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‘Mobile men with money’: the socio-cultural and politico-economic context of ‘high-risk’ behaviour among wealthy businessmen and government officials in urban China

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Abstract

China’s transition from an injection drug-driven HIV epidemic to one primarily transmitted through sexual contact has triggered concern over the potential for HIV to move into the non-drug-injecting population. Much discussion has focused on the migrant men of China’s vast ‘floating population’ who are considered a high-risk group. As a result, many men who frequently engage in high-risk behaviour but are not included in this especially vulnerable group are evading HIV prevention messages. This paper highlights the socio-cultural and politico-economic factors that motivate many of China’s wealthy businessmen and government officials, sometimes referred to as ‘mobile men with money’, to engage in such behaviour. Examination of the activities related to the work of these men reveals a situation where the confluence of a market-oriented economy operating within a socialist-style political system under the influence of traditional networking practices has engendered a unique mode of patron-clientelism that brings them together over shared social rituals including feasting, drinking and female-centered entertainment that is often coupled with sexual services. As a result, consideration of the socio-cultural factors influencing these men’s sexual practices is important for responding to the newly emerging stage of China’s HIV epidemic.

Keywords

China; HIV; masculinity; sexual culture; work

Introduction

High rates of HIV associated with injection drug use (IDU) have helped categorize China as a country with an injection-driven epidemic. This perhaps offered an accurate description of the situation during the initial stages of China’s epidemic when as many as 70% of cases were attributable to IDU, but a vastly different situation is now emerging. In 2003, statistical data on HIV and AIDS in China began to illustrate rapid transition toward a trend of sexual transmission (primarily heterosexual but also including homosexual) and HIV is now primarily spread through sexual contact (Sanderson 2007). Such a shift in the epidemic

pattern is raising concern about the potential for HIV to be transmitted among those who are not readily associated with the ‘high-risk’ behaviours of groups such as injection drug users or sex workers. Chief among these concerns is identification of populations that may act as a conduit between ‘high-risk’ populations and the population more generally.

Some believe the 100–150 million domestic migrants branded as the ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*)¹ will act as a potential tipping-point for the expansion of HIV into the general population as they are exposed to new attitudes toward sex in urban areas and faced with the many psychosocial challenges that have been shown to influence sexual attitudes among migrants around the world (Caldwell, Anarfi and Caldwell 1997, Brouckhoff and Biddlecom 1999, Wolffers *et al.* 2002, Anderson *et al.* 2003, Yang and Xia 2006). While the behaviour of some men in this group may give cause for concern, the risk for sexually transmitted HIV in China is spread throughout a complex web of sexual networks that has emerged out of contemporary China’s unique socio-cultural and politico-economic landscape. Consequently, an effective response to this emerging stage of China’s epidemic must recognize how such forces act upon and influence high-risk behaviours.

This paper examines the socio-cultural and politico-economic structures that shape the sexual practices of China’s growing class of wealthy urban businessmen and government officials, who are sometimes referred to as ‘mobile men with money’.² Political and social status protects these men from being included among the marginalized categories of high-risk groups defined by global public health paradigms and, consequently, helps them evade contact with HIV prevention messages. But, as I will explain, the unofficial aspects of the work required for their economic and political success are often associated with practices and behaviours that can potentially expose these men to sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Why pay attention to ‘mobile men with money’?

The risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, exists for men at all socio-economic levels who have access to China’s complex commercial sex industry.³ Local popular discourse, cultural practices and observation of the commercial sex industry in China, however, raise greater concern over men with access to wealth. People in China often say:

fugui siyin

ren bu fengliu zhi wei pin

(A man thinks of sex only after he has succeeded and become wealthy and thus only poor men do not chase women)

¹This is an estimate based on demographic analysis. For a more detailed discussion please refer to Zai and Ma (2004).

²A term developed by the Global Coalition on HIV/AIDS to represent the wealthy Chinese businessmen and government officials who frequently move around as they engage in China’s rapid of economic development

³According to sociologist Pan Suiming, China’s sex industry is comprised of seven tiers ranging from women who exclusively service one man in exchange for material goods to women who provide domestic and sexual services to a group of construction workers in exchange for food and shelter.

