Chinese students or homemakers in the U.S. to buy dog leashes or Simpsons T-shirts for their little wards and courier them to China on online shopping forums.

"Data from first two episodes of "Stand by Me" told us that about 70% of the viewers were female young adults," said Zhu, CEO of Xinchi Media.

Other Chinese producers were also scripting shows to create hype about an industry or a sponsor's brands. This included the recent runaway hit focused on China's emerging home-deco market. And advertisers, weary of 30-second commercials or subtle product placements, were lapping up the idea.



"Stand by Me" has inked advertising deals with Myfoodie, a pet food company, and Vitasoy, which makes soy milk and green tea beverages. And during the first 10 minutes of the first episode of "Stand by Me," beverages from Vitasoy appear 25 times.

Variety shows have also spawned successful mobile games and clothing brands. For example, when Chinese heartthrob Zheng Kai accidentally passed gas while on the set of "Running Man" in 2014, it became a trending topic on social media. Within a week, the star launched his own clothing line and used a mushroom cloud as its brand to make fun of himself. The clothes, specially the jeans, sold like hot cakes.

The pet show, "Stand By Me," has devoted a sizable chunk of the program showing celebrities walking 10,000 steps each day with their pets wearing Vitasoy's pedometer.

Suffocated producers

In addition to pressure from advertisers to integrate their brands into the story, producers were also crushed by celebrities who demand a lion's share of the production budget.

Zhu says 60% of the production cost for "Stand by Me" went to the celebrity pet keepers that included Victoria's Secret super model He Sui.

"We were able to cut back on the celebrity paychecks after switching from a satellite TV show to an online-only show," he said.

But sky-high celebrity pay remains a hotly debated topic on Chinese social media. According to data from [Tencent](#), which has investments in several large video-streaming platforms, rock singer Wang Feng made 12 million yuan for appearing as a judge in one season of "The Voice of China" in 2014.

Producers also have had to step gingerly to avoid topics deemed taboo by authorities such as homosexuality and time travel. Last year, China's media regulator also banned reality television shows from featuring the children of celebrities, spelling the end for one of the country's most popular prime-time programs that showed celebrity dads traveling with their children.

Despite these challenges, Chinese variety show producers say they are continuing to explore new possibilities.

Cao from Star Media says his team is experimenting with introducing virtual reality elements into variety shows that allow viewers to feel like they are on the set, or even augmented reality, similar to what was used in Pokémon games. But he declined to offer details as the projects are still under development.

After years of having their eyeballs abused by copycat shows, Chinese viewers were now yearning for something different, said Zhu. "Only good content is what matters ultimately," he said.

