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Turning Points in China's AIDS Response

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Introduction

In the two decades since the first AIDS case was confirmed in China (1985), public perception of the disease has undergone a sea change. In 1985, the disease was viewed as a foreign disease associated with illicit behaviour to be controlled by testing all foreigners who entered the country. In 2008, China had an internationally lauded AIDS prevention and treatment policy that endorsed many best practices and was promoted by the senior leadership. The changing attitude towards AIDS parallels shifts in Chinese society and politics in the three decades since the end of China's decade-long Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1976. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese were a traumatised, suspicious, fearful and inward-looking society. By the beginning of the new millennium, China was an emerging global power, a country that is both partner and participant in globalisation. A new and large generation of youths, coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s and largely spared the trauma of the previous generation, make up a newly emerging educated middle class. Increasingly exposed to new ideas and values from the outside, and connected by the Internet and global media, this new generation has greater respect for the value of life and tolerance for diversity. Because the highest risk groups for AIDS

infection are often the most highly stigmatised groups in society, the acknowledgement and increasing acceptance of these groups and their behaviours has opened the door for a more sympathetic attitude towards HIV/AIDS and a coordinated public policy response based on best international practices.

These changes have been brought about by a combination of events both internal and external. Domestic events and resulting internal pressures on the government to be accountable and to act have been the major impetus. Domestic advocacy from within the government and from NGO activists and academic scholars (public intellectuals) have also spurred government action. But external pressure from the international community has also been an important factor in pushing for greater attention to AIDS in China. As with many other issues, the international perception of denial, inaction, human rights abuses and cover-ups have threatened China's self-image and spurred internal debate and response, often positive. Combined with a realisation that economic growth and participation in the fruits of globalisation depend on good global citizenship, these forces have propelled an uncustomary accountability on the AIDS issue. These internal and external forces have worked synergistically over two decades to build the current consensus for action, albeit belatedly. This article highlights and analyzes key turning points in China's response to its AIDS epidemic.

The Beginning of the Epidemic

China's first case of AIDS was diagnosed in 1985 in a tourist from South America. All of the subsequent early cases were also of foreign origin: four haemophiliacs treated with Factor VIII supplied by a US pharmaceutical company, and naturalised US citizens visiting China. (1) AIDS in China was identified as a foreign disease from bad behaviour and immorality not found in China. Official reports, serious journal articles and news reports of that time consistently identified the epidemic's origin in China as from the West. The illicit behaviours associated with the epidemic by the Chinese public were highly stigmatised and denied to exist in China by the Chinese government: homosexuality, illegal drug use and prostitution were considered vices of the West and social problems that had been wiped out by socialist China. (2) The reality--that HIV was transported into China via the Burmese border by injecting users of heroin--was downplayed and information about rising infection rates during the early 1990s was suppressed by the government. (3) As a result, all

foreigners planning to live in China were required to be tested for AIDS and present certification that they were disease-free in order to obtain residence visas.

Official denial of an AIDS epidemic in China characterised this period. Even as late as 1996, the government had reported only 4,305 cases of AIDS and the estimate of infections was 100,000 even as the epidemic was exploding among injecting drug users in Yunnan Province. (4) HIV infections among injecting drug users being monitored through sentinel surveillance in Yunnan Province rose from 6 to 22 per cent between 1992 and 1996. (5) Increasing evidence of an emerging sexual epidemic among commercial sex workers and gay men were caught up in the official rhetoric of socialist moralism and a denial of the resurgence of prostitution or changing sexual behaviours among youths. At the same time, an urban gay community was emerging and a karaoke bar culture for business travellers extended even to rural market towns. (6) Evidence about the large numbers of abortions among unmarried women, (7) surveys showing changing attitudes and sexual behaviours among college students, (8) national sexual behaviour surveys, (9) and a large qualitative study about sex work (10) all during the 1990s did not make their way into AIDS programmes and policies, while existing sex education focused on abstinence among youths. (11) A few pilot projects reached out to karaoke bars and other sex-worker venues with safe sex education and condom promotion, but these pilots were isolated and small. There was virtually no education for the general public through the media.

This early period was characterised by public fear of the disease, poor public understanding of transmission, the belief that bad people got HIV and that the general public needed to be protected from them. Early provincial laws further stigmatised HIV-infected persons. Chengdu, the capital of populous Sichuan Province in China's southwest, passed a law restricting HIV-infected persons from marrying, serving as kindergarten teachers, surgeons and other professions, and an early draft even proposed prohibiting them from public swimming pools and public baths. (12) Copycat laws in other cities followed with little intervention by the central government. These were in part a reaction to rumours followed by ensuing panic. During late 2001 and early 2002, reports that disgruntled AIDS patients were randomly sticking infected syringes into people on buses, nightclubs or shopping areas in Tianjin--a large city of nine million in northeast China--fuelled public

fear and pressured local authorities to respond. (13) The rumours proved to be false but repeated hearsay about similar attacks even as late as 2005 revealed a lack of trust in the government. (14) The rapid spread of the rumours via the Internet and mobile phone text messaging presaged a similar phenomenon two years later during the SARS crisis.

At the same time that laws based on fear rather than scientific fact were passed, morality and continued denial of immoral behaviours in socialist China dominated over the adoption of internationally proven "best practices" for HIV prevention. The promotion of condoms, the only proven method of preventing sexual transmission, was contested throughout the 1990s despite widespread advocacy by public health professionals. Hard-line moralists in influential positions within the Ministry of Health's Health Education Center insisted that condom promotion would lead to promiscuity. (15) In a bold move to test the waters, the State Family Planning Commission's Publicity and Education Center produced and aired a 42-second animated condom public service announcement on national TV in 1999 (CCTV Channel 1) which promoted the use of condoms to prevent STDs and AIDS. It was quickly taken off the air by China's national censors who regarded it as too sexually explicit and violating laws on pornography. (16) The ban on condom advertisements was not lifted until 2003 by which time China was already reporting nearly one million HIV infections in the country. (17)

Sexual Transmission of HIV: Belated Acknowledgement and Response

Homophobia, Homosexuality and HIV

Even as China's AIDS response gathered momentum, a key group central for the response--men who have sex with men (MSM)--was barely mentioned and scant resources or efforts were devoted to prevention and care until fairly recently. This was not because of the absence of risk but because of the intense stigma associated with homosexuality in China and the public perception of homosexuality as aberrant and immoral behaviour associated with the West. Even as an urban gay culture began to emerge in the 1990s, most Chinese gay men hid their sexual preferences. Strong Confucian traditions for marriage and procreation, especially for sons who can carry on the family name and provide old age support, pushed homosexual men towards marriage with women despite their sexual orientation.

Efforts to reach MSM with AIDS prevention methods were limited to a few academic and non-governmental groups during the 1990s. Zhang Beichuan's Friends Exchange magazine, launched in the 1990s and published from his academic base at the Department of Psychiatry of Qingdao Medical College, was a furtive publication, always under threat of being shut down by university authorities. The magazine on homosexuality dealt with psychological support needs, AIDS prevention education and international events. Each copy passed through many hands and was one of the few sources of information for this hidden population in China. Several NGO groups, online publications, Aizhi Action and Beijing Gay Men's Hotline and similar hotlines in other major cities also provided anonymous safe sex information and support. The denial of homosexuality meant that AIDS associated with homosexuality was considered a purely Western phenomenon. Even as the MSM community began to organise itself, both to legitimise its existence and offer social support to its members, these efforts were entirely outside of the government, and its leaders were often subject to censure and discrimination. Even as late as 2005, AIDS prevention for MSM was not taken up by the government.

However, public and professional (psychiatric) views of homosexuality in China have begun to move away from the association with criminal behaviour. Until recently, China's psychiatric field continued to define homosexuality as a disease according to the outdated first edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM I), published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1951. Classifying same-sex behaviour as a disease removed the criminal dimension and allowed important debates to occur below China's political radar. However, many conservative Chinese still regarded homosexuality as criminal. In the summer of 1997, psychiatric magazine Mental Health Bulletin launched a debate on homosexuality with an article by the psychiatrist Jia Yicheng. Jia argued that homosexuality should be regarded as a criminal abnormality related to capitalism. It was damaging to socialist "spiritual civilisation", could break up families and led to the spread of AIDS. (18) The debate continued until early 1998 when a rebuttal by Zhang Beichuan was published, which pointed out that homosexuality had existed in China since ancient times and criticised attempts to impose modern political connotations on it. Zhang also argued that the idea that AIDS is a plague upon homosexuals is both wrong

and dangerous. He offered international scientific evidence to support his positions, and denounced Jia's viewpoint as ignorant. (19) An editorial in the magazine supported Zhang's position and concluded the debate.