A walk through any urban area in modern-day China demonstrates the maintenance of the ideas promoted by this traditional idiomatic expression. The complex politico-economic networks that support economic development are established and maintained in urban karaoke clubs and entertainment establishments that are growing in size, opulence and, consequently, expense. Officially, the women who work in these high-priced establishments provide entertainment as masseuses or partners in song and dance. Informally they can also offer sexual services that comprise a large part of the local sex industry. High demand for their services is supported by men who depend on these activities as a means of establishing the relationships needed to succeed in China's rapidly developing economy. It is no wonder then that Chinese sociologist, Pan Suiming, has found that urban Chinese men who hold management positions are ten times more likely than labourers to solicit the services of a sex worker, 'sexual secretary' or minor wife;⁴ a ratio that increases to 22:1 in rural areas. And, overall, the men who comprise the top 5% of China's income earners are 33 times more likely than men in the lowest 44% to purchase sex (Pan 2001). This may be partly due to economics but, as I will illustrate, the current politico-economic climate provides extra incentive for men in positions of wealth and power to engage in these types of practices.

It is not simply wealth or even an individual set of behaviours that motivates these men to participate in the myriad forms of entertainment that lead to their high rate of engagement with commercial sex. Rather, such sexual practices stem primarily from a particular set of socio-cultural and politico-economic factors that converge within their work-related roles and duties. Economic development in contemporary China is dependent on the success of a new class of entrepreneurs who are now allowed to pursue opportunities in the emergent market economy. Their success, however, is still dependent on the government officials who, under China's socialist bureaucracy, maintain control over the resources, permits and allowances that are crucial for a businessman's participation in the market. The relaxed political controls that have necessarily accompanied market reforms have fostered the re-emergence of many traditional Chinese practices and structured a situation that has helped engender a unique system of patron-clientelism that brings these men together over shared social rituals that include feasting, drinking and female-centered entertainment that is often coupled with sexual services.

Such trends have led some to believe that China's 'mobile men with money' are also well poised to transmit HIV into the general population (du Guerny, Hsu and Cao 2003, Pan, Huang and Li 2006), a suspicion that concurs with the jolts being felt by the public health workers battling the epidemic on the ground. In 2001, one-third of patients hospitalized for AIDS in Beijing had contracted HIV through homosexual contact. At the same time, however, many of the calls to a national AIDS hotline came from men who had solicited services from a sex worker and subsequently learned that such behaviour could expose them to HIV. One of the operators told me that these men, who held positions that conferred high levels of political and social status, were reluctant to approach their local anti-epidemic station⁵ for an HIV test and instead were hoping for a remote diagnosis over the phone (which of course was impossible).

⁴Chinese men with resources often maintain exclusive sexual relationships with women in exchange for benefits that can include houses, cars and clothes.

During the eighteen months I spent researching issues related to HIV and AIDS, masculinity and male sexual culture in China between October 2003 and March 2006, I discovered that people from both the international and domestic communities realized the importance of finding a way to target HIV prevention messages towards the type of hidden men who called into the national AIDS hotline. Several of the Chinese public health workers I met realized that the standard masculine practices used to build networks among business and government partners would imminently affect their local HIV epidemic. They also expressed concern about the wives and regular partners of these men. Local efforts to stem this part of the epidemic, however, are constrained by political sensitivities. The political implication that a government official has engaged in practices deemed immoral for their position can pose a threat to the ruling Communist Party. Additionally, the association of businessmen with HIV/AIDS can threaten important local plans for economic development.

