

FEATURE

Making China safe for Coke: how Coca-Cola shaped obesity science and policy in China

Susan Greenhalgh investigates how, faced with shrinking Western markets, the soft drink giant sought to secure sales and build its image in China

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Ever since 2001, when the US surgeon general called on all Americans to fight the newly named epidemic of obesity, the soft drink industry has had a target on its back. Recent investigations have shown how it is fighting back. From blocking New York City's ban on large drink sizes to lobbying against soda restrictions and funding exercise specialists to promote physical activity as the best solution to obesity, "Big Soda" has been defending its interests.¹⁻⁴ Yet with US soda sales plummeting, the industry is losing the battle.⁵

As the US market shrinks, the industry has set its eyes on the global south, especially rapidly developing countries like China, with vast undeveloped markets for products associated with "modernity" and "the American way of life."^{5,6} Until recently, China's hypermarketised political economy and pro-Western culture have enabled some multinational firms, especially politically well connected ones, to manage the risks and restrictions and prosper.

This is particularly true for Big Soda's largest and most famous brand, Coca-Cola. China is now Coke's third largest market by volume.⁷ And with its vast population, huge growth potential remains, making it "critically important to the future growth of our business," according to former Coke chief executive Muhtar Kent.⁷

But Coke's recipe for success in China relies on more than cultivating political relationships and strategic localisation of products and marketing. Through a complex web of institutional, financial, and personal links, Coke has been able to influence China's health policies. The company has cleverly manoeuvred itself into a position of behind-the-scenes power that ensures that government policy to fight the growing obesity epidemic does not undermine its interests. It has done this by leveraging the Chinese branch of an organisation it created to advance its interests around the world. The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), set up by a Coke executive 40 years ago in the US, is housed within the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a unit of the government health ministry. The staff of the industry funded ILSI-China have unparalleled access to government officials, and the organisation established

itself as a premiere scientific body capable of providing access to the best that Western science has to offer.

Critics call ILSI a front for the food industry, yet little is known about how it works.⁸ As a China specialist and anthropologist with longstanding interests in opening up the "black box" of Chinese policy making, I conducted dozens of interviews in late 2013 with Beijing based obesity researchers to try to understand the rapidly growing Chinese obesity epidemic. In 2011, 42.3% of Chinese adults were overweight or obese, up from 20.5% in 1991.⁹ What started out as interviews expanded into a four year research project—just published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*—and involved poring over hundreds of archival newsletters, annual and sustainability reports, tax filings, and websites.¹⁰ A clear pattern emerged—one that explains how Chinese obesity science and policy came to emphasise physical fitness over dietary restrictions, matching strategies advocated by Big Soda.

Laying the groundwork

ILSI was the brainchild of Alex Malaspina, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology trained food technology specialist and Coke's senior vice president from 1969 to around 2001. Malaspina founded ILSI in 1978 as a Washington based, corporate funded, global non-profit organisation "where scientists from industry, government, and academia... collaborate... to provide science that improves human health... and safeguards the environment," according to its website.¹¹

That same year, Coca-Cola became the first international company allowed to re-enter China after 30 years of isolation under Mao. Malaspina visited in 1978 to scout for local scientist partners. He soon identified Chen Chunming, a powerful nutritionist reputed to have connections high up in the central government. In 1983, Chen became the founding president of the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine,¹² a division of the Ministry of Health that was the forerunner of the CDC, and in 1993 left to head up ILSI's new "Focal Point in China" (ILSI-China), which she headed until 2004. (She then became senior adviser until her death last year.)

In interviews with me in 2013, Chen and her deputy explained the appeal of ILSI-China during the early years. Government management of health research had become burdensome. Money for public health work was in short supply. Establishing a non-governmental research organisation would allow them to seek funding from a wide range of sources outside China and overcome China's scientific backwardness by bringing the advanced ideas of Western science to China.

"Malaspina was very helpful," Chen told me earnestly. "He brought new international knowledge that China lacked."