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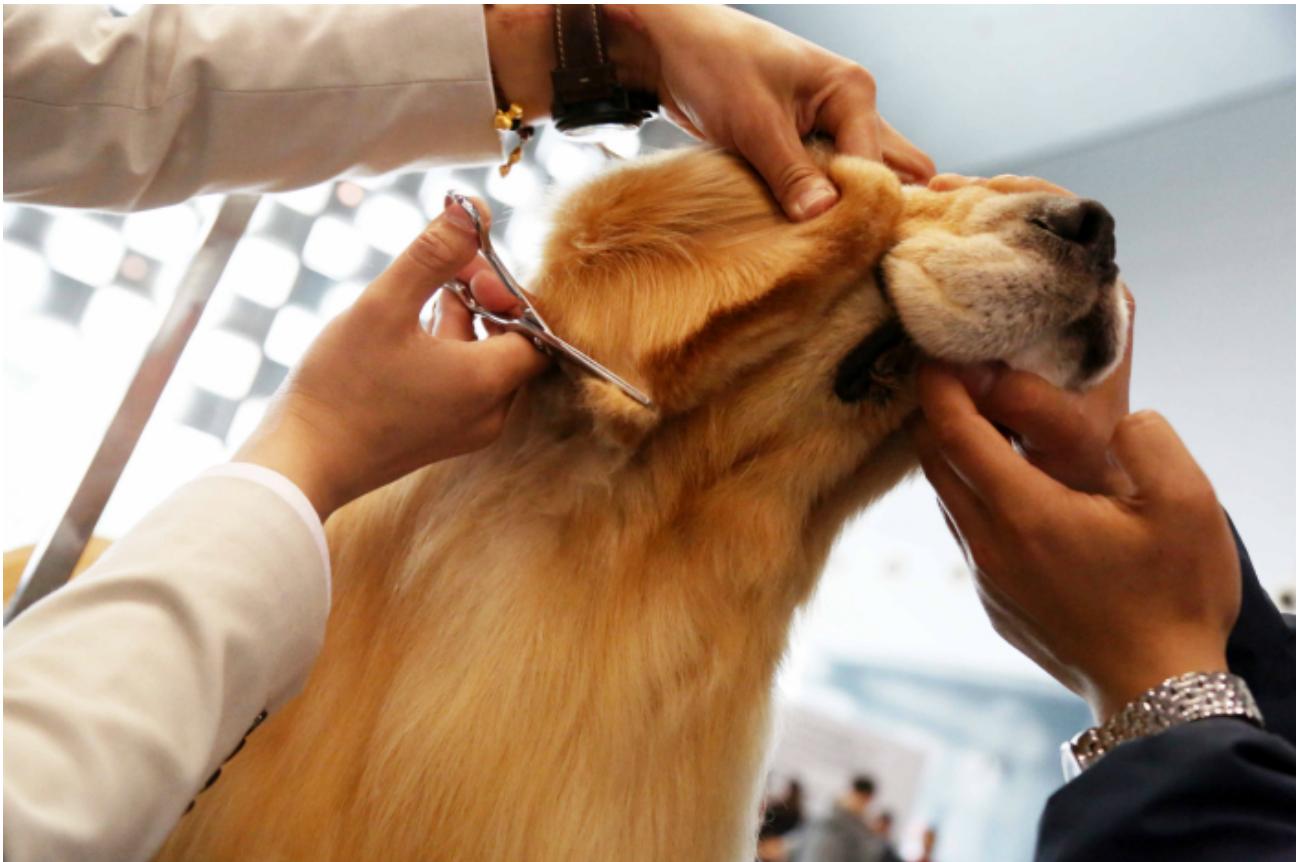


Jul 21, 2017 05:49 PM

BUSINESS & TECH

Is China Poised to Become the Top Dog in Luxury Pet Services?

By Cai Tongxu



A dog gets a trim at the Pet Expo at the Shanghai World Expo Exhibition & Convention Center on March 17, 2016. Photo: IC

(Beijing) — In one of the largest pet cemeteries on the outskirts of Beijing lies a dog's tomb made of white marble — the material used only for ancient royal gravestones. This symbol of love that reminds one of the cool white marble coffin inside the Taj Mahal cost the pet owner more than 30,000 yuan (\$4,440), according to the guard at this graveyard that smelled of cat litter.

The rise in disposable incomes, the number of rich elderly with “empty nests,” and “double income, no kids” households — or DINK families — are fueling pet ownership and the growth of luxury pet services in China.

Once banned as a bourgeois pastime, pets have now become a symbol of financial success and a way to fill an emotional void for some in the country. Consultancy Euromonitor forecast the pet care sector to grow by more than 22% year-on-year to \$2.5 billion by the end of 2017, outpacing growth in the world's biggest market, the United States, which is expected to grow just over 3.7% this year to \$46 billion. According to Euromonitor's forecast, China will become the world's fourth largest pet market in 2021 after the U.S., Brazil and UK.

Pet ownership in the country has more than doubled since the turn of the century and stood at 100 million in 2015, according to Goumin.com, a leading online forum for China's animal lovers.

A survey by the site that year showed that 3 out of 5 pet owners in China had a dog, and only 1 in 5 had a cat. The third-most-popular pet was a turtle.

“Since people have started to view their animals more like children, the demand for training and pampering services has turned rigid and wasn't too price-sensitive,” according to the report.

One in 10 surveyed pet owners spent more than 10,000 yuan per year on pet massages, manicures and imported pet food, while 19% spent 3,000 to 5,000 yuan, the study found. Given that over half the pet owners in the country were between the ages of 25 and 35, and the average annual salary of a white-collar worker in Beijing in that age group was about 120,000 yuan, this shows that some spent over 8% of their salary on their little wards.



A guard cleans a marble tomb at Baifu Pets' Paradise Cemetery in Beijing on July 10. Photo: Cai Tongxu / Caixin

China's pet-rearing habits have certainly passed the stage in which one fed one's Pekingese with some diced chicken liver or corn-flour flatbread. As many families switched to specialized food options, the market for dog food in China is estimated to grow by 182% from 2013 to 2017 to 6.5 billion yuan, according to Euromonitor.