Many foreign observers and representatives of international public health organizations are also aware of the risky behaviours that prompted concern in these local public health workers. The same ritual practices expected of a Chinese partner are also often extended to foreign guests hoping to collaborate with a local host. Foreign guests who are unfamiliar with China, however, often dismiss the drinking and entertainment rituals encountered in these situations, as sophomoric. But expatriates who have spent considerable time in China recognize the normality of such behaviours and the risks incurred by the men who regularly engage in related practices. One foreign aid worker I met recounted to me his own concern over the government officials he dealt with on a regular basis. In the rural prefecture where he lived, it was customary, as in other parts of China, to include the provision of sex work in the entertainment of one's guests and, to him, this represented the most major risk for development of an HIV epidemic in this remote corner of the country. The development of the term 'mobile men with money' in late 2004 placed some needed attention on the issue, but the national response is challenged by the global paradigms that structure many international public health programmes.

The same political restrictions and global paradigms that challenge our efforts to target China's wealthy businessmen and government officials with HIV prevention messages also consequently limit our knowledge of the impact of HIV on these men. There is no statistical data that can allow us to assert that men who occupy such positions in China are indeed affected by HIV and are a possible route of transmission to their sexual partners. It is even more difficult to assert that these men themselves are exposed to HIV. After all, while eating, drinking and even karaoke singing, are collectively performed rituals, sex is a private act that can be refused without incurring a loss of face. In addition, new trends are arising that bring men together outside the karaoke bar. In Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, I saw men getting together on the tennis court. A growing cadre of women entrepreneurs and government officials are also now seeking success within China's political-economic system. And while they are not put at risk for STI or HIV infection by these local practices, many still invite the men who control their success to the entertainment establishments where sexual services are provided. Still, these trends are slow to occur and

⁵This nomenclature, which was adopted from the Soviet system, was used to refer to the national system of disease surveillance centres that reached down into every local area. The system has now been renamed the Centre for Disease Control.

are most prevalent in large cities. The various men, women and public health workers I spoke to, however, still believe these practices affect the sexual behaviour of the many men seeking success in China.

Methods

This paper reports on findings from a larger study that examines how contemporary trends of masculinity and male sexual culture in contemporary urban China can expose men to STIs and HIV. Ethnographic research for this project stressed sexual practice over sexual behaviour. As a result, data collection focused primarily on structural factors that cause urban Chinese men to seek sexual experiences outside of marriage and how they negotiate, use and experience sex with various partners rather than on the individual aspects of their behaviour during sexual contact (including questions about rates of condom usage). This led to analysis of the social, cultural and political meanings that help construct sexual behaviour among these men.

Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews that helped me trace the daily lives of urban men who engage in professional networking activities. Participant observation in restaurants, hotels, massage parlours, hair salons, karaoke clubs, saunas and brothels helped me understand the relationship of their related activities to political and economic success in contemporary China. Research conducted in people's homes and their places of work was equally important for the lessons it offered about the socio-cultural factors that construct men's lives in urban China, including the struggles encountered between traditional family expectations of marriage and fatherhood, the masculine entitlements offered by traditional Chinese culture and state expectations and proscriptions that often govern a man's success. In-depth interviews conducted with businessmen, government officials and government workers, entertainment-establishment owners, doctors, nurses, female service providers, sex workers and married women offered further clues about contextual factors that influence a man's decision to seek extramarital sexual relationships.

In addition to ethical review conducted at Columbia University, my institutional affiliation at the time of research, the project was also approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at Tsinghua University. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling based on a system of referrals and introductions. All participants were informed of my identity as a researcher from the USA and the purpose and activities of the study before giving oral consent.

Both descriptive and analytic impressions from participant observation were recorded as field notes. Fluency in Mandarin Chinese allowed me to conduct interviews directly with research participants. Interviews were taped and transcribed directly into English in the event a participant agreed to audio-taping. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, however, most interviews were recorded in typed field-note format. The large amount of qualitative narrative data collected during participant observation and in-depth interviews was filed and categorized into an indexed system that developed during the course of research. Textual analysis was conducted on this data to understand both popular and

official discourse about male sexual culture in China. Common themes that emerged during interviews were categorized together, as were common responses to questions that followed those themes. This initial coding exercise was used to relate certain events to each other through a process of ‘textual interrogation’ (Dowsett 1996). Analysis also avoided the imposition of categories and classifications from my own cultural background onto the cultural practices I observed. My analysis relies on ‘thick description’ of local categories in order to preserve the local meanings and cultural practices conveyed during the research process (Asad 1986, Sanjek 1990, Parker 1993, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Finally, the project considered the important historical structures that influence sexual culture and masculinity among middle- and upper-class men in urban China.