A major turning point occurred with the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness in 2001, (20) when China's Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3 [third edition]) was published. It retained the classification of homosexuality as a disease, but removed homosexuals who were self-accepting and well-adapted from the category of sexual abnormality. (21) CCMD-3 was quickly adopted throughout China. Since that time, most influential psychiatrists have advocated that homosexuality is a normal part of human nature. (22) So while still stigmatised and disapproved by many, public attitudes towards homosexuality have changed to a greater degree of acceptance and have legitimised efforts to engage with MSM groups on HIV prevention.

Prostitution and HIV

Similarly, the official government position that prostitution was wiped out in China after 1949 contributed to the public's perception that heterosexual transmission of HIV/AIDS was not a prominent feature of China's emerging AIDS epidemic. (23) Confucian prudery and prohibitions against discussing sex with unmarried persons contributed to a climate of denial and discomfort with the topic.]

Pan Suiming's noteworthy studies in the mid-1990s changed that perception by documenting the ubiquity of sex work, both formal and informal, the migration patterns of sex workers and the specific sexual practices, and terminologies associated with the trade. (24) His comprehensive national survey on sexual behaviour also documented that men travelling for business and men of higher incomes had greater numbers of sexual partners. (25) Partly a rebound after the restrictive decades of the Cultural Revolution when many people were forced into politically correct but loveless marriages, and partly due to the government retreating from people's personal lives in the last decades, there has been a belated sexual revolution and sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure.

Domestic Advocacy and Events

2000 saw the expose of an AIDS epidemic in central China resulting from tainted blood. An online

newsletter (Aizhi Action) published the story of Dr. Gao Yaojie, a retired gynaecologist and AIDS campaigner in Henan Province trying to force the government to care for sick villagers who had become infected while donating blood plasma for cash during the 1990s. The New York Times (26) and China's own Southern Weekend (27) published front page stories about the widespread epidemic in Henan and its neighbouring provinces, detailing the human tragedies of dying parents, poverty-stricken and stigmatised families and children, the increasing number of AIDS orphans, and the provincial government's cover-up of the epidemic and refusal of care or assistance to the victims. This was followed by an onslaught from the foreign press corps based in China to out-scoop each other on the central China blood scandal and tragedy, laying blame and estimating the number of infected, rumoured to be in the millions. Even as information about the epidemic in central China emerged in the next year, the Chinese government continued to claim that China's AIDS epidemic was primarily among injecting drug users in southwest China. Vice Minister of Health Yin Dakui's visit to Wenlou, Henan in August 2001 to see an AIDS village firsthand, and his admission in a subsequent news conference of a "serious epidemic"--the first such visit and statement by a senior Chinese government official--resulted in his forced early retirement the following spring.

However, China's first application to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2002 from its Ministry of Health and Centers for Disease Control asked for assistance in dealing with its central China epidemic but was turned down initially because the country was still reporting that its epidemic was primarily among injecting drug users in the southwest. The application's rejection pushed the Chinese government to publicly acknowledge the extent of the central Chinese epidemic in their re-application, admitting for the first time that about 800,000 Chinese were infected, of which 80,000 (mostly in central China) required immediate treatment. The Global Fund re-application process led the China CDC to set up the China CARES project (see below) shortly thereafter to deal with the central China epidemic.

Meanwhile, Gao Yaojie, who exposed the central China epidemic, was awarded the prestigious Jonathan Mann award for health and human rights by the US-based Global Health Council and was invited to Washington, DC for the

award ceremony in 2001. This angered local officials in Henan, whom she rightfully blamed for covering up the epidemic. She was put under house arrest and denied a passport, accused of working for "anti-China forces". (28) The central government did not intervene, despite substantial pressure from the foreign donor community. Wan Yanhai, an outspoken AIDS advocate who accepted the Jonathan Mann award on her behalf, had provided her the original forum for her expose in his online Aizhi Action newsletter. Wan continued to publicise the plight of AIDS-infected villagers in Henan, and on 24 August 2002, was arrested by State Security officers "for leaking state secrets" and detained for over a month before being released on 20 September 2002. (29) Upon his release, he was allowed to officially register his advocacy group, Aizhi Action, with the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, a tactic used by many NGOs to circumvent the more restrictive registration process required by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. He angered Henan authorities by distributing a confidential report on his online list-serve which confirmed that the Henan government knew as early as 1995 that AIDS was spreading in the province from unclean blood collection practices. Wan's arrest was highly publicised internationally and led to international pressure for his release. However, there was substantial domestic pressure from the CDC and the Ministry of Health. On the one hand, China had a big Global Fund application pending (nearly USD100 million) and Wan's arrest was threatening its approval. But increasingly, China's own health officials recognised that while they did not condone Wan's tactics, they agreed with his call for greater action and accountability on the expanding Chinese AIDS epidemic. The government's attitude towards AIDS was changing and pressure from within, driven to some degree by pressure from the international community, resulted in Wan's release.

Public figures like Gao Yaojie and Wan Yanhai played into longstanding Chinese traditions of public campaigners for a good cause. Based on the Confucian model of a "princely man", public heroes capture the imagination of the Chinese public with their tireless moral crusades for the underdog, often at their own political or personal risk. During SARS, an elderly doctor from the military hospital system, Dr. Jiang Yanyong, publicly revealed the extent of the SARS epidemic and was placed under house arrest and silenced, and selfless nurses who treated SARS patients were glorified. Gao and Wan's

troubles helped propel them into the public imagination and redefine the issue of AIDS as one of government callousness in face of personal tragedy for many poor rural villagers in central China.

Innocent Victims and the Re-emergence of Sympathy and Charitable Action

Perhaps the greatest change in public perception has been towards the victims of the AIDS epidemic. Prior to the late 1990s, there was little sympathy for AIDS-affected persons. Mainly drug users or foreigners, these victims were considered complicit in their own fate and few felt they should be treated or spared. A front-page article in the Southern Weekend on 30 November 2000 featuring the central China AIDS epidemic dramatically changed public perception of the disease. The central China epidemic among poor rural farmers with no risk behaviour other than donating their blood for extra income, challenged the public perception that AIDS was caused by illicit and immoral behaviours. Coupled with this was the obvious truth that local officials in Henan knew of the problem and did nothing about it, that infections to spouses and children occurred as a result, that no one had been held accountable and that there were large numbers of AIDS orphans. This put a human face on the AIDS epidemic and in some ways, crystallised sympathy for the victims that merged with a public disdain for corruption and the unaccountability of China's political system, free market economy (greedy pharmaceutical and blood products companies), growing concerns about inequities between rich and poor and rural governance problems. (30) In the past, urbanites exhibited disdain towards farmers, rural migrants and others from the countryside whose "quality" they considered lower than theirs. The AIDS epidemic, however, caused many educated urbanites to develop a greater sympathy for the plight of rural villagers and outrage at how little their lives were valued by local communist party officials.

International Pressure to Act

As the global AIDS response gained momentum during the 1990s, concern began to mount over the potential for Asia to become the next epicentre for the epidemic, especially among the huge populations of China and India. Thailand's epidemic and its strong policy and control efforts were seen as models for the region and promoted by UN leaders, UNAIDS and bilateral donors at the highest levels of government. Concern about the exploding epidemic of HIV

infection among injecting drug users in the Mekong region (Golden Triangle) included Yunnan and its border with Burma. Although there was only modest donor support for AIDS projects in China in the mid-1990s, UNAIDS set up a country office and began working closely with the Chinese government in both surveillance and response, with most of the focus in China's southwest and border provinces.

By the late 1990s, stories of a widespread epidemic in central China were rife, even as the government continued to deny the problem. An important article in an international journal in 1995 identified HIV infections among former plasma donors in Anhui province, suggesting the problem might be widespread. (31) The annual epidemic update from UNAIDS and MOH parroted government statistics which claimed the epidemic was mainly in Yunnan and other border areas among injecting drug users. However, in late 2001, the UNAIDS China office released its annual report with the title "China's Titanic Peril" (32), which claimed that that over one million persons were likely already infected (800,000 to 1.5 million) and that 10 million might be infected by 2010, thus challenging the government's low estimates. Although the UNAIDS office cleared the report with its main working partners at the China CDC prior to publication, the report caused an uproar in other parts of China's government. The international publicity that accompanied the report led to denial, distancing and criticism of the UN from the Chinese Minister of Health, who was visiting Washington at the time and caught offguard by questions from the press.