A Shanghai-based manufacturer named Royal Canine was the top dog in the country's pet food industry, closely followed by global brands like Nestle's Purina and U.S. food giant Mars Inc.'s Pedigree.

Small artisan bakeries have also popped up in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing, which offer chicken mousse cakes or mixed-berry cheesecake made with New Zealand yogurt — especially for puppy birthday parties.

Besides the daily meals and occasional treats, pets also required vitamin supplements, calcium tablets, omega-3 and even dentifrice. One pet store in Sanlitun, a busy shopping hub in downtown Beijing, sells mouthwash for dogs that can give canines minty breath for 12 hours. One of these bottles cost over 240 yuan, the price of a meal at an upscale restaurant in the area. According to the Goumin.com survey, spending on these nonfood items including clothes, toys and "plush cat castles," accounted for 60% of all expenses on pets — and the percentage is growing.



A pet owner dresses her teddy-bear dog with a navy blue top on Thursday at the Smellme pet store in the Sanlitun Soho shopping center in Beijing. Photo: Cai Tongxu / Caixin

China's demand for high-quality pet accessories has pushed up cross-border e-commerce, with a premium puppy stroller from South Korea being sold for 3,747 yuan on shopping site [Taobao](#). It has also mobilized an army of "daiguo," or Chinese students or housewives living abroad, who will buy high-end trainers from the U.S., or a handmade dress with lace and fake pearls from Japan and deliver it to one's doorstep.

Another sector that has benefited is pet spas. Smellme, a high-end pet store in the Sanlitun Soho shopping center, plays a video showing a French bulldog, partially wrapped in a white, fluffy towel, enjoying a fragrant oil massage with its eyes squinting in pleasure. According to the price list behind the front desk, this massage costs 588 yuan. The company also offers mud baths, herbal baths and hair styling, in addition to the mandatory fur trimming.

Despite the small apartment sizes given real estate prices in major Chinese cities, many pet owners opted for bigger dogs such as golden retrievers, huskies and Labradors, according to data from Your Pet, an industry information provider from the southern city of Guangzhou. A few even opted for sturdier animals, including German shepherds, Alaskan malamutes or Great Pyrenees.

The upkeep of a large dog usually costs more than 3,000 yuan a month, according to a manager at Nobelpet, another pet store located on the same building as Smellme.

She underplayed the hefty price tag, saying, "Expensive? That is not expensive at all!"



A refrigerator holds pet pastries at the Smellme pet store at the Sanlitun Soho shopping center in Beijing on Thursday. Photo: Cai Tongxu / Caixin

Meanwhile, a couple entered, holding a schnauzer. They asked for a bath and later chose the kind of pedicure they wanted for their dog.

At one end of the store a teddy-bear dog, shaking badly, was getting its hair shaved by two pet stylists. On the price board, stylists were classified as A-grade, B-grade or those that could prep your pup for a beauty pageant. The pageant option could cost up to 1,300 yuan per session. On the other end of the store were kennels where pet owners can leave their wards for a few days when they are out of town, and where a stressed employee snapped at a boarding dog for barking too much.

A costly ‘ancestor’

The rise in disposable incomes, particularly among rich elderly parents trying to fill their empty nests, DINK families and white-collar female workers who opt to stay single, have fueled spending on luxury pet care, according to Deng Yuanyuan, a researcher from CKGSB Knowledge, a part of Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business.

Another reason is that Chinese students, who went overseas to study after the country opened up in the 1980s, brought back with them Japanese or Western ideas of pet care to China.

According to Deng's research into [pet-related consumer behavior](#) China's pet industry has also been through “the three stages of maturity,” similar to that in Europe or Japan, and this has changed people's attitudes toward animals.

“At the primary stage, animals were only needed to fulfill domestic or functional roles, including watching over homes or catching mice,” she said. “At the second stage, the concept of ‘raising’ an animal comes in, and pet owners would set aside part of their income for pet food and other basic needs of animals. Finally, at the third stage, the existence of pets breeds an independent industry, which includes all kinds of different merchandise, just like those for human beings.”