Field site

Research for this project was primarily conducted in the city of Ruili, located in Yunnan Province in southwestern China adjacent to the Burmese border. The significant role that Ruili plays in the history of China’s HIV epidemic as well as its active cross-border trade with Burma make it an ideal location for studying the interaction of male sexual culture and HIV in China. Ruili is a county with an urban centre and surrounding rural areas that depend on agriculture. The county covers 1020 square kilometers that are situated on a small geographic peninsula surrounded on three sides by Burma and inhabited by 112,000 people of both Han Chinese and ethnic minority background.⁶ Approximately 30,000 people officially occupy Ruili’s urban centre, but migrant traders from both China and abroad swell the population by an additional 30,000 to 50,000 people.

The first domestic outbreak of HIV in China was detected in 1989 among injection drug users living in Ruili’s rural ethnic minority communities. The local epidemic remains one primarily transmitted through injection drug use, but is increasingly being transmitted through heterosexual contact among the Han population.⁷ This transition is partially due to Ruili’s economic transformation. Its historically agriculturally-based economy is now primarily supported by active trade industries in both legal and illicit goods ranging from jade to timber and heroin. A large contingent of both short-term sojourners and long-term hotel residents who come to Ruili to gamble in an array of casinos located just across the border in Burma, also support a lucrative industry of tourism. All the men who work in these industries rely on entertainment, including sex work, as a way of communicating between themselves and the government officials who can facilitate their opportunities. Consequently, the health of the local commercial sex industry relies on the amount of work conducted in the industries that are primarily responsible for supporting Ruili’s economy.

⁶China’s population consists of the Han majority (92%) and 55 ethnic minority communities (8%). Yunnan Province is home to 25 ethnic minority communities. The Dai, the Jingpo, the Lisu, the De’eng and the Achang ethnic minorities comprise 64.5% of Ruili’s population.

⁷In 2007, 60.4% of new cases of HIV in Dehong Prefecture (the administrative prefecture of Ruili County) were transmitted through sexual contact and only 20.7% were transmitted through injection drug use.

Findings and discussion

'Work' and its accompanying burdens in the Chinese context

During the initial stages of fieldwork I visited karaoke clubs, massage parlours and saunas in order to understand the structure of the entertainment conducted in these establishments. I also talked to both men and women about the structures that influence the sexual lives of the men who attend such establishments.

Discussion of sex, however, only comprised part of what I heard from these people. Women spoke to me about the effects of incessant episodes of drinking on their husband's health. Men also spoke of these types of events in conjunction with the accompanying expectations to eat, smoke and participate in entertainment that could include sexual services. These activities were often represented as a burden handed down by their bosses rather than as a choice, desire or luxury.

I soon learned that my inquiries of sexuality were too narrow to understand the sexual behaviour conducted among the wealthy businessmen and government officials I had come to examine because their sexual conduct in these environments did not simply result from an individual pattern of desire and, in fact, represented only the coda to a group of shared masculine ritual practices. Its perfunctory nature for some also made me realize that these activities actually comprised a form of work for these men and not simply entertainment.

Low- and mid-level government workers described the consequences that could result if they refused invitations to a banquet or a karaoke club. As one man told me, 'when your boss calls, you have no choice but to drop everything and go for the evening.' In addition to the eating, drinking and smoking, he said, 'you have to do things that are offensive to your own wife (*ni yao duibuqi ni ziji de laopo*)'. These activities, which are collectively referred to as *yingchou*, are not only perfunctory, but also dominate the work of the many government workers, government officials and businessmen I met during my research. These initial findings led me to believe that analysis of the cultural practices and politico-economic dynamics that structure work for these men was crucial for understanding their sexual behaviour.