In turn, China would earn international respect for what she imagined would be a quickly maturing scientific field. And despite leaving government service, Chen could retain influence with the health ministry. In Chen's eyes, it was a win-win prospect: a chance to gain global connection and visibility and use that global savvy to shape state policy, advancing public health in an environment in which the state had virtually abandoned the field.

ILSI-China projects itself, and is widely seen, as a bridge builder between government, academia, and industry, providing the latest scientific information for policy decisions on nutrition (especially obesity and early childhood development), food safety, and chronic disease prevention and control.¹³ What distinguished ILSI-China, Chen said, was that it does not just hold conferences; it "puts scientific evidence into policy."

The organisation is funded by dozens of supporting companies—including Coke, Nestlé, McDonalds, and PepsiCo—and establishes standard annual giving levels. Companies decide how much to give and sometimes provide more for specific events, but the organisation does not disclose details about funding or even its operating budget. Permitted by ILSI in Washington to "do its own thing," as Suzanne Harris, ILSI executive director, put it to me, ILSI-China had no board of directors, allowing Chen and her deputy to run it along lines they thought best. "We have lots of freedom; we can do anything we like," Chen told me enthusiastically.

Creating quality science and scientific policy advice untainted by commercial bias was fundamental to ILSI-China's sense of its mission, scientific legitimacy, and ability to be effective. By rigorously enforcing ILSI's rule of no advertising and no endorsement of company products in all activities, ILSI-China leaders and experts exuded genuine confidence they were protected from influence. "Companies know there won't be any commercial benefit," Chen assured me.

Over the years, Malaspina and Chen developed a close working relationship. In an open letter celebrating ILSI-China's 20th anniversary, Malaspina confided that ILSI-China "has had a special place in my heart and brings back the fondest memories of all the times that I visited ... Thank you so much for your friendships and hard work that made so many dreams come true."¹²

How nutrition lost out to physical activity

In 1999, ILSI asked its branches to put obesity on their agendas, and ILSI-China soon established itself as China's leading authority on obesity. Between 1999 and 2003, ILSI-China assembled a cadre of obesity specialists, defined obesity as a Chinese disease (with China specific body mass index thresholds), and created guidelines for the prevention and management of obesity and overweight in adults.^{14 15} Those guidelines were issued in the name of the Ministry of Health. ILSI-China's involvement was not mentioned, even though it had prepared the guidelines. At least until the early 2010s,

ILSI-China was the leading sponsor of obesity research and policy making. Though not openly recognised, its substantive role in tackling obesity was arguably greater than that of the government.

Before 2004, around half of ILSI-China's obesity activities dealt with measurement issues, not prevention strategies. Some prevention activities focused on nutrition, but none centred on physical activity.

That began to change in the coming years.

As China was defining obesity as a major health problem, Coke began exhibiting strong interest in the condition and its belief that physical activity was key. Investigative reports show how, within three years of the 2001 US Surgeon General's call to action, Coke launched a multipronged strategy to avoid blame and protect its profits.¹ Presenting itself as an advocate of "healthy active lifestyles," Coke promoted the message that all foods and drinks are part of a healthy diet; to avoid obesity, what matters is how much you move. And it maintained that there were health benefits to the ingredients of sugar sweetened carbonated beverages.

In 2004, a major WHO report called for public-private collaboration to fight the growing obesity epidemic.¹⁶ But ILSI-China helped China bring corporate involvement in health affairs to a different level altogether.

Chen was a tireless promoter of industry's role in public health. By stressing the theme in meeting after meeting, she helped normalise a role for industry in fighting chronic disease by promoting "healthy lifestyles," making it the only approach that was thinkable. And by encouraging and concretely enabling industry participation in conferences, research, and public health interventions, Chen helped insert it into the nation's core strategy to combat obesity and chronic disease.

The ILSI model of tripartite academic-government-industry work was now the official approach for fighting chronic disease, with ILSI at the centre. In an environment in which the government had little interest in and few resources to focus on chronic disease, industry members of the ILSI-China family were able to take on enlarged roles in anti-obesity work. Few companies had more interest than Coke. And the company had another advantage: in 2009, ILSI-China created a nine member scientific advisory committee that included company representatives from Coke and three other companies. On paper at least, this made them key decision makers, empowered not just to set research topics but to monitor and essentially police the quality of the science that ILSI-China created.