A red lotus-shaped speaker, powered by solar energy, plays Buddhist chants for a deceased pet at the Baifu Pets' Paradise Cemetery in Beijing. Photo: Cai Tongxu / Caixin

While some affluent buyers are willing to splurge as much as \$3,200 on an extravagant dog collar, according to the product catalog at Smellme pet spa, some complain about the rising cost of products as the industry matures. “My pet’s medicines and shampoos are costlier than mine,” wrote one Weibo user with the online name Vitaminee-D. “It costs 10 times the money to get the fur trimmed on my dog compared to my haircut. It’s almost as if I was making offerings to a precious ancestor!”

But the extreme lengths that some owners go to pamper their pets was also linked to loneliness and stress endemic to city life.

A graduate student in psychology at Beijing Normal University who provided only her surname, Zhang, said, “I basically treat my cat Jianguo the same way I would treat a very important friend.”

“My cat brings me great comfort and joy. Most importantly, he offers me many new experiences, which I’ve never had when I interact with humans.”

“For example, with humans, I might be desperate to reason with others and to prove them wrong,” she said. “But thanks to Jianguo, I’ve learned the happiness of compromising for another being.”

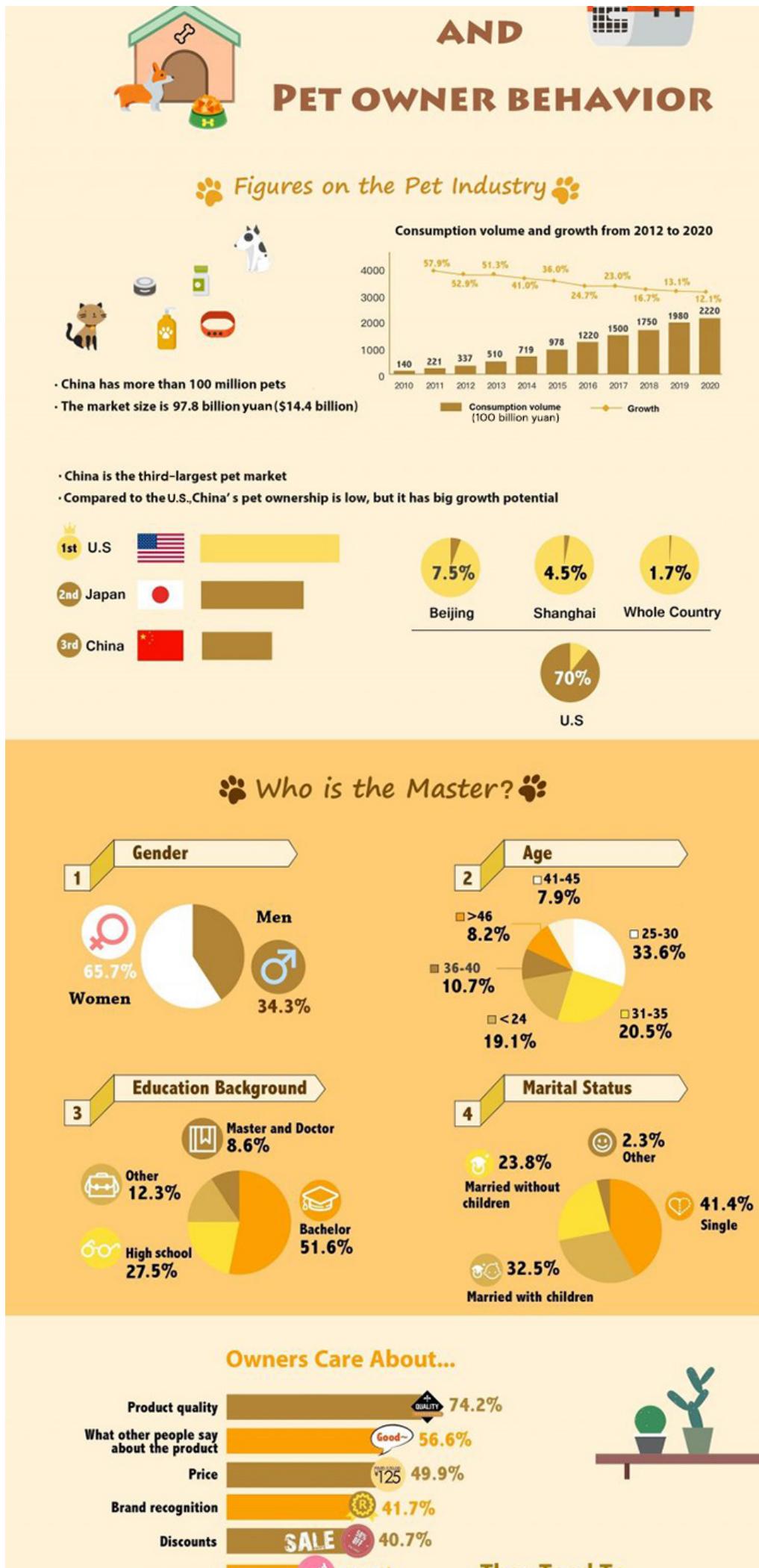
“I do know quite a few people who could have a great time with cats but not with humans,” she added, trying to explain why some owners may attribute human traits to animals or believe they had humanlike demands such as the need to have a gravestone.