Work or *gongzuo* is a dynamic term in the Chinese context that has a very specific meaning associated with position rather than labour. To 'have work' or 'have a job' (*you gongzuo*) in China implies that you are employed by a state-owned enterprise or work unit (*danwei*) that provides employee entitlements such as housing and healthcare (Entwistle and Henderson 2000). All other types of work are categorized according to function. For instance, someone who does business is said to *zuo shengyi*, a peasant is said to *laodong* (do labour) and a migrant worker is said to *dagong* (do manual or menial work). All are forms of work, but generally, only work inside a state-owned enterprise is officially called *gongzuo*; a privilege that carries an expectation of party loyalty demonstrated through adherence to strict moral and political standards.

This institutional framework has led to an ambiguous definition of the activities associated with 'work', which often transcend the expected purview of a given position into a realm

dictated by cultural and political expectation. In an environment where a socialist-style patron–client system has intersected with a market-oriented economy, a new politico-economic environment has emerged where many government officials are in positions to control the success sought by various entrepreneurs. Consequently, the official and unofficial activities necessary for establishing trust in a businessman as someone who is both loyal to the party and to their ensuing interpersonal relationships have become an integral part of the work of both Chinese entrepreneurs and local government officials. Many government officials aspiring for higher positions also rely on these activities to strengthen relationships with the officials who determine their promotion.

After following various businessmen and government officials both inside and outside the karaoke bar, I discovered their days are structured around activities centered outside any formal work environment. A typical workday for many of the men I interviewed begins at eight o'clock in the morning and often ends at two o'clock the next morning. Their busy schedule starts with the invitation of a guest to breakfast. Breakfast is followed by trips to the field to survey (*kaocha*) the particular situation that brought the host and his guest together. For example, the visit of a provincial-level health official on a mission to evaluate local HIV prevention efforts may include perfunctory outings to the homes of some people living with HIV, a local methadone clinic and the local hospital. Similarly, a businessman seeking approval from a government official may invite his guest to visit a factory site or to view the local resources available for conducting business in a particular industry. Showing the guest around these sites demonstrates the host's operational capacity. Successful communication between these men, however, is dependent on a deep level of trust that is established over ritual practice that continues throughout the day and indeed throughout the duration of their professional relationship. The host invites his guest to lunch at 11:30 where they dine on various local delicacies and toast each other with alcohol as a means of demonstrating respect to one another. Lunch is followed by a brief siesta (*xiuxi*) period if time permits and then the official work-related duties resume between two-thirty and five-thirty. The host invites his guest to dinner in the evening, which consists of more local delicacies and more toasting between the two partners in order to further demonstrate their mutual respect and appreciation. After dinner, the host invites his guests out for some entertainment, which can include massage (*anmo*), foot reflexology (*xijiao*), hair-washing (*xitou*) or a trip to a local disco and karaoke club. This can often be followed by a midnight meal (*xiaoyan*). In addition, the entertainment can be coupled with sexual services from a service girl or guests can be offered the services of a brothel-based sex worker who is discretely solicited to the guest's hotel room. This typical day of hosting and entertainment can define six or even seven days of the workweek for local officials and entrepreneurs.

This cultural scenario, known as *yingchou*, is a necessary minor ritual practice that has been used as a means of establishing and strengthening social relations in China since the Song dynasty (960–1279) (Anon 1979). The tradition has since evolved into a 'series of scripts and patterned expectations' (Fordham 1995, 154) that help participants develop the emotional feelings (*renqing*) required for building the networks of personal relations (*renji guanxi*) that support contemporary China's unique form of patron-clientelism. For businessmen, *yingchou* is crucial for establishing good relations with the government

officials who control the resources, permits and allowances necessary for success in China's developing market economy and often demands more time than their basic operations. The manager of a large and opulent three-storey karaoke club in Beijing told me it took only three months to build and furnish the club, but two years to go through the process of pleasing the government officials who held the key to the project. Local government officials also participate in *yingchou* activities (often referred to as *jiedai keren* or 'receiving guests') with one another as a means of pleasing superiors who control promotional opportunities. As one former mid-level official told me:

If you want to be an official and advance up the ladder, you must have personal relations (*renji guanxi*). You cannot advance without these personal relations. And where do personal relations come from? You have to invite them out to eat, for a massage, shoot the breeze with them, solicit prostitutes for them and then they'll see that you're useful. Our country's policies do not permit these things, but our local officials desire them. So slowly, if you give them the impression that you can do these things, you will gradually advance in rank.

Consequently, when reflecting on his subsequent diagnosis with HIV, he blamed his sero-status on his work. This man, who previously spent five out of seven nights of every week engaged in entertainment duties, said to me:

Our work made us do these things. When a superior (*lingdao*) came down to visit we would go eat with them. Then when we finished eating and finished drinking we would all go out to sing and dance together. And after singing we would go do chaotic things including all the soliciting of prostitutes that comes along with it (*luanqi bazao shenme piaochang de shi ye laile*). That is to say, I know what road I walked to being infected today and I regret it.

Feasting and drinking

As I learned, the sexual relations that were so important to my concern about HIV transmission must be considered within the context of the practices of *yingchou*, which are founded upon rituals of feasting, drinking and entertainment practices that have traditionally been used to structure China's gendered social hierarchy. The feasting and drinking that help lubricate relationships in contemporary China are reminiscent of the proper rituals described for state dinners in the Book of Rites, the Confucian text that established standards for social forms, ancient rites and court ceremonies. Proper administration of social ceremony that established hierarchical structure and secured social solidarity dictated the size of the drinking vessel, the spatial positioning or seating of the guests, the order of serving and consuming the drink and food, the number of accompanying dishes and the quantity of drink served to each guest (Smart 2005).

The alcohol consumed at dinners and banquets in contemporary China has also maintained its historical role in establishing the bonds of trust that allow Chinese men to negotiate and cooperate with one another. Like food, alcohol is not consumed individually in China but is reserved for its use in building and structuring social networks that are founded on culturally prescribed masculine customs of sharing (Heath 1987, Yan 1996). Even within the structure of a social feast, glasses are not simply clinked and then enjoyed individually. The alcohol in

those glasses serves an important role in demonstrating respect between men. Each time a cup is raised, the person inviting someone to a drink precedes the request to empty a glass with words of respect, joy and perhaps favour. Someone may thank their counterpart for help in the past, ask them for help in the future, securing success or a better position, or wish them everlasting joy, youth, beauty and health, like government officials whose positions within the Communist Party prohibit them from seeking the wealth and prosperity (*facai*) often conveyed toward counterparts in China. People rehearsed in the art of toasting become quite animated and humorous. Finally, the person who initiates the toast demonstrates their utmost respect by saying to their partner, 'For you, I will empty a cup' (*wo wei ni yao gan yibei*). The partner reciprocates this respect by drinking an equal amount of liquor. The base of trust is finally solidified when the two provide evidence of their empty cups.

Entertainment

Similar feasting and drinking rituals are characteristic of social networking and hierarchical structuring in many modern societies (Mars and Altman 1987), but in China they are accompanied by certain forms of entertainment that are woven into the scripted patterns of *yingchou*. This entertainment, which typically takes place in an establishment that provides female-centered services, has been used to distinguish male social elite in both imperial and modern Chinese society.

In this homosocial society, men who begin establishing a relationship over ritual food and drink have historically extended the process with one that strengthens their trust in each other as members of the same privileged class. During China's late imperial era (1368–1911), elite male literati validated their status with the attention of talented courtesan women (Hershatter 1997). This tradition was especially popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Shanghai, a cosmopolitan metropolis where educated literati competed with domestic and international traders for attention and status. Female courtesans of this era, trained in poetry, song and dance, entertained wealthy and prestigious men including married officials, artisans and wealthy merchants (Zamperini 1999, Micollier 2004). Courtesans, were primarily valued for their talents but men could also request sexual favours from their favorite entertainers (Xu 1995, Hershatter 1997).