However, there was no way of closing Pandora's box of AIDS in China. The following year, the US National Intelligence Council published its own report entitled "The Next Wave of HIV/AIDS: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Russia, India and China", which pointed to these five countries as locations where the epidemic was likely to expand. All five countries had large populations, emerging epidemics and insufficient policy responses. China's epidemic was again predicted to expand to 10 to 15 million infections by 2010. (33) The "Titanic Peril" report and the NIC report both received wide publicity and created a sense of international urgency about China's emerging epidemic.

In 2002, two articles about China's epidemic appeared in influential international publications, Foreign Affairs and Science, reiterating the need for a more urgent response by the Chinese government to the "Titanic Peril" and NIC

reports. (34) The Foreign Affairs article suggested the potential for destabilising social consequences; the Science article called for an urgent ramping up of the response and laid out an action plan. These articles got the attention of Chinese leaders. The latter article, published just before the 2002 Barcelona AIDS Conference, highlighted China's closing window of opportunity to avert a large epidemic by applying internationally tested best practices for HIV prevention.

These reports and articles thrust China's emerging AIDS epidemic and its insufficient response into the international realm, creating the perception that China was denying the severity of the problem and suppressing information. The subsequent fiasco of the SARS response built on a growing uncomfortable self-image of irresponsible and potentially disastrous action regarding AIDS. The cover-up of the Henan AIDS epidemic, growing public sympathy for the central China AIDS victims, and rumours of angry Henan villagers intentionally infecting the public all fuelled a growing social distrust that further pushed China's government to react.

The SARS Epidemic and the Spur to Action

The SARS epidemic and response was the final blow to China's "denialist" approach to infectious diseases. After the fiasco of the initial response to SARS, China was forced to realise that infectious diseases cross national borders and cannot be contained by political will. (35) Moreover, it was clear that the world would hold China accountable for its actions. As a good member of the global community, China had to publicly admit to and deal with its epidemic diseases. Fortunately, a major SARS epidemic was averted through a combination of luck and belated action, but China learnt a hard lesson that not responding to infectious disease threats can undermine economic growth and tarnish its global image. Waiting in the wings after the SARS crisis died down, China's AIDS advocates from the government, civil society, academia and their international partners grabbed the opportunity to push forward greater action on AIDS, the other infectious disease epidemic that had not been fully dealt with. A powerful Vice Premier, Wu Yi, who had been assigned to lead the SARS response during the height of the crisis, pushed forward a long overdue and aggressive response to AIDS. The resulting transformation led to the open admission of the AIDS problem and the initiation of a set of pragmatic policy responses. (36)

A number of published articles and public presentations in 2002-3 linked SARS and AIDS. But it took a major event billed as an international SARS and AIDS symposium at Tsinghua University in November 2003 to humanise the response and propel it forward. This event, organised by Tsinghua University, featured David Ho, an AIDS celebrity who invented the AIDS drug cocktail that transformed AIDS from a death sentence to a treatable disease, and former US President Bill Clinton. While Wu Yi did not appear as planned, three Chinese Vice-Ministers shared the stage. During the question and answer session, Bill Clinton took a question from Song Pengfei, an HIV-positive young man who had been infected by a blood transfusion as a teenager, and had subsequently formed an NGO for people living with AIDS, Positive Art. Clinton invited him to the stage and publicly hugged him, in that one important moment humanising the epidemic and obliging his Chinese government counterparts to publicly shake Song's hand or embrace him. Prior to that, it was impossible to get any political leader to touch an HIV-infected person or any public figures to lend their images to public education campaigns for fear of negative public reaction to this still highly stigmatised and feared disease. Following the symposium, Clinton met with CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao and pushed aggressively on the issue of public leadership to combat stigma. Shortly afterwards, Wen paid a visit to Ditan Hospital on World AIDS Day 2003 and Hu Jintao shook hands and was photographed with AIDS patients. Wen later visited rural Henan during Chinese New Year in 2005, shaking hands and having photographs of him taken with AIDS patients. Wu Yi also visited Henan and met with AIDS-infected villagers and promised greater government help. Previous to these visits, the highest official to visit Henan was Vice Minister of Health, Yin Dakui (2001), who called for greater action and was forced to step down shortly thereafter. In recent years, public sports and entertainment figures (Pu Cunxin, Jackie Chan, Yao Ming and Peng Liyuan, among others) have appeared in public service announcements about AIDS.

Role of Public Intellectuals

A feature of China in the last 20 years has been the re-emergence of public discourse and the revitalisation of academic debate and scholarship, albeit within fairly circumscribed political boundaries. As China's political leadership has allowed more political space for other voices and viewpoints, and public discourse on many issues

of social concern, a set of public intellectuals have emerged that has influenced and shaped public opinion on a variety of issues (the environment, equity, human rights, sovereignty, market economy, rule of law, political reform, etc.). In the AIDS realm, a group of public intellectuals has helped frame the equity and rights discussions surrounding China's AIDS response since the earliest days of the epidemic. They are frequently interviewed by the press, serve on advisory committees to government and often speak publicly. These include Qiu Renzong, a prominent ethicist based at the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Li Dun, a legal scholar and Jing Jun, a sociologist, both based at Tsinghua University; and Zhang Beichuan, a psychiatrist based at Qingdao Medical University.

Qiu Renzong was one of the earliest voices for tolerance, rights protection and programmes for those at risk. He organised a number of high-level policy debates in the early days of the epidemic on issues such as homophobia and AIDS, prostitution, injecting drug use, stigma and discrimination against HIV-infected persons and violence against women/marital rape. He published a widely-read book on AIDS calling for urgent responses and the protection of rights in 1999. (37) Together with Li Dun (a legal scholar) and Xia Guomei (from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences), they published a comprehensive review of AIDS legislation in 2003 that helped rid the country of fear-based laws like the Chengdu legislation and became the foundation for a series of laws and policies on AIDS based on international standards of confidentiality, non-discrimination and rights protection. (38) Jing Jun, an anthropologist by training and Director of the Institute for Social Policy Research and AIDS Policy Research Institute at Tsinghua University, has spoken and written extensively on the AIDS stigma in China, focusing attention on the interrelationships between poverty, minority status and risk. His work and public views have helped to frame AIDS issues in terms of social equity, social distrust and fairness. Zhang Beichuan has published and publicised the rights of homosexuals in China for decades and highlighted the need for social support, understanding, tolerance and AIDS prevention as well as the toll of social stigma on individuals and their families. His work has helped to shift attitudes towards greater tolerance. These public intellectuals have all helped shape and frame the equity, humanistic and rights-based discussions on AIDS that have emerged since 2003.

After 2003--Government Policy and Action

In 2003, the Chinese government launched the China CARES project (Comprehensive AIDS Response) to begin to deal with its central China AIDS crisis and to serve as a vehicle for partnership with the Global Fund and planned scaling-up of the response. In September 2003, China's government announced a free national AIDS treatment programme, one of the few countries in the world to do so at that time. This important (and expensive) act was the first of many to move China out of a denial response to one of accountability and humanism in its response to its AIDS epidemic. Focused mainly on the predicted 80,000 infected persons located mostly in central China and requiring immediate treatment, the programme entitled "The Four Frees and the One Care" provided free HIV testing and treatment using domestically-manufactured generic drugs for the AIDS cocktail therapy for all rural residents and poor people in cities, free counselling and testing services, free treatment for pregnant women and testing for their babies, free school fees for children affected by HIV and AIDS and financial support for affected families. (39) With this policy, the government squarely recognised the need for treatment and care not only as a means of improving the lives of people and functioning of communities affected by HIV and AIDS, but also as a means of preventing further transmission of the disease. The government's response has continued to become more aggressive and open. These actions and the greater transparency that has accompanied them come from a new leadership that is defining itself as more willing to prioritise the poor and more concerned with both equity and social development. A State Council AIDS Working Committee (SCAWCO) chaired by Wu Yi was established in early 2004, elevating the importance of the AIDS issue at the national level. Following similar moves as a result of the SARS epidemic in 2003, the government clearly stated its intention to hold all government officials accountable for their honesty in dealing with AIDS and for increased attention to and resources for infectious diseases. Recent years have seen the ban on condom advertisements removed (2002), the publication of an aggressive five-year action plan (2006-10), a state council decree on AIDS from Premier Wen Jiabao (2006) and greater tolerance for the role of NGOs in China's AIDS response (see below). This overdue and more aggressive government AIDS response points to the mustering at last of the Communist Party's high-level political commitment so essential in the China context for mobilising local-level action.