ILSI-China's focus on physical activity began to overshadow nutrition. Between 2004 and 2009, a third of ILSI-China sponsored or co-sponsored obesity activities focused on physical activity. Between 2010 and 2015, the proportion rose to almost two thirds while obesity activities focused on nutrition sank to around one in five. Nutritional approaches, such as promoting healthy foods, dietary guidelines, and nutritional education remained on the books, mapped out in national plans for chronic disease prevention, but despite some corporate funding, they lacked visibility and active government support (table 1).

Scientific conferences: "educating" the Chinese

Clinicians and researchers expect scientific conferences to be places where they can hear debates between leading points of view. But rather than a melting pot of ideas, obesity meetings sponsored or co-sponsored by ILSI-China were packed with presentations by experts with financial ties to Coke or ILSI.

Although Coke was sometimes listed as a conference funder on the programmes, its myriad ties to experts and ILSI-China remained hidden.

Between 2004 and 2015, ILSI-China organised six international obesity conferences, with around 200 attendees, including researchers, health officials, clinicians, and company representatives. Reflecting the widely held view among Chinese experts that Chinese health research was scientifically backward, Chen told me that she structured the meetings as opportunities in which Chinese researchers could “learn best practice from the advanced countries.” Invariably, foreign experts were the featured speakers.

Most of the invited experts (13 out of 18) were from the US, and Steven N Blair of the University of South Carolina and James O Hill of the University of Colorado received repeat invitations. It was the ideas of those two—who focused on energy balance, the neglected importance of physical activity, and inactivity not obesity being the critical health problem—that would be presented most often. Some conferences were even specifically on these ideas (box 1).

Box 1: Examples of ILSI-China sponsored and co-sponsored obesity activities with primary focus on physical activity (2004-15)

Conferences and workshops

- Dec 2004:** International conference on the health benefits of physical activity
- Mar 2006:** Joint meeting of the working groups on obesity and physical activity in China
- Nov 2006:** Conference on the control of obesity and related diseases in China: maintaining healthy weight—a priority in chronic disease control and prevention
- Jun 2007:** International beverage forum on sport and health
- Jun 2009:** Working groups on obesity and physical activity in China symposium
- Nov 2010:** Conference on physical activity and health: exercise is medicine
- Dec 2011:** Conference on obesity control and prevention in China: energy balance and active lifestyles
- Dec 2013:** Conference on obesity control and prevention in China: appropriate technologies and tools in weight control
- Nov 2014:** Conference on physical activity and health: exercise is medicine

Other scientific activities

- Apr 2005:** ILSI-China forms working group on physical activity
- Jul 2011:** Government issues physical activity guidelines for Chinese adults (trial), followed by advocacy conference in September
- Jun 2012:** Launch of Exercise is Medicine programme in China, numerous training courses 2012-15
- 2011-13:** Training fellowship programme, Coca-Cola Beverages (China) and ILSI-China scholarship programme
- Apr 2014:** ILSI-China forms Exercise is Medicine China working group

Public health interventions

- 2004-15:** Happy 10 Minutes, school exercise programme, from trial to inclusion in national campaign
- 2007-09:** Community based physical activity promotion project
- 2007-15:** Healthy Lifestyles for All action, develops into a national campaign

emphasised physical activity in “fixing our metabolism” and keeping weight off.¹⁷

Blair, who has received Coke funding for years, much through unrestricted educational grants, is well known for his controversial view that lack of fitness—not fatness—is the problem. At conferences in 2010, 2013, and 2014, he presented research suggesting that the US obesity epidemic was due to a decline in activity not a rise in dietary intake.¹⁷

Of the remaining 11 US based obesity specialists appearing at the conferences, eight were exercise scientists, including “father of aerobics,” Kenneth H Cooper. Five have or had known ties to Coke, ILSI, or both, and two more were employees of Coca-Cola or its Beverage Institute. Only two were nutrition specialists.