In the nondescript cemetery in Beijing’s Changping district, a freshly dug grave that was barely 1.6 square meters (17.2 square feet) cost 3,000 yuan, according to the guard. The bigger ones were priced at 5,000 yuan or more. The marble tomb for the royal canine sprawled over four big plots and had the words “Mommy’s little princess, I’ll love you forever!” carved on it. The owner had also placed more than a dozen stuffed animals and other toys the pet loved in a glass case built atop the grave. The funeral service also includes transportation, according to the guard, who estimated that it would cost 300 yuan one-way to pick up a deceased pet from downtown Beijing, which is an hour’s drive from the cemetery.

“We have plenty of returning customers,” he said. “That household over there has buried seven pets already.”

The sound of Buddhist chanting could be heard blaring out of small devices on some graves. According to the guard, the mini-speakers placed on a few tombs are powered by solar energy.







Where Do They Spend Money? 🐾🐾



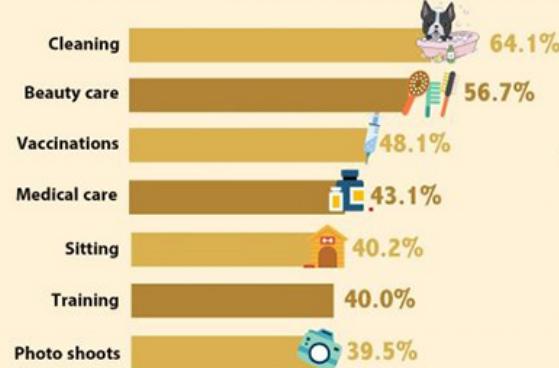
99.8% of pet owners are willing to spend money on goods specifically for their pet. On average, a dog costs 450 yuan per month, and a cat cost a bit more at 488 yuan.



Although e-commerce is quite developed, bricks-and-mortar pet shops are still a very important channel. 32.8% say they buy from offline stores more often than online, because there is more choice, greater convenience and free samples to try before buying.



They Also Are Interested in Pet Services Such As...