Many attribute the dramatic transformation of China's AIDS response in the post-SARS period to the

leadership of Wu Yi. No doubt her personal interest and recognition of the need for action along with her own political power were essential, but as noted above, internal and external pressures for change spearheaded by enlightened officials, advocates and public intellectuals also played a significant role, sometimes with negative consequences for their careers. Some of the strongest internal advocates were the former and current directors of the National Center for AIDS Prevention and Control under the China CDC and officials at the Division of Disease Control and Ministry of Health. They have worked closely with UNAIDS, lobbied internally for Wan Yanhai's release in 2002 and pushed hard for the establishment of the China CARES project and China's national treatment programme. Its current director, Wu Zunyou, has been a tireless advocate for evidence-based best HIV prevention practices and personally spearheaded controversial "harm reduction" programmes for injecting drug users including a new nationwide methadone maintenance programme. The scaling up of harm reduction programmes for injecting drug users continues, albeit while a more aggressive campaign to deal with sexual transmission has yet to emerge, even while the government now admits that half of all new infections in China are sexually transmitted. (40)

Tolerance for Civil Society--Understanding the Need for Support Groups

As the AIDS epidemic expanded in China in recent years, it has become increasingly evident that there is a need for a greater role for NGOs in the response to reach groups that avoid government service programmes (sex workers, drug users, gay men). The government's newfound pragmatic approach to controlling AIDS has helped push China's government towards increasing tolerance and support for the role of civil society in China's AIDS response. There has been considerable government easing of previously tight restrictions on civil society movements and roles, and public support for the advocacy and roles that non-government groups have been playing. As a result, there has been a proliferation of AIDS orphan relief charities and volunteer groups, patient support groups and groups working with gay men.

Independent MSM groups have been set up in most major urban areas in the last few years, promoting and carrying out HIV prevention education, setting up hotlines and doing outreach and condom distribution in bars, parks and bathhouses. Such groups have grown from a university-led organisation (Friends Exchange Project) and several Beijing-

and Hong Kong-based NGOs (Beijing Tongzhi Network, Aizhi, Chi Heng Foundation) to numerous active local groups serving their communities and communicating with one another online. The incidence of HIV infection among MSM has been increasing and is now acknowledged by the government as an issue of urgent concern. Of new infections in 2007, a full 12.2 per cent were among MSM. (41) This high incidence has motivated government agencies tasked with AIDS prevention to reach out to the growing number of locally-spawned volunteer MSM groups and there has been a resulting expansion of MSM groups nationally, often working in collaboration with local CDCs engaged in AIDS education outreach in urban areas. (42)

AIDS patient groups (often for haemophiliacs and people infected from blood transfusions) have also grown in China's big urban areas. Originally affiliated with infectious disease hospitals and led by medical personnel, these groups are now becoming more independent. However, at the local level in rural China, there are few such legitimate groups representing former plasma donors, and the groups that are formed are feared by the local governments who do not want to be held accountable for patient demands for financial or legal redress. Most local crackdowns related to the AIDS epidemic in Henan have occurred for such reasons. There remains little tolerance for any group demanding justice or legal action, and advocacy groups too closely tied to international human rights groups are regularly suppressed.

Perhaps no other situation has contributed to greater understanding of the value of NGOs in China's AIDS response than the controversy surrounding the China Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. The Global Fund was established in 2002 and functions through CCMs, which are groups made up of civil society representatives to review, approve and submit all applications for country grants for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. (43) China has successfully competed for five rounds of Global Fund funding for HIV/AIDS, signed grants totalling nearly USD180 million and has received nearly USD84 million so far. While China did establish a CCM, it worked more as a rubber stamp for applications developed and executed by China's Ministry of Health and CDC. Domestic AIDS NGOs had limited say in the process. Several years ago, an election was organised to formally elect NGO representatives, and Wan Yanhai, representing his own organization, Aizhi, as well as a number of Henan Province

grassroots patient groups, lost the election and claimed the election was rigged by the government. This precipitated a thorough review by the Global Fund assisted by UNAIDS, and resulted in a new election that by all accounts was uniquely transparent and accountable, advertised and participated in by any interested AIDS NGOs in China. (44 This process provided an opportunity for wide discourse and comment over the Internet within China, and helped to network disparate groups in the country. Several widely attended local meetings (Xi'an, Beijing and Kunming) brought groups together often for the first time, with UNAIDS and donor representatives to teach them how to conduct the elections. The election resulted in two elected representatives and two NGO committees, each with 11 elected representatives from a broad spectrum of groups representing haemophiliacs, MSM, former plasma donors and migrant workers. The controversy and resolution served as a significant door opener for NGO participation in the AIDS response in China and helped to bring onboard central government leaders who now (at times grudgingly) accept the reality of Global Fund requirements. It also established a genuine mechanism for input by NGOs into China's AIDS response. Global Fund Round 6, which is fully focused on AIDS NGOs, was seen by many as an important further mechanism to institutionalise the AIDS NGO role in China's AIDS response, even though its intended implementing agency (principal recipient) was switched at the last moment from a national GONGO (China Association for STD and AIDS Prevention and Control) to the government AIDS agency (National Center for AIDS Prevention and Control of the China CDC). A new independent NGO has been established in China, China Global Fund Watch, to monitor compliance with Global Fund rules. However, routine citizen and civil society participation and influence in government-organised AIDS work still have a long way to evolve.

China's Current AIDS Epidemic

The government estimates there are now 740,000 (560,000-920,000) HIV infections in the country with 319,877 confirmed cases, and that the disease is found in all of China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. (45) Despite the many positive policy changes, new HIV infections are still growing at an alarming rate--45 per cent in 2007. (46) Overall prevalence of HIV remains low in the general population (0.05 per cent) but given China's large population, the number of infected persons and persons requiring antiretroviral (ARV) treatment (102,323) constitutes one

of the largest disease burdens in the world. (47) While infections among injecting drug users are still a major source of new infections, 57 per cent of all new infections are now sexually transmitted. (48) The challenges for control in the coming period are daunting and will require new approaches and partnerships with civil society.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the major turning points in China's AIDS response in the 25 years since the first AIDS case was diagnosed in China in 1985. The initial response rejected the possibility that immoral and criminal behaviours associated with AIDS could exist in communist China and blamed the victims (AIDS sufferers) for their plight. A lack of humanism characterised this period, following a difficult dehumanising chapter in Chinese history when voicing concern for fellow citizens was dangerous and discouraged. A combination of Confucian prudery and communist morality created a cultural and political avoidance of discussions about sexual behaviour, drug use and homosexuality, and by doing so, wasted precious years that should have been spent on early prevention.

A combination of internal and external forces, often working synergistically, has pushed China's AIDS response forward since 2000. The exposure of the central China epidemic caused by donation of tainted blood changed the public face of the epidemic. The innocent victims of central China--rural villagers and AIDS orphans--catalysed a public sympathy for AIDS victims that had been missing. The emergence of a middle class in China with a growing interest in charitable giving found a ready vehicle in the social relief programmes aimed at AIDS orphans. Sympathy for the victims combined with public distrust and disdain for the growing economic and social inequities and corruption in rural China.

A major factor mobilising the AIDS response was China's negative reputation as a member of the global community in the aftermath of the initial missteps in handling the SARS epidemic. The loss of face and need to burnish its image helped to mobilise long overdue action on AIDS. China's own internal advocates from the government, civil society and academia seized the opportunity to make the connections between the two responses and to convince the senior leadership of the urgency to act.

At the same time, the opening of China to new ideas in the 30 years since the beginning of economic

reforms has contributed to greater tolerance for diversity in society. Homosexuality, while still highly stigmatised, is acknowledged. Non-governmental organisations, while still restricted, are tolerated and better understood, especially for the role they must play in China's AIDS response. Prudery and moralism about drugs and sex are giving way to pragmatism and the endorsement of harm reduction programmes, such as the promotion of condoms and clean needles. Fear-based laws restricting rights and dismissing the importance of confidentiality are being replaced by laws based on international standards. But China still has a long way to go in controlling the AIDS epidemic and enforcing the policies and programmes promulgated from the central level. Local officials still resist admitting to AIDS in their locales--for fear of scaring away economic investment--and publicly acknowledging prostitution or drug use in their communities. More effort is needed to hold these officials accountable and to transform the culture of distrust and concealment of bad news to one of positive partnership. A more aggressive push on local areas to scale up programmes aimed at preventing sexual transmission is long overdue. This involves tackling the still difficult issues of sexual behaviour among youths, men who have sex with men, commercial sex and the travelling businessmen who pay for it. China has come a long way in tackling its AIDS problem, but the battle is far from over.