As Shanghai became more commercialized, a new affluent consumer society, which placed more value on a woman's sexual services than her erudition, helped push the roles of courtesan and prostitute closer together (Hershatter 1997, Henriot 2001). Courtesan culture was replaced with a cabaret culture that nurtured a tradition of service girls who accompanied merchants in song and dance. These women primarily worked as companions but also offered 'extra' service for a negotiable fee (Field 1999).

A similar culture has re-emerged in the market-oriented society of post-Mao China. The business entrepreneurs and government officials who comprise contemporary elite male society are once again underscoring and protecting their social status through the consumption of female-centered entertainment activities at saunas, massage parlours, hair-washing salons or disco and karaoke clubs. The modern karaoke club is reminiscent of the cabarets that dotted the landscape of 1920s Shanghai. Similarly, the female masseuses in contemporary China who offer special service⁸ for a tip can be harkened back to a custom

introduced to Shanghai by Russian émigrés shortly after the 1917 Revolution (Henriot 2001).

For the elite scholar officials of Imperial and Republican era (1911–1949) Shanghai who endured the pressures of scholarship and governance, these leisure activities served a similar role to the masculine cultural practices shared by businessmen in contemporary Japan or Korea (Allison 1994, Cheng 2000). For the elite men of contemporary urban China, however, participation in these activities is a crucial part of their work used to demonstrate the personal respect and Party loyalty that are necessary for professional success.

The cultural and political significance of Yingchou

Demonstration of loyalty toward the Communist Party has always been crucial for success in post-revolutionary China. Initially, work output was officially used as a measure to evaluate the ‘impersonal loyalties demanded by the modern Leninist party’ (Walder 1986, 25). In post-Mao China, however, the criteria seem to have changed to an environment where:

Nanren bu piao chang, duibuqi dang zhongyang

Nüren bu zuo ji, duibuqi Zhu Rongji

(A man who does not solicit prostitutes has insulted the Party central level/A woman who does not work as a prostitute, has insulted Zhu Rongji)⁹

The ideas contained in this popular couplet reflect the new system of reward distribution that has emerged in post-Mao China where loyalty is now demonstrated through the practices of *yingchou*. Development of a market economy has created demand for government-controlled resources from private entrepreneurs who lie outside the trusted network established by demonstrated state loyalty. The government still requires loyalty in exchange for its resources, but the work of these private entrepreneurs, which does not serve the state, must be replaced by an alternate means of demonstration. The traditional cultural practices that have emerged under the relaxed political controls that have accompanied market reform have allowed officials to turn to the personal loyalties characteristic of the traditional authority and patrimonialism that were stressed by Confucian discourse (Walder 1986).

Confucian ideology promoted a system that valued relationships between partners that had an established bond of trust built upon a recognized hierarchy. Constructing these relationships around the strong hierarchical bonds that naturally existed between a ruler and his subjects, a husband and his wife, a father and his son and an older brother and his younger sibling created an indestructible system of social and bureaucratic order that was dependent on a mutual extension of kinship (Yang 1994). A fifth relationship built upon friendship established loyalties between people of different age groups, social status, educational level and official position who could depend on one another for professional advancement (Kutcher 2000).

⁸A euphemism used for sexual services.

⁹Zhu Rongji served as the Premier of China from 1998–2003. He is best known for his pragmatism and insistence on a hard work ethic as a countermeasure to political corruption within the Party.

