

The Butterfly And The Sword: AIDS In China

The lid is coming off of China's potentially monumental AIDS problem—but slowly.

BY KYNA RUBIN

UNBELIEVABLE THEATRE IN CHINA—everybody's a Bette Davis," thirty-four-year-old gay expatriate Brad tells me. "They say they love only you, but they're lying through their teeth!" By the way, he adds, "Why don't you come to a party I'm giving next weekend at my apartment? There'll be lots of people for you to talk to there."

Brad lives to party in China's "one-party" state, and his soirées are well known in gay Beijing. He issues the invitation over Vietnamese spring rolls during a dinner chat in an upscale section of the city. I am here to learn about AIDS and homosexuality, although the two aren't as inextricably linked in China as they are in the West. Brad is from Indiana. He is a curious point of entry for studying the Chinese scene. His Chinese is rudimentary, and, like the stereotypical American abroad, he pontificates loudly in public places. But his gay status makes him less a foreigner than I am, a married mother of two, within the community I am seeking to understand. Brad has known a selection of Chinese "comrades" (a campy self-referential term for Chinese gays). His longest relationship lasted nine months. His favorite "ex" was a bisexual soldier. "Every day we'd laugh," he recalls, fondly.

This self-professed social butterfly has lived here for six years, working for a multinational company serving some of the thousands of foreigners living in the Chinese capital. With a gleam in his eye and a wholesome Midwestern smile, Brad explains his philosophy of living gay in China: He likes seeing people "break out of their shells," going against the grain. He sometimes gives shelter to local comrades in need of space apart from families who would not accept their being different even if they had the courage to come out. Most gays stay closeted, fearful of causing the family to lose face. Brad also graciously hosts parties in his spacious high-rise flat—better for China's urban homosexuals, starving for companionship, to meet at a friend's home than on the street or via the Internet, as is more common.

Brad's desire to have fun is well-intentioned. And his Chinese friends appreciate the social venue he provides in a society where tradition dictates that few of

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them reveal their sexual orientation at home or work. But he lives in a dream-world. AIDS is barely in his vocabulary, and he didn't want to dwell on the topic with me, despite the fact that HIV/AIDS is a sword of Damocles hanging over vulnerable populations, including gays, in China. The sword has already crashed down in rural areas, bringing devastation so huge that China's government—denying the problem for years—has finally been forced to acknowledge the scourge. In China, where press coverage of society's underside is severely restricted, it is easy for well-off urban citizens—especially a comfortably ensconced foreigner—to live in a kind of void. Brad (not his real name) did not want to be associated with an article about AIDS or other “difficulties” that he says are “not part of my experience nor people I know.”

Sketchy Numbers, Certain Catastrophe

THE THREAT OF AIDS MAY NOT YET HAVE ENCROACHED upon Brad's urban circle of friends, but it will soon enough. Some 1.25 million people in China are HIV-positive, according to international health organizations. That number is projected to surge to ten to twenty million in a decade.

Although China's Ministry of Health doesn't admit to those estimates (the official estimate is 600,000), health officials ac-

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knowledge a staggering rise of 67 percent in new HIV cases between 2000 and 2001—double the growth of the previous three years. Roughly 70 percent of these persons, say officials, were infected through unsafe blood supplies (exacerbated by careless collection methods, particularly in the countryside) and intravenous drug use.

Fewer than 10 percent contracted the virus through sexual contact—heterosexual and otherwise. It is impossible to know how many gays in China have HIV because the majority of Chinese homosexuals do not identify themselves as such for fear of ostracism. Indeed, AIDS is not primarily a “gay” or urban problem in China, as it was first identified in the United States. So far the most dramatic numbers of AIDS deaths are occurring among poor, uneducated peasants who unwittingly sell their blood to marketers unconcerned with sanitary collection techniques. But gays make up an estimated thirty-six to forty-eight million of China's 1.2 billion population and mirror the population at large in that most know nothing about AIDS or safe sex.

Homosexuals may be a relatively small chunk of China's AIDS problem right now, but their numbers equal the combined population of eight South Atlantic states and the District of Columbia. To have that many people unwittingly con-

tributing to the spread of HIV through unprotected sex with men and with their own wives (most gays are married) is helping to push China down a treacherous path. As Brad knows, like all urbanites, China's gays will not escape knowing someone close to them who has contracted the virus; it is simply a matter of time.

A Fertile Environment

TODAY'S CHINA IS A PETRI DISH for the spread of HIV. Market reforms of the past two decades have sparked changes that create a fertile environment for the diffusion of sexually transmitted diseases. The population is newly mobile, and unemployment, poverty, prostitution, and drug use are rising. The fresh-from-the-provinces "money boys" I saw sitting one weekday evening at the front table of Drag-on ("Dragon" in Chinese), Beijing's hottest gay watering hole, attest to the problem. In one night, Brad tells me, they can earn what they'd make in a month at a minimum-wage job. The likelihood of their engaging in safe sex is small. The hundreds of thousands of young, unschooled men and women like them who migrate from countryside to cities for prostitution or other jobs know nothing about AIDS and scoff at condoms occasionally offered by well-meaning health volunteers.