Providing HIV-Related Services in China for Men Who Have Sex with Men/

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Introduction

Community engagement is important for controlling the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic among men who have sex with men (MSM). (1-3) In China, not-for-profit community-based organizations (CBOs) are engaged with the social, educational, environmental or public safety needs of the community. However, the majority of public sector-funded HIV programmes in China have failed to engage CBOs (4,5) and have had limited success in preventing HIV. (6) Furthermore, the lack of endorsement for CBOs from the public sector has hampered the work of CBOs on HIV control and delivery of related services. Most MSM-friendly CBOs do not offer services like HIV testing, post-test counselling, result notification and follow-up, which limit their ability to provide comprehensive care services.

To address these problems, an HIV care and prevention programme sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was launched in China in 2008. The programme promoted collaboration between public sector agencies and CBOs in the delivery of prevention and support services. Preventive services were directed to high-risk groups and included reducing risk behaviours and increasing HIV testing. Support services focused on increasing access to care and improving the quality of services for people living with HIV. During the programme, the responsibility for some HIV-targeted interventions began to shift from the public sector to CBOs. (7)

Here we describe a project collaboration called IMPACT (integration minimum package of prevention in accelerating case finding and treatment) in Guangzhou.

Local setting

In China, basic HIV control and prevention measures are implemented primarily through the public health

system organized by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC). These measures include HIV-testing campaigns, condom promotion, behavioural change interventions, follow-up care for people living with HIV and implementation of free antiretroviral therapy (ART). (4,5) Due to stigma and discrimination against homosexuality and people living with HIV, MSM are usually hard to reach. Most of the CBOs working with MSM are newly-established organizations that know the community very well. However, a large proportion of CBOs have not been well supported by the public health sector due to policy barriers and a perceived lack of expertise in HIV prevention in these organizations. Many CBOs have not survived due to lack of funds.

In 2011, MSM constituted almost one-third of the 48000 new HIV infections. (5) The HIV prevalence among MSM has increased from 2.5% in 2006 to 7.4% in 2009. (8,9) Furthermore, it is estimated that in 2011, 50% of MSM who were HIV-positive did not know their status. (5)

Guangzhou is a city in southern China with over 12 million inhabitants. In 2008, it was estimated that 44 593 sexually active MSM were living in the city. HIV prevalence among MSM has increased significantly from 5.0% (19/379) in 2008 to 11.4% (72/633) in 2013. (10)

Relevant changes

Previously CBOs were restricted to carrying out programme implementation only. Here, the Guangzhou CDC and the Lingnan Partners Community Support Center worked together to design an integrated service including HIV health education, online HIV-risk assessment, on-site HIV counselling and testing, partner notification, psychosocial care and support, CD4+ T-lymphocyte count testing and guidance on clinical treatment. Each component of the project was designed with a specific goal and relevant HIV care service (Table 1). We describe these components below.

Project components

Online prevention tools

We developed two internet tools: a scenario-based application and an HIV risk self-assessment system. The scenario-based application is an interactive internet application that simulates real-life HIV risk scenarios. The objective of this application is to encourage HIV testing and reduce high-risk behaviours.

The online HIV risk self-assessment system calculates an individualized HIV-risk score by evaluating an individual's risk profile. Based on the results, this system also provides tailored guidance to promote HIV testing and behavioural change. These two online tools reach a wide user base via the internet and provide tailored interventions to meet specific needs. HIV education was also provided online and by public service broadcasting via a social media application (WeChat).

Online-to-offline service

This component linked virtual interventions for increasing HIV testing to actual HIV testing and facilitated HIV care. The online prevention tools described above were linked to an online appointment system for HIV testing. People could choose to have a test at one of three facilities in the area and test results were made available via an online notification system. A person who made an online appointment could also choose that the notification system (Easy Tell[R]) informed their partner anonymously about a positive result by clicking a consent button and providing the partner's mobile phone number or email address. (11) If the result was positive, a system message which contained a verification code was sent automatically to the partner. Notified partners could retrieve the information through the platform using the verification code and then be linked to HIV testing from the platform.

Service centre

We set up a one-stop service centre in Guangzhou, which was coordinated by a local CBO and Guangzhou CDC. In this centre, public sector staff provided on-site blood sampling and testing and carried out epidemiological investigations, such as HIV sentinel surveillance among MSM and medical follow-up for people who tested positive. People who were tested were also asked questions about their sexual behaviour. Meanwhile, CBO peers delivered high-quality and

timely pre-and post-test counselling, psychosocial support services, guidance on retention in care and ART adherence support services. The quality of these processes was ensured by following a stringent selection process. Peer workers were trained by staff from Guangzhou CDC and the CBO for about three months in the one-stop service centre. All peer counsellors signed a confidentiality agreement.

Project outcome

Between 2008 and 2013, the project gave 22 282 HIV antibody tests, of which 999 tests were positive. The annual number of tests increased from 1064 in 2008 to 7754 in 2013. By 2013, tests conducted under the project accounted for more than 80% of total HIV tests (22 282/26 884) and new HIV diagnoses (999/1218) among MSM in Guangzhou (Fig. 1). Currently, an average of 25 people make appointments and get tested through the project each day. This project has addressed the needs of this community and has been improving access to HIV services.

The project also ensured continuum-of-care services, including linkage to care, retention in care, ART initiation and ART adherence. Of the 999 HIV-positive people, it was possible to link 948 (95%) to care services, while 891 (94%) of those linked were successfully retained in care. Among those who were retained in care and met the criteria for receiving free ART (CD4+ count <350 cells/[micro]L), over 85% (353/415) initiated ART. Based on the percentage of people on ART, we assumed that approximately 75% of these people achieved viral suppression (less than 50 copies/mL).

Challenges and lessons learnt

The project had several limitations and faced several challenges (Box 1). One of the key limitations is that this project did not collect comprehensive pre-intervention data to demonstrate the effect of the intervention. Also, the project could recruit only a subset of MSM residing in the study area and found it difficult to reach out to some subgroups (e.g. older MSM and rural MSM). These hard-to-reach subgroups reportedly have lower levels of education, poorer HIV knowledge and fewer opportunities to access HIV-related services, making them highly vulnerable to HIV. (10)

Despite the expanding scope of HIV services arising from collaboration between the public sector and the CBO, the relative absence of formal partnerships with treatment facilities limited the extent to which this intervention impacted clinical management and retention. Closer partnerships with clinical facilities may further enhance the project. Our annual HIV sentinel surveillance face-to-face survey showed that 80% (2081/2603) of respondents received some form of HIV-related service during the past year, HIV testing coverage remained relatively low (47%; 1227/2603) among MSM. (12,13) This disparity indicates the need to strengthen the promotion of HIV testing. Other challenges included instability of peer workforce, lack of sustained funding and intervention information fatigue.

Despite the limitations, the high percentage of people who were retained in HIV care suggests that collaboration between the public sector and CBOs can be successful in providing high-quality HIV-related services. Internationally, task-shifting from health professionals to CBOs has proven to be effective in the provision of counselling, testing, care and treatment services for HIV. (7,14) In the current project, the CBO engaged with the MSM community and the public sector agencies contributed technical proficiency and worked together to improve the quality of services offered. The key to this successful collaboration was the mutual trust between the public sector and the CBO. The role of the CBO was not restricted to programme implementation; it was also involved in the project development phases. (15) The one-stop shop concept of providing a range of HIV services from a single location increased retention in HIV care.

Box 1. Summary of main lessons learnt

* The internet can facilitate human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention among a subset of men who have sex with men by enhancing awareness, service uptake, retention in care and adherence to

treatment.

* Collaboration between the public sector and the community group

promoted acceptance by the target population.

* Task sharing by community groups can Increase access of this

high-risk group to available HIV-related services.

The project may be usefully adapted to other places in China and perhaps other low- and middle-income countries, where opportunities for community engagement are limited. Finally, experience gained from the project can also inform decision-making in other public health domains, which is likely to benefit from increased collaboration between the public sector and community groups.

The Lack of Chinese Lesbians: Double Crossing in Blue Gate Crossing

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[1] Although no critic has noted this, it still appears trite and painfully embarrassing to proclaim: "There are no lesbians in Chinese societies." After all, it is almost a cliche to argue that sexuality is a construct. Thirty years ago, Michel Foucault in The History of Sexuality examined how power structures in the nineteenth-century had defined homosexuals as a "species," repressing and at the same time, defining them, giving a voice to the love that dares not speak its name. Following Foucault, historian Jonathan Ned Katz traces the etymology of the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" only to uncover that their definitions change over the century. He concludes: "Radical social constructionists ... posit the historical relativity of sexual behaviors, as well as of identities, meanings, categories, groups, and institutions. Such relativity theory ... remains subversive ... for it challenges our stubborn, ingrained idea of an essential eternal heterosexuality and homosexuality" (179). It is hardly a great leap to apply the relativity theory to the word "lesbian." Indeed, Judith Halberstam argues that "lesbian" is a term produced by the politicized powers "of the rise of feminism and the development of what Foucault calls a homosexual 'reverse discourse'" in the mid to late twentieth-century and since the term is situated in a specific time, it "cannot be the transhistorical label for all same-sex activity between women" (51). By extension, neither can the term "lesbian" be transnational if it means differently to women in different cultures. Hence, discourses on sexuality ought to be culturally and historically specific.