As in most ILSI events, industry presentations were on the agenda. Rhona Applebaum, Coke Global’s chief science and health officer (and future ILSI president), presented in 2013, outlining Coke’s commitments towards preventing obesity, rationalised in the language of energy balance.¹⁷ “We collaborate with folks who are fact based and credible,” she declared. “It’s not our science, it’s theirs.”

Coke influence was felt not only in conferences emphasising physical activity, but also in a wide array of public health programmes to combat obesity (box 2) and in conferences emphasising nutrition (box 3).

Box 2: Public health in China: the Coke connection

Links exist between many obesity related Chinese public health programmes and Coca-Cola.

Exercise is Medicine China

Exercise is Medicine (EIM) is a global initiative that encourages healthcare providers to prescribe exercise as medical treatment. Coca-Cola was EIM’s founding corporate partner and, according to the company, its sponsorship has been essential to the programme’s ability to reach a worldwide population.¹⁸ Working with the American College of Sports Medicine, which manages the initiative, ILSI-China launched the EIM China Programme in 2012.

Happy 10 Minutes

Happy 10 Minutes was a national campaign that introduced 10 minute exercise breaks into the school day. Launched in 2004 and extended nationwide at a 2006 ceremony supported by Coke China, the campaign was a Chinese adaptation of Take 10!, one of Malaspina’s pet projects.¹⁹ In 2004, the ILSI Center for Health Promotion transferred \$50 000 to the Chinese CDC, the organisation that developed Happy 10. Widely publicised as an important public health programme, Happy 10 Minutes grew to become part of the Ministry of Health’s healthy lifestyles campaign.

Healthy Lifestyles for all Action

Launched in 2007 and later scaled up into a national campaign, Healthy Lifestyles for all Action was the centrepiece of the Ministry of Health’s interventions on obesity and other chronic diseases. Although this was a governmental activity, Coca-Cola and other companies used it to showcase their favoured programmes for fighting obesity. Under the Healthy Lifestyles initiative, a government sports researcher told me, one year Coke pledged to donate a dollar for every 10 000 steps walked. Another year, it encouraged planning for healthy living.

Other scientific activities

ILSI-China also administered a scholarship programme, launched in 2011 with Coke China, that provided two scholarships a year for young researchers to gain short term training in the US in exercise science. Blair’s university was one of the training centres.

Hill has had Coke funding and has close ties to ILSI, having served on the boards of ILSI-Global and ILSI-North America for many years. An ILSI-China newsletter reported on a small meeting of core Chinese researchers in 2006 at which Chen introduced Hill’s theory that “small changes [in diet and exercise] can bring large impacts,” as one of the “latest development[s] of the international research in the prevention and control of obesity.” In 2013, he mapped out a plan that

Box 3: Nutrition conferences promote the nutritional qualities of processed food

Although the focus was increasingly on physical activity, nutrition was also covered in ILSI-China sponsored conferences on obesity held during 2004-15, but often on terms favourable to the food industry. Some meetings can be traced directly to Coca-Cola and reflect its strategy of emphasising the benefits, and de-emphasising the harms, of key ingredients in sugar sweetened carbonated beverages.

At a May 2006 symposium on the "importance of water as a nutrient," Zhang Huaying of Coke's Beverage Institute of Health and Wellness (now shut down) gave a presentation on the importance of water to physical activity and health. An ILSI-China newsletter says Zhang "raised the point that beverage was a fine source of water, including beverages that [sic] containing caffeine." The message was repeated at ILSI conferences in 2008 when another Coke Beverage Institute scientist "reemphasized that water is essential for life and health," and "highlighted a theme of 'Managing sweetness, not banishment,'" according to another newsletter.

Other food and beverage companies also leveraged ILSI-China to influence the science and policy of obesity. In virtually every meeting, food industry representatives gave talks focusing on the health benefits of their products, including green tea (Lipton Tea), chocolate (Mars), and nuts (Almond Board of California).

Some events were funded by the China branches of particular companies. Danone Biscuit supported a 2004 symposium on the health effects of dietary fat, and the US fast food company Yum! funded a 2006 workshop on restaurant food and balanced diets. Other companies gave presentations on their contributions to fighting fat. Carrefour, the French retailer, described its promotion of nutrition knowledge, while QINGBI, the Chinese food giant, outlined its weight control scheme.

