

Fitness fad that fails spell-check

Group 'higking' trend has become a source of controversy and public debate, not over bad spelling but road safety



A "higking" group in Qingdao, in East China's Shandong province. They are fitness enthusiasts who share an interest in walking, running or hiking. LU YOU / FOR CHINA DAILY

By **ETHAN YUAN**
The World of Chinese

Although the past few years have seen the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity in China, there is also a growing number of individuals who take fitness and exercise seriously. In addition to gym memberships and marathon running, booming yoga and grandma-led "plaza dancing" have brought both joy and anguish to the citizenry.

But recently, another kind of organized exertion has been making the news.

"Higking" groups are fitness enthusiasts who share an interest in walking, running or hiking. Together, they organize regimented marches along set routes, harnessing the power of the hive mind and peer pressure to make health gains.

According to the Higking Group City Alliance's Douban page, the name comes from "highking", a word they made up after failing to find a proper translation for their Chinese name, "violent walking group". The "high" refers to the ecstatic feeling — but just what happened to the missing second 'h' is not explained.

While this does sound like an effective way to encourage the lazy to exercise, higking groups have also been the source of some public debate, mainly due to an unfortunate (if, perhaps, inevitable) incident.

A number of weeks ago, one higking group was marching down the left lane of

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bào zǒu, higking

a highway in Linyi, East China's Shandong province. As they neared an exit, a taxi suddenly ran into the back of the group, taking out several members, before veering to the side and stopping.

This resulted in the female driver being charged with vehicular manslaughter over the death of one (two others were injured), but also highlighted the controversy surrounding the new sport. The higking group involved has questioned how the driver could have failed to avoid this cyan-shirt group if she had been paying proper attention. However, online commenters were baffled as to why so many people were using highways as exercise tracks in the first place.

The higking group involved has said they were only running in the middle of the road because the sidewalks were under renovation, though commenters have pointed out that their city, at least, was not lacking in trails for running or walking.

A lack of accessible parks, and sidewalks blocked by construction (legal or not), are familiar problems to Chinese cities. But as an opinion piece in the *Beijing News* suggested, people are also "intimidated" by higking groups of "a hundred strong", that take up entire lanes meant for traffic and wave flags, wear uniforms and shout slogans as they walk.

This issue has developed into an argument between higking practitioners and car owners, with most bystanders taking the side of the machines, citing higking groups' "disruption of traffic" and "tyranny".

Unfortunately, this kind of problem does not seem to be going away. Recently in Nantong, in East China's Jiangsu province, a group of "higkers" surrounded a bus and beat up the driver after he failed to give way to the group crossing the street. The driver ended up with eight stitches and a lost tooth.

Higking groups are far from the only fitness demographic to become a serious source of public irritation. The legions of middle-aged plaza dancers have come under fire for their occupation of large spaces and use of loud music. But the issue is less about fitness than inter-generational tensions: The higking controversy also involves older exercisers at loggerheads with young netizens over space and public decorum.

And when disputes happen, more often than not, fisticuffs follow.

Courtesy of The World of Chinese, www.theworldofchinese.com

Word box

暴走 bàozǒu higking
健身 jiànshēn do fitness
跳广场舞 tiào guǎngchǎngwǔ
plaza dancing
大爷 dà yé grandpa
大妈 dà mā grandma