[2] However, given the hegemonic academic hold of Western discourses and the lack of lexicon regarding sexuality in the Chinese language, it is impossible that terms are not translated. "Queer" is translated into "ku'er" and "homosexuality" into

"tongxing ai" or "tongxing lian" (which literally means same-sex love). Even though "tongxing lian"is translated from the West, in its mistranslation, something is transmogrified, lost, and reconfigured for "tongxing lian" or same-sex love, an emotion, is not the same as the clinical species of homosexuality. Furthermore, in translating Chinese back to English, there is a double crossing, a doubly "lost-in-translation"-ness. In the Chinese lexicon, "lesbian" is a translated word from the West. If thoughts are defined by words, then in the Chinese imagination, there are no "lesbians." In this article, I will examine the consequences of the nondescript "lesbian" in Chinese societies through Blue Gate Crossing (2002), a contemporary coming-of-age Taiwanese film about a teenage "lesbian" and the film's engagement with Western discourses. While I appreciate that China and Taiwan (and other countries with large Chinese populations) are affected by globalization in different ways, I have conflated the countries as "Chinese societies" since my analysis focuses on how the Chinese language acts as a reverse discourse to Western theories.

Burdensome Names

[3] While Katz and Halberstam argue from a social constructionist's point of view, the more basic fact that there is no neologism for the term "lesbian" in Chinese lexicon points out that there are truly no "lesbians" in Chinese societies. Tze-lan Sang uncovers the genealogy of the word "tongxing lian" in her book, The Emerging Lesbian, although she overlooks the term she is more interested in--"lesbian." When one mentions "tongxing lian," one usually refers to the male homosexual. A "lesbian" is a "nu tongxing lian" (a female homosexual), a mere addition of the word "female" as a prefix to "homosexual": it is hardly a translated word. Furthermore, as Wah-shan Chou evinces in his book, Tongzhi, not many in Chinese societies identify with the terminology of "tongxing lian." Judith Butler in "'Dangerous Crossing'" remarks, "At issue is how to read the name as a site of identification, a site where the dynamic of identification is at play" (Bodies 143). If this is so, then the lack of the category, "lesbian," disallows the Chinese "lesbian" to be inscribed on. The "lesbian" is, thus, elusive and fluid and always in a state of formation of its identity. The Chinese "lesbian" is a reification of the Western

concept of queer which is defined by "its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity" (Jagose 1). Nonetheless, precisely for the lack of its definition, whereas queer has a name, "queer," the "lesbian" is unwritten and in a constant state of being written and re-written. In other words, "lesbian" in Chinese societies may be a name queerer than queer.

[4] In Butler's reading of Jacques Lacan, she comments that the social function of naming "is always to some extent an effort to stabilize a set of multiple and transient imaginary identifications" (Bodies 152). She further explores Lacan and Slavoj ZiZek's reading of Saul Kripke and concludes that both Lacan and Kripke agree that "the name, as part of a social pact and, indeed, a social system of signs, overrides the tenuousness of imaginary identification and confers on it a social durability and legitimacy. The instability of the ego is thus subsumed or stabilized by a symbolic function, designated through the name" (152-3). Since the social pact and system of signs are dictated by the Law of the Father, and that "lesbian" is not a sign in the Chinese imagination, female same-sex desire not only escapes the jurisdiction of the Law but is always indefinable. Instead of occupying the space of visual order of the Imaginary which is stabilized through the symbolic function, "lesbianism" becomes the Real, the impenetrable and willful world that defies and at the same time, eclipses interpretation. The Real, as the Other, producible in everyday life through gaps, slips, speechlessness and the sense of the uncanny, exposes the sexist reliance on the (male) phallus as a referent in a world where meanings are found in gaps. The Real is terrifying because it is unknowable and cannot be tamed by the Law of the Father. If this is so, the embodiment of "lesbian" in male dominated Chinese societies should be tabooed and well-documented for its deviance.

[5] But it is not. Critics such as Vivien Ng, Bret Hinsch, Fu-Ruan Fang and Vern Bullough have tried to seek "lesbians" who are--to borrow a term from Martin Duberman--hidden from history in vain. It is not because female same-sex activities were suppressed but that they were fully integrated into the lifestyles of ancient Chinese societies. In one of the first book-length history of homosexuality in China, Xiaomingxiong's extensive research reveals that female same-sex activities were even more widespread than male homosexuality and its sanction was not as dependent on the times, laws and

dynasties. However, while female same-sex activities were not suppressed, they were approved only under the policing eyes of a patriarchal society. For example, concubines in a confined household were encouraged to have same-sex activities for fear they might cuckold their husband. Or as Laura Wu argues, after examining 12 Ming-Qing texts, female same-sex activities in the literature of that period are often "heterosexualized," resulting in a (heterosexual) marriage to prove that a union in which a man rules is superior to a female same-sex egalitarian union although the research is by no means extensive or conclusive. Translating the ancient Chinese societies to psychoanalytic discourse which claims that one tries to tame the ineffable Real through the symbolic function of language and societal mores, one sees how the Lacanian theory is in tension with ancient Chinese societies. Although there is a lack of terminology for female same-sex relations, the men in the societies were comfortable living in close proximity with the Real, "lesbians," without a need to define the sex acts. Yet, at the same time, because the Real exposes the gaps in the linguistic world ruled by the Law, the (phallic) men controlled the women through their patriarchal dominance. In other words, there was only a difference of sex but not sexuality in ancient Chinese societies.

[6] Chou agrees that in Chinese societies, there is no concept of sexuality, no divide between homo--and heterosexuality (13). Thus, he espouses the term "tongzhi" (comrade) and rejects "tongxing lian" for its sexual connotations. "The primary concern of modern parents," he argues, "is not so much the child's intimate relationship with people of the same sex, but that she or he becomes ... a sexed category that privileges sexuality at the expense of his or her position in the family-kinship system, thus making the child a nonbeing in Chinese culture" (96). On the other hand, "tongzhi" was a term used during the Chinese nationalist movement and is appropriated by the homosexuals. To Chou, "There can be no final definition of 'tongzhi,' as its meaning and content depend on and require everyday practices of all self-identified 'tongzhi' to actualize, define and redefine" (4). However, Chou's differentiation of "tongxing lian" and "tongzhi" appears merely to be tautological, a play on semiotics: is not a "tongzhi" defined by "everyday [sexual] practices"? (Like the term "tongxing lian," "tongzhi" is assumed to be a man unless prefixed by "nu.") If Chou's account of the genealogy of the word, "tongzhi," demonstrates that

it is burdened with political and cultural baggage, how can it perpetually be in the process of defining itself? Furthermore, he treats individuality as incompatible with familial ties; this is not necessarily so. Although it is generally true (and generalizations are tricky as everyone knows) that Chinese societies place kinship in high regard, it does not mean that one must sacrifice everything--his personality, her career, his sexual practices, or her maiden name--to family obligations.

[7] The problem with Chou's reading of homosexuality in Chinese societies is that it is ahistorical. He imagines that Chinese societies are preserved in a time capsule, untouched by globalization. His comradeship, his "tongzhi"-ism, exists only in Chinese societies isolated from the world. On the contrary, Western discourses on sexuality, through translations, had infiltrated the Chinese societies when there was an incipient consciousness on sexuality in the early twentieth century (Sang 102-6). Since then, the legacy of Victorian prudish ethics has instilled in Chinese societies a shame for the love that dares not speak its name.