ILSI-China newsletters described how conference speakers urged "balance" and "diversity" in diets. Although companies were encouraged to stop selling unhealthy food, the overwhelming emphasis was on educating the public to make healthy choices. There was no call for government regulation of the food industry or its marketing; instead, industry was to regulate itself.

Condemn it or embrace it?

Through a complex web of institutional, financial, and personal linkages, Coke was able to influence China's health establishment (fig 1). Though the effect on official obesity policy cannot be precisely measured, China's policies aligned well with Coke's position as transmitted through ILSI-China. Hard hitting dietary policies recommended by the World Health Organisation—taxing sugary drinks and restricting food advertising to children—were missing, and national plans and targets emphasised physical fitness over dietary restrictions. Consistent with ILSI's and Coke's "energy balance" perspective, policy documents urge citizens to achieve a healthy lifestyle and healthy weight by "balancing eating and activity."^{20 21}

To an outsider, Coke's involvement in shaping Chinese obesity science and policy may appear reprehensible, especially considering how corporate leaders leveraged to their advantage the craving of "third world" scientists for global connection and respect. In putting its massive resources behind only one side of the science, and with no other parties sufficiently resourced to champion more balanced solutions that included regulation of the food industry, the company made China safe for Coke.

Global nutrition expert Barry Popkin, who has worked in China for decades, lamented what had occurred in an email to me. "There is now no immediate possibility the government will regulate food, beverage, or sugar in the way countries globally are beginning to work to create healthy diets and address not only obesity but all diet-related noncommunicable diseases. I believe ILSI's influence in promoting the physical activity agenda was extremely detrimental and put China decades behind in efforts to create a healthier diet for its citizens."

But many Chinese scholars welcomed industry's involvement in public health. A scientist from China CDC told me. "They've built schools . . . provided equipment for school cafeterias. It's a kind of return to society." "There is no profit, but it is good for their reputation."

A clinical nutritionist at a Beijing hospital commented: "I think we must support company participation in standards making . . . Actually, a lot of companies have contributed a good deal of academic knowledge. They've brought standards from abroad . . . they haven't dominated the [process]; they've just provided some financial support."

"A lot of money for public health education comes from corporations," explained a dietitian at another Beijing hospital and popular blogger.

"Do you worry about that?" I asked. "It is neither good nor bad," he responded.

Only a tiny handful of those I interviewed decried industry's influence. "Corporate money definitely influences the scientific character of nutrition research," an older generation scholar told me, speaking warily and on condition of anonymity. "But today it is impossible to say no."

Coca-Cola, ILSI-China, and the Chinese health ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

After a series of critical investigative reports by the *New York Times* in 2015,²²⁻²⁴ Coke pulled back on its aggressive promotion of the science of physical activity.²⁵ But its influence continues to be felt in China since the ILSI structure remains in place and the activity programmes it supported are now well established.

Unlike the US and Europe, which have well established institutions of investigative journalism and civil society, China has no watchdogs. The press is not free to complain and China's non-governmental organisations are preoccupied with more urgent matters. China's scientists can hardly bite the hand that feeds them. Since 2016, the state has finally begun to seriously tackle chronic disease, but its approach emphasises education and market development, not industry regulation. With no one to complain about—or even see—this corporate biasing of science and policy, the size and consequences of the Chinese obesity epidemic are likely to continue to worsen.

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Table

Table 1 | Emphasis of obesity activities sponsored or co-sponsored by ILSI-China, 1999-2015*

Year	No of activities	Activity focus (%)			
		Nutrition	Physical activity	Both	Neither†
1999-2003	12	5 (42)	0	0	7 (58)
2004-09	30	12 (40)	11 (37)	5 (17)	2 (7)
2010-15	30	7 (23)	18 (60)	4 (13)	1 (3)

* Data from ILSI Focal Point in China semi-annual newsletters, supplemented by interviews. For activities that were the focus of more than one newsletter item, the table counts each activity, not news item.