Source: CKGSB Knowledge

• Research by Deng Yuanyuan. Graphic by Zhao Qianwen/CKGSB Knowledge

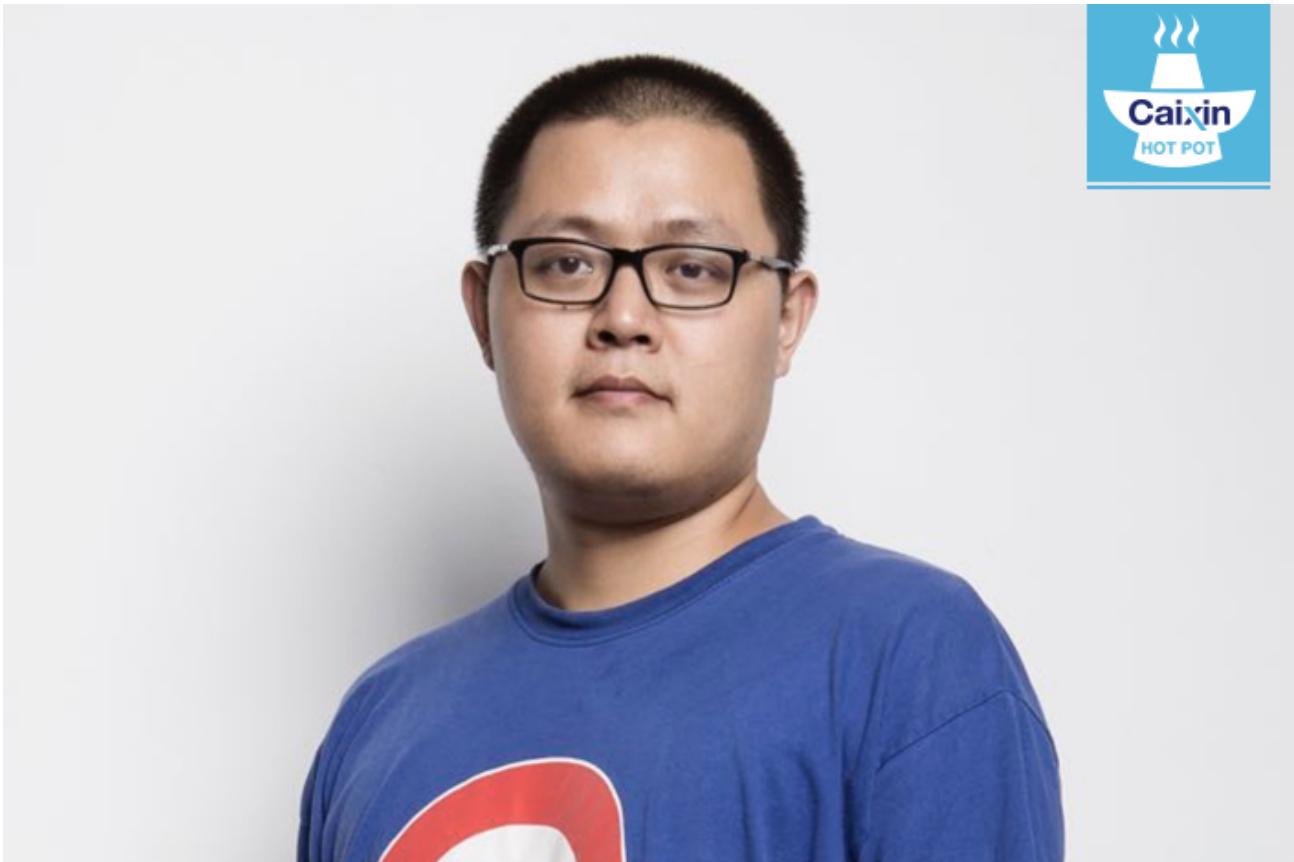
Correction: This article has been corrected to say that according to Euromonitor's forecast, China will become the world's fourth largest pet market in 2021 after the U.S., Brazil and UK. An earlier version said "according to Euromonitor's forecast, China will surpass Japan to become the world's second-biggest pet market by 2020."

Aug 25, 2017 06:20 PM

PEOPLE

Is China the Wild West of Consumer Gene Testing?

By Cai Tongxu



WeGene Co-founder Chen Gang. Photo: WeGene

Genetic testing services that promise to find whether your child is the next Mozart or matchmaking services that help you find the most “genetically compatible” partner have made headlines in China in recent years.

That is because the multibillion dollar consumer gene testing industry in the country is still in its infancy and regulations to govern its growth aren’t still in place.

“There are plenty of different tests directly for consumers, worldwide. But there are still many unresolved issues. For instance, gene testing for the purpose of talent detection doesn’t have a scientific basis and isn’t ethically sound,” said Chen Gang, co-founder and CEO at WeGene, a direct-to-consumer genetic testing startup in Shenzhen. “In the early years, these companies got themselves into trouble and later became tools for pyramid selling.”

Chen received his doctorate in computer science from Central South University in Changsha, Hunan province. For his degree, he concentrated on bioinformatics — the science of analyzing complex biological data like genetic codes. He has also worked at Shenzhen-based BGI, one of the world’s largest genome sequencing companies, as its vice president of internet and cloud computing.

Gene testing is the next frontier in personalized health care, Chen said. It will allow doctors to forecast major health risks such as cancer and could prompt individuals with a high risk of developing certain diseases to alter their lifestyles. By referring to a gene report, both doctors and individuals could also more accurately choose medicines or control the dosage of drugs.

At present, one can purchase a basic gene-testing kit online for about 1,000 yuan (\$150.10).

Despite the name, this “kit” is only a tube to store your saliva so you can send it to the testing company. This reporter, who tried an introductory package, received the results in 30 days. The findings traced my ancestry to Mongolian roots, which came as a surprise to me, but didn’t mention anything about my Manchu grandmother. It also hinted that my chance of dying from sudden cardiac arrest was three times the average. It also included a report on my reactions to various types of medicines, which I could barely understand, but I assume would be helpful to my doctors.