Bodies under the Ban of Suspension

[8] While the West saw the gay liberation movement in the sixties, it is not till the late eighties has there been a burgeoning of "lesbian" literature which strives for sexual equality in Chinese societies and at the same time, interacting and counteracting with the Western discourses (Sang 7). Blue Gate Crossing is such a text. For a first-time director, Chih-yen Yee, it is courageous to begin the movie with a black blank screen. "I cannot see. I really cannot see," says a female voice-over. What Yee does is to prevent what Laura Mulvey calls scopophilia and self-identification between the viewer and the film. The blank screen is a refusal to feed the voyeuristic tendencies of the "male gaze." Right from the start, Yee announces her intention for this film to be a discourse with Western theories. The blank screen cuts suddenly to a medium shot of a teenage girl with short boyish hair and plain features, her eyes closed. Although the blank screen may encourage an identification with the girl, that the viewer is looking through her closed eyes, this identification vanishes the moment the

viewer sees her: she is plain; she is neither the curvy bombshell nor the willowy Cinderella waiting to be rescued one is accustomed to identify with in Hollywood movies. Furthermore, if eyes are the windows of the soul, and actors depend on their eyes to convey their emotions, the first image of a girl with closed eyes disrupts the conveyance of her emotions to the audience, which in turn, prevents the audience from identifying with her. She, Ke-rou Meng, slowly opens her eyes, looks to her left lovingly, repeats the refrain "I can't see" playfully and nudges someone sitting beside her. "I can see now," says another female voice as the camera slowly zooms out to include the new speaker in the frame. The new speaker, Yue-zhen Lin, then describes what she sees in her future: she will be having high tea with rich ladies and her beautiful child while her husband glides into the restaurant. There is "already a question of crossing" from a present to a fantasized future which does not include the plain girl (Bodies 145). The "husband," the audience finds out later, is manifested in the form of an infatuation for a boy, Shi-hao Zhang, in the same school. Lin manages to persuade Meng to get to know Zhang who, in turn, falls for Meng. How are we to read the--to borrow Eve Sedgwick's terms--triangular crossing of desires (Meng's budding acknowledgement of same-sex love for Lin; Lin's infatuation with Zhang; and Zhang's attachment to Meng)?

[9] We might read the crossing of desires as a site of contested gender and sexual meanings. Naming, as we have seen previously, is such a site. According to Butler, naming is "a patrilineal organization that implies that it is patronymic names that endure over, as nominal zones of phallic control" (Bodies 153). She adds that the expropriation of feminine names gives the illusion of permanence to patrilineality. Hence, in Butler's reading of Willa Cather's fiction, one might expose this illusion through "appropriation and displacement of the patronym" (154). In addition to appropriation and displacement of the patronym, Blue Gate Crossing also adds a new dimension to subvert the patronym, repetition of phrases. Lin brings Meng to a swimming pool where Zhang practices nightly and persuades her to get to know him on Lin's behalf. Meng approaches Zhang and asks him, "I have a friend who wants to know you. Are you interested?" He inquires for the identity of that person repeatedly but she refuses to answer him directly. Ignoring Zhang, she calls for Lin whom she thinks is still lurking around the pool. When it is apparent that Lin has left, Zhang says, "Actually, there is no such person as Lin

Yue-zhen is there? You just want to know me right?" This is not the only time Zhang, a custodian of the patronym by the virtue of his sex, tries to efface the existence of Lin. He repeats this sentence several times throughout the movie. However, the more he repeats it, the more ridiculous and empty it is, as if his words have lost their meaning, because we, as audience, know that there is such a character and because it exhibits his childish mentality. In repeated attempts to obliterate her existence, he only reveals his insecurity as part of the order of the Father over the control of patronymic names.

[10] When Meng continues to ignore him and leaves the pool, Zhang calls after her, "I'm Zhang Shi-hao. Scorpio. O+ blood. Swim team. Guitar club." As a self-introduction, he repeats the exact sentence at least thrice in the movie. With each repetition, the hollower it sounds. It appears he is defined by superficial frivolities, his horoscope, blood group, and his hobbies. It follows then that his name is one of his frivolities; it is of little significance to him. By extension, the senseless repetition of his name reveals that the patrilineal system, which one thinks of as important, is inconstant and unstable. Furthermore, in a scene where Lin writes Zhang's name repeatedly, believing that he will fall in love with her if the ink in the pen runs dry, she suddenly switches from writing his name to that of Takuya Kimura, a (male) Japanese pop idol. While the scene is to show that Lin is merely having an infatuation, that she is flighty and superficial, it can also symbolically represent how the repetition of a patronym (Zhang's name) can lead one into an illusion that patrilineality is permanent. However, since a patronym is merely referential but not descriptive, and that one name is as good as another and as easily replaced, it suggests that patrilineality is by no means permanent but a construct by the Law of the Father to maintain a hegemonic hold over the women, or women like Lin whose sole desire is to marry and adopt her husband's surname.

[11] Unlike Zhang, Meng never introduces herself by her name. It is most unusual that even though she is the protagonist, the viewer knows Lin's and Zhang's names even before hers. Or that the viewer knows her name only after about twenty minutes into the movie. Even then, she is not the one who announces her name. The camera shows Lin forging a love letter in Meng's name to Zhang. Even when Meng's mother calls her by her name, she does not respond. The letter, naturally, gets

Zhang and Meng into trouble with the school authorities. Mien, Zhang's friend, playfully (or spitefully) glues the letter on the floor, outside the principal's office. The offense, though not serious enough to merit a suspension, is sternly reprimanded. They are to remove the letter from the ground. At first, they use a metal ruler to scrape it. Zhang says to her, "Sorry. I didn't do this. Mien did it." To which, she replies, "I didn't write the letter. Lin Yue-zhen did." He repeats his two favorite refrains: "There is no Lin Yue-zhen is there?" and "I am Zhang Shi-hao..." Exasperated, she stands up and erases the letter (and her name) with her rubber soles. Rather than seeing the incident as Meng's refusal to acknowledge her patrilineal name, one could utilize what Butler calls appropriation and displacement in the name. Her name, Ke-rou, has a masculine ring and literally means to curb gentleness/softness. A girl is supposed to have a feminine name so that she could grow into the feminine gendered role. The conflict between Meng's masculine name and her feminine gender then demonstrates how names given by the Father are used to naturalize genders.

[12] Nevertheless, her name is not merely a form of resistance to patrilineality; if it were, the movie would fall back into the male/female and heterosexual/ homosexual binaries. Although contemporary Chinese societies have acquired a knowledge of sexual shame from the West, Yee, the director, chooses to revert to the philosophy of ancient Chinese society, depicting a modern Chinese society that exists comfortably in contradictions. The depiction does not diminish the realism of the film since the term "lesbian" has been missing in the Chinese imagination. As a result of the lack of nomenclature, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact "crime" of sexual shame. Throughout the movie, Yee incorporates elements of ancient and contemporary Chinese societies. For instance, knowing that Meng's father has left her mother and her, one would presume that it is her mother who gave her such a masculine name to imply strength. It is curiously her grandfather, the guardian of her patronym. Her uncommon patronym reminds one of a Chinese philosopher with the same last name, Meng-zi (Mencius) who is arguably the most famous after Confucius. In his canonical work, Mencius discusses "xing" (sex), as in "tongxing lian." "Prior to the twentieth century, the character 'xing' had not meant 'sex', but had been limited to denoting 'nature'--the original state, truth, quality, or disposition of something. In Confucianism, 'xing' is a specialized philosophical term,

meaning 'human nature'" (Sang 103). To Mencius, human nature ("xing") is capable of moral facilities that go beyond libidinous needs. The last name of Yee's protagonist therefore recalls to the Chinese consciousness that the movie isn't merely about sexuality but also morality and humanity.

[13] Furthermore, the modern meaning of "xing" does not merely denote sex/sexuality but also gender ("xing bie"). In an attempt to translate Western gender and sexual discourse in the early twentieth-century, the lack of vocabulary in the Chinese nomenclature to handle such issues had induced the scholars to coin the words, "xing bie" and "xing" as gender and sex/sexuality respectively. While Butler may argue that the tenuous relationship between the original and the evolved meanings of "xing" may demonstrate a gap in the patrilineal system, there is another way of reading. Since it is her grandfather who gave Meng her first and last name--in other words, it is he, a male, who points out the gaps in the patrilineal system--it follows that Chinese societies today inherit the negative capability of ancient ones discussed earlier.