† Activities dealing with neither nutrition nor physical activity generally focused on the definition of obesity and other measurement issues.

Figure

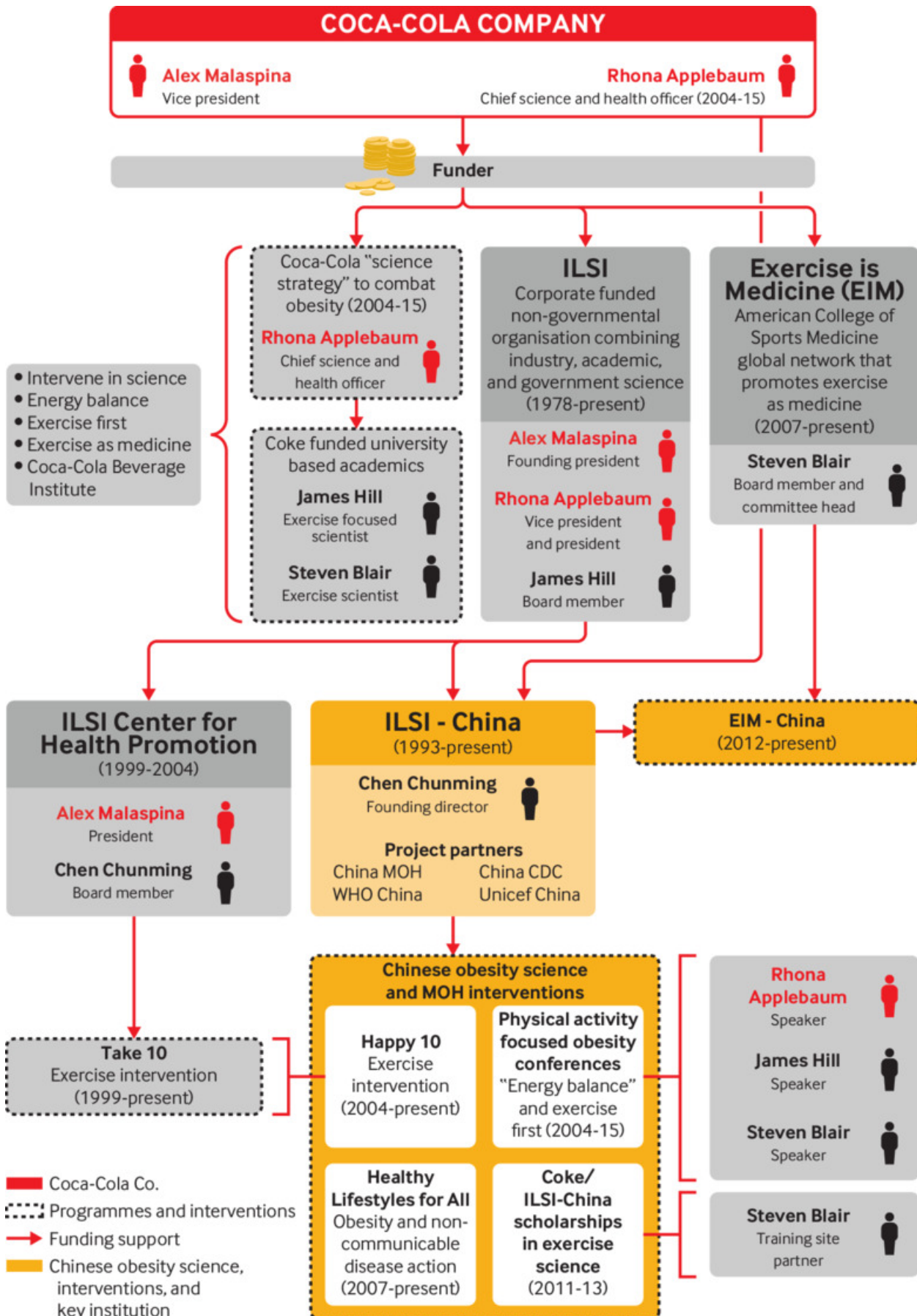


Fig 1 Known links between Coca-Cola and China's obesity science and policy