WeGene's headquarters in Shenzhen. Photo: WeGene

Critics of the direct-to-consumer gene testing services say that the findings are not as accurate as people imagine, and could vary based on the method of testing.

But despite these concerns, China’s genetics testing is one of the fastest growing markets in the world, estimated to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 37% in the next five years through 2021, according to a report by China Investment Consulting Corp. from earlier this year.

The company forecast that the market will grow to 42 billion yuan by 2021, up from 13.3 billion yuan in 2017, fueled by a surge in cancer cases in recent years.

In a telephone interview with Caixin, Chen talked about the untapped potential for consumer gene testing in China, how the country compares with mature markets like the U.S., and ethical issues such as privacy due to the lack of clear regulations. The following are edited excerpts of that interview.

Caixin: What's the growth potential for commercial gene testing in China?

Chen Gang: I have a great interest in doing genomic data analysis. During my PhD, I noticed the vast gap (in this field) between the U.S. and China. As a matter of fact, China is better in prenatal DNA testing, but we lag far behind in terms of personal genome services for consumers. WeGene has merely tested tens and thousands of people, while U.S. companies have done millions. This leaves a huge room for growth. For instance, if we

apply AI to medical services, genome data would be a prerequisite for this. Everyone should be able to access his or her own gene data at the time of birth.

What is gene testing mostly used for? Is it for personal uses like predicting potential future illnesses or commercial collaborations with other companies that use it for drug discovery?

Many people don't know about this immature market (for gene testing). It is also still rather costly for most people. Our customers are generally middle class from first-tier cities, and a few from developed second-tier ones, aged 20 to 40. These people usually work in the fields of finance, bio-science, computing and technology; individuals who are working in the health care sector are the largest group among those demanding personal gene tests. Ours is still a small company, with a limited advertising budget. Moreover, regulators have not introduced any clear definition for our products.



A basic gene-testing kit bought online. The kit allows users to send their saliva to be tested. Photo: Cai Tongxu/Caixin

Commercial gene-testing services have sparked controversy the world over. What are the regulatory and ethical issues in this industry?

There are plenty of different tests directly for consumers, worldwide. But there are still many unresolved issues. For instance, gene tests for the purpose of talent detection don't have a scientific basis and are not ethically sound. In the early years, these companies got themselves into trouble and later became tools for pyramid selling. This creates a negative impression of the entire industry. We could say that the regulators are being positive, but they don't necessarily have a holistic approach or understanding of the gene testing industry. The government has allowed several commercial gene testing startups to register their businesses. We

are capable of providing more and more reliable genetic information. But still, China's regulations to govern this emerging industry are not officially out yet.

Why does it usually take about two months on average to get the results back after a personal gene test?

WeGene, on average, takes three to six weeks. The process includes receiving samples, quality control, DNA extraction, on-machine examinations, chip-scanning and data analysis. As part of a gene test for a normal healthy person, these procedures are not only costly but also time-consuming. Over the past decades, we have digitized many things: music CDs and printed photographs have already become obsolete. In the same way, we can digitize information about our bodies, which genome data is the most basic. This data could be used many times for various applications that require gene data (such as assessing the risk of breast cancer and checking metabolism rates).

How does your company deal with the data you collect? How do you safeguard privacy?

We save data, but delete it, if explicitly asked by the client to do so. As for (mass-scale) statistical analysis, we need permission from the clients first. If other studies are involved, we still need to inform the users and get their permission.

There is a fear that individuals' genetic information could be sold to businesses that can use it to promote products like tailor-made weight-loss programs or medical tests. Is this a real concern?

A: From a legal perspective, it would be very risky (to sell gene data). Moreover, it would simply be a one-time deal. But imagine if many users are relatives of people with Parkinson's disease, we could sell their data for a research study and receive cash without violating privacy laws.

I have seen some companies that provide prenatal DNA tests. What are your thoughts on that? Do many couples in China choose to have abortions if they find there is a genetic defect in the fetus?

A: It is definitely a very strict medical service, in terms of genetics. For instance, abortion is outlawed in Muslim countries, but prenatal DNA tests are permitted. The most widespread one is noninvasive prenatal testing. It targets high-risk groups through surveys. Many (in China) would choose abortion if the diagnosis keeps on showing a genetic defect in the fetus.

Caixin Hot Pot is a regular feature that introduces you to the colorful array of players in today's China – from the leaders of top U.S. companies doing business here to the migrant woman selling noodles from a push-cart.