[14] In fact, this willingness to live side-by-side contradictions is so prevalent, pervasive and integrated that one is never sure whether one is homosexual or heterosexual. For example, Meng and Lin's relationship mirrors that of Zhang and his good buddy, Mien. For an audience without an inkling of the plot of the movie, the beginning can be quite disorientating: one does not know if one is watching a male or female homosexual story. The audience is unsure of the intention of Mien pasting the love letter on the floor outside the principal's office. Is it done out of mischief or jealousy? Nor is this not the only incident which leads one to suspect Mien and Zhang's relationship. After we finally catch a glimpse of Zhang, one of the first scenes of the movie shows Zhang and Mien resting on a basketball court with their shirts unbuttoned. Out of ennui, Zhang makes a bet with Mien that he dares not to masturbate in the soccer field. They walk out to the middle of the field, with Zhang following close behind. They stop. Mien turns around and looks coyly at Zhang. Zhang smiles and turns around like a blushing bridegroom. They now stand back to back. A cheeky grin on Zhang's face. Mien unzips his pants and lets them fall to his ankles. The homoerotic moment threatens to burst into a homosexual one--but it does not. Yee, the director,

uses comic relief to ease the tension. Zhang looks at the bottomless Mien and shouts, "Quick! Come and see! A virile hunk jerking off!" The Freudian slip of "virile hunk" indicates the possibility of desire for each other--even if it is said playfully--as one would normally not think of one's good friend in sexual terms. At the moment Mien bends over, one is never sure if he is pulling up his pants or offering his ass to Zhang to be sodomized. Nor is Mien the only one showing off his bottom. Zhang offers his ass to the audience constantly. In the pivotal scene where Zhang's visage is first revealed, we see his back view as he is cycling with his ass off the saddle, suspended high in the air. And in a scene where Meng looks for him in the swimming pool, he stands in the middle of the pool, stares at her and dives with his black Speedos-clad ass breaking the surface, like a dolphin. Given Zhang's relationship with Mien, the sexualized portrayal of his body, and his pretty--instead of handsome--looks, one can never be sure if he is heterosexual. It is true that he has feelings for Meng but her appearance and character are androgynous. If he can desire a boyish girl, surely he could desire a girlish boy. Furthermore, Zhang is represented as naive, conventional and unthinking, hence, it may just be a "heterosexual" phase he is going through.

[15] Neither is gender represented as fixed. Lin makes a mask out of a blurred photograph of Zhang and forces Meng to wear it. At one point, Meng asks to leave but Lin does not allow her to. Instead, with Meng still wearing the mask, they dance slowly in a tight embrace. One suspects that this scene is Yee's cultural joke. In Taiwan, the "tongzhi" party, similar to gay pride parade, is organized with participants masquerading in masks, to which activist Hsien-hsiu Lin has urged the revelers to "remove your masks and dance together with us" (qtd in Martin, 63). In Fran Martin's article where he compares the political metaphor of masks in parades to the coming out of the closet, he argues that "Understood as a false face, the mask begins to problematize not only the idea of identity but also that of the integrated social subject as symbolized by the integrity of the facial surface ... Since the mask plays on the counterfeitability of the authentic face, it logically implies the possibility of an endless series of masks, where each one removed is replaced by another that is equally suspect" (72). Although Martin hardly mentions Butler and Joan Riviere, his ideas are closely associated with theirs. Published in 1929,

Riviere, in one of the earliest feminist writings, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," claims that "Womanliness ... could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" although she does not explicitly explain what lies beneath the mask (38). In Gender Trouble, Butler asserts: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts without a highly right regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). All three critics' theses are similar and could be applied to the particular scene of Meng wearing a mask: they point out the instable construction of gender. Gender does not pre-exist the performances. Rather, specific performances bring gender into being. Because gender is always a repetitive act, a performance, a masquerade, a wearing of layers of masks, slippages may occur in the production of gender into being. Hence, gender is always unstable. To apply the performativity theory to the situation, one can never tell if Lin is vividly imagining that the person she is dancing with is a boy, or that she knows it is a girl pretending to be a boy or even a girl, who is in love with her, pretending to be a boy.

[16] Ultimately, Blue Gate Crossing is a story of a girl who comes to terms with her sexuality through a love for a cruel girl and with the help of a boy. The lack of the word for "lesbian" in Chinese societies defies yet defines her selfhood. In a confession to Zhang over their "break-up," she says, "I really like Lin. I like her a lot. I'm willing to do anything for her." It is Zhang who insists on calling her a "tongxing lian" but she rejects the term; she never allows herself to be defined. One night, Meng creeps onto her mother's bed and asks, "How did you survive the heartache when dad left you?" Her mother answers with another question, "Why? What's wrong? Is it that boy [Zhang]?" In a Western coming-out movie, the audience would have anticipated Meng to blurt out her sexuality to her mother, which has always been a definitive moment for one's identity. Instead, Meng urges her mother to tell her a direct answer. Her mother brushes her off: "I just did." Her mother, lying with her back to Meng, opens her eyes and looks melancholic. The melancholy is ambiguous. It could mean that she has not gotten over the trauma of her divorce but if it were the case, then this subplot has not been developed fully. The father is never mentioned until this point of time nor is he brought up again. On the other hand, a subtler reading would

signify that Meng, by not answering if she has "broken up" with Zhang, is implying her sexuality to her mother. After all, mothers know best. Meng's silence on her relationship is, of course, predicated on the love that dares not speak its name and the lack of lexicon. Her oblique coming-out is both a coming-out and not a coming-out, avoiding the familial histrionics.

[17] This does not mean that coming out is easy nor is it surreptitious and shameful. Most of the classroom lessons depicted in the movie are English lessons. Meng memorizes passages in English by heart and shows an aptitude for the language. It is during an English lesson when Meng discovers that Lin has written the letter using her name and confronts her. The almost-melodramatic scene is ironically undercut by the English lesson. They are taught the words, "knives," "housewives" and "ambitions." One can easily form a sentence to fit the circumstances: "In order to fulfill her ambition as a housewife, Lin backstabs her best friend." Dark humor aside, the main purpose of Meng's assiduous attempt to learn a new language is an attempt to define herself. She constantly marks the wall in her school gymnasium and once she writes on the sand: "I'm a girl. I must like boys." Yet, eventually, she rejects defining herself according to any language belonging to the phallus and to compulsory heteronormativity. The graffiti on the wall have become a passing memory; the words on the sands, washed by the waves. In the end, urged by Zhang, Meng confesses her love for Lin non-verbally: she kisses her in the school field. It is hardly surprising that Lin walks away and ignores Meng. What can one say to a confession made outside of language? The end of a friendship, however, is the start of another. In the film's denouement, Zhang is seen cycling with Meng. In a voice-over, Meng says, "When I close my eyes, I still cannot see my future. But I can imagine yours [Zhang's]." Because of the lack of nomenclature for female same-sex desire, and because, as Ludwig Wittgenstein has famously claimed, "the limit of one's language is the limit of one's world," Meng, as a "lesbian," has not merely eluded the limited world controlled by the Law of the Father, but confirmed the expansiveness and boundlessness of a "lesbian" identity.

[18] Hence, contrariwise to the idea that the lack of a lexicon for female same-sex desire is detrimental to one's identity formation, the lack frees one from the limits of language; one finds an expression outside of language. Moreover, the lack of

the term "lesbian" destabilizes the notions of gender and sexuality. In a way, the reverse discourse of modern Chinese societies, exemplified through Blue Gate Crossing, is a dialogue with its patriarchal history of the treatment of women and a translation, a mistranslation and a non-translation of Western queer theory. Modern Chinese societies are similar to ancient ones in their abilities to tolerate, if not accept, differences within them. Blue Gate Crossing is one of the growing bodies of texts which challenge the seemingly permanent status of patriarchy. While in the past, men policed "lesbians," it is no longer possible to do so in the widening circle of modernization and globalization and with the rise of feminism. Patriarchy, in the strictest sense of the word, in Chinese societies is eroding.

[19] Even in the film, men are portrayed as effete, which could be seen as an effect of modernization, globalization and feminism. Rather than considering effete men as Orientalist stereotypes, Yee encourages us to read her film as a critique of Chinese men's Darwinian inability to adapt to modern life. Meng's family can be rid of the policing male only because divorce is gradually accepted in Chinese societies and her mother can move outside the private sphere of domesticity and earn a living as a roadside food seller. The only adult male, a physical education teacher, believes wrongly that Meng has a crush on him because he misreads the cultural signs. Unable to view Meng as a lesbian due to the missing nomenclature, the teacher is doomed to be mocked and made redundant in the modern society. His marginal role in the movie mirrors his sinecure as his job is only to bark orders for students to run around the track, unlike Meng's English (female) teacher who imparts knowledge for survival in society. As for Zhang, although he forces Meng into a confession of her sexuality (which implies that he is the policing male), there is nothing more he can do to her except in the realm of language. He cannot, say, blackmail her into marrying him. In this case, he is more of a confidant than a police. While the film is set in Taiwan, it interacts on an international level with references to sexuality. The lack of a name for "lesbian" in Chinese societies and a willingness to co-exist without the desire to provide a name for "lesbianism" create a tension in the Lacanian discourse that states naming as an act of taming the Imaginary through symbolic function and that the Law of the Father subjugates and suppresses the gaps in the Real to a great extent.