The bonds that result from this socio-bureaucratic ordering of society serve as the structure for a complex network of personal relations (*renji guanxi*) that govern traditional modes of exchange in China and consequently underscore the structure of patron–client relations in China’s contemporary politico-economic system. Chinese people often recount the necessity of *guanxi* for success: a term used to refer to the traditional dyadic relationships that allow people to develop bonds of mutual interest and benefit. ‘Once *guanxi* is established between two people, each can ask a favour of the other with the expectation that the debt incurred will be repaid sometime in the future’ (Yang 1994, 1). *Guanxi* is traditionally established between people who have long-standing kin or kin-like relationships that grow out of an institutional bond. Standard prerequisites for *guanxi* relations in contemporary China rely on networks of classmates, old friends, army buddies and people who share a common place of origin (*laoxiang*). Like the bonds that ordered the Confucian socio-political system, these relationships are imbued with a strong innate sense of human sentiment (*renqing*) that forms an everlasting bond between two people who can turn to each other for favours and assistance.

The inherent conflicts created between the needs of a market-oriented economic system and socialist political system have caused government officials to turn to the personal loyalties engendered by *guanxi* networks in order to facilitate the operation and development of China’s market economy. In a politico-economic system fueled by exchange between the market forces and socialist controls, government officials must interact with businessmen who are required by the market to provide money in exchange for resources. This traditional system of social relations helps them structure a basis of non-monetary exchange that cannot be directly associated with corrupt practices. It is the traditional ideology of *guanxi* that structures this new system and the traditional practice of *yingchou* that allows them to build personal relationships and loyalties with people who lie outside of their formal *guanxi* network. These responsibilities do not end, however, with the establishment of *guanxi* because social relationships require maintenance.

One of the men in Ruili who worked for a local state-owned company was responsible for sales to a discrete set of local government bureaus. Of course his work entailed a certain amount of *yingchou* to build up necessary *guanxi* with the officials of those bureaus as a way of winning over their business from other private competitors. But I always wondered why he repeatedly went to karaoke clubs and massage parlours after securing these contracts. As he explained to me, gaining their business was only the beginning of their relationship. They are only willing to maintain the relationship with someone who demonstrates their continued trust and loyalty. Such dependence on personal and social networks has resulted in a system where the distribution of power is ultimately dependent on the reproduction and conduct of social relations rather than through the objective measures honored by the state (Yang 1994).

Conclusion

The epidemiological paradigms that govern many global public health programmes have created a perception that HIV infection is limited to certain high-risk populations.

Consideration of the local structural forces that promote high-risk behaviour, however, will help uncover people outside these categories who are also at risk for infection.

While the men I discuss in this paper are highly mobile, their social and political status precludes them from being targeted by messages aimed at marginalized men of the *floating population*. Similarly, messages that try to target ‘clients of sex workers’ evade these men who are engaging in entertainment activities offered by women who work as entertainment service workers. Alternatively, I suggest an understanding of the role that work plays in their lives and sexual practices can offer important lessons for responding to their risk for STIs, including HIV.

Responding to the epidemic in this context, however, will require us to broaden our definition of the terms ‘work’ and ‘workplace’. Valuable work within the public health and human rights fields has helped us define sex work as work for women. But we have not considered the role that soliciting of sexual services plays in men’s work. The political and economic success of many Chinese men is dependent on activities conducted inside myriad entertainment establishments that are often only considered a workplace for women. An understanding of all the work conducted in these spaces will help us design more effective programs for STI and HIV prevention within this context.

Effective prevention of HIV among these men will also recognize the competing social and political discourses that structure their daily lives and influence public recognition of their risk for HIV. Extramarital relationships with female entertainers, lovers and ‘minor’ wives are part of masculine entitlement for elite Chinese men. Politically, however, this type of behaviour is proscribed. Such an environment, where elite male entrepreneurs and government officials are caught between the competing discourses of a socialist patron-clientelist system and an incumbent system of cultural values, has incited the rise of an ‘economy of desire’ (Zhang 2001), where precious commodities and resources are quietly exchanged for corporeal experience.

Several provinces in China have tried to respond to these competing discourses by mandating placement of condoms in hotel rooms and other entertainment establishments where men solicit the services of sex workers. The effectiveness of these policies, however, is dependent on the development of messages that similarly recognize the multiple competing discourses that challenge prevention of HIV among China’s wealthy businessmen and government officials who experience sex within this liminal space.

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