The worst culprit, well documented by Chinese and Western journalists, is the unregulated blood market. Grueling poverty in some rural areas has spurred farmers to sell their blood to brokers who fatten their own wallets—and those of the local health officials colluding with them—by selling the plasma to hospitals, blood banks, and pharmaceutical companies. Unclean collection processes by "bloodheads," including reinjection of pooled blood back into donors, have led to widespread infections and deaths. Some villages in Henan Province, 400 miles southwest of Beijing, have been nearly wiped out by AIDS. Scores of fresh graves line the fields. Rural victims of the disease die literally unaware of what struck them. Sympathy from provincial public officials is rare, and drugs to fight the virus, where available, are unaffordable.

Some Chinese doctors and Ministry of Health researchers have known about the AIDS threat for years, but their efforts to get government leaders to listen were rebuffed. China's leaders have long considered HIV a "foreign disease" to which China was immune because of its traditional morality and assumed lack of homosexuals and drug users. Chinese radio programs, Brad says, have warned listeners, "Don't have sex with foreigners."

One such health researcher is Wan Yanhai, a graduate of Shanghai Medical University. In 1990 Wan began focusing on AIDS through his job at the Ministry's Health Education Research Institute. Because of his interest in AIDS education, his employer had "subtle ways" of making him unwelcome, he told me by phone from Los Angeles, where he now lives. "Sometimes they sent me outside of Beijing [to lie low]. They moved three people into my [ministry-supplied] housing, when

I'd had a single room before, and they decreased my salary." In 1994 the ministry fired him for his outspokenness about AIDS and an AIDS education program and hotline he had created.

Forced Recognition

THINGS ARE CHANGING AT THE MARGINS, SLOWLY. In 2001, after a bold Chinese reporter exposed the massive scope of HIV infection in Henan, the central government lifted a ban on media coverage of the virus. Late that year government officials convened China's first large-scale, official HIV/AIDS conference. Among the attendees from twenty nations were representatives from Western drug companies. Like some African nations, China has begun negotiating with foreign drug makers to lower the price of their AIDS treatments for Chinese consumption.

In August 2001 China's State Council announced a five-year plan to stem the spread of AIDS: Steps will be taken to screen blood banks; control the unregulated blood market; and improve diagnosis, treatment, and counseling for HIV-positive people. The government has budgeted \$12 million a year up to 2005 for this purpose. This is a pittance compared to U.S. public funds devoted to HIV/AIDS pre-

vention (\$900 million in fiscal year 2000, according to the White House Office of National AIDS Policy) in a country with about a fifth of China's population. But, symbolically, it is a move in the right direction.

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China's government is unlikely to wipe out HIV/AIDS on its own. Just as leaders now welcome domestic and international nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs') help in providing some of the social services that the state no longer can, they are allowing some individuals

and private groups to engage in limited AIDS education. Recognizing the role that homosexuals play in spreading HIV and potentially in helping to stem its tide, government health officials have begun to include in their education efforts gays who are unassociated with state agencies. For instance, in fall 2000 Chinese gay hotline representatives attended China's first AIDS meeting sponsored by NGOs (it's tempting to call them "activists" but not apt, because gays still don't dare to organize politically). "Officials who were scared of gays came and spoke to us," the manager of China's only such hotline told me one late afternoon in a Beijing coffee shop. "They realized we were regular people; this was progress." The Ford Foundation-funded gathering, held in a plush Beijing hotel, marked the state's willingness to admit the presence of AIDS among homosexuals in China—and, by extension, the existence of gays at all. Gay hotline volunteers, who currently number

about forty, have screened some 10,000 calls since the privately funded service's inception in 1997. They are working to improve the quality of AIDS handouts sent to their anonymous constituency.

Zhang Beichuan, a physician at Qingdao University Medical School, heads up another private project that targets gays. He receives funding from the Ford Foundation to print a newsletter that educates them about how to prevent AIDS. Although Zhang is criticized by some observers for printing mainly government-sanctioned material and statistics, the reality in today's China is that efforts like his can only be carried out with state consent. Even then, the longevity of programs dealing with sensitive issues such as AIDS and homosexuality is always in question. Two AIDS researchers in China suggested that I not try to contact Zhang to learn more about his work. "He likes to lie low," they told me. "He doesn't want publicity."

Other gay/AIDS education projects, semi-condoned by Beijing health experts, take place from afar and are run by a few highly committed individuals whose work is uncompensated. For instance, former Ministry of Health researcher Wan Yanhai operates a gay activist/AIDS Web site from his politically safe perch in California. Lin Zhixiao, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University who has lived in the United States since 1991, helped to found a Virginia-based Web site that informs Chinese about the latest information and research on AIDS and homosexuality. Lin takes a less critical approach than Wan does toward the Chinese government's feeble AIDS prevention efforts. Provocation, he believes, is counterproductive. Over the past few years both Wan and Lin have been permitted into China to attend AIDS meetings. Lin has given a paper at one of these gatherings on how to market AIDS education within China's gay community.

Immovable Prejudices

PROVING HARDER TO BUDGE than cadres' cavalier attitudes, and hampering public and private efforts to stem AIDS are the Chinese public's deeply ingrained prejudices against disease in general and its antipathy toward discussing sex. People who are different in China, including those with a physical disability or an incurable disease, are treated with malice by the general public, sometimes even by their own families. People with AIDS are subjected to cruel discrimination. The Ministry of Health issued a document a few years ago stressing AIDS patients' rights to confidentiality, school, work, and medical treatment, but health officials cannot enforce these principles. The sex education that might help to prevent the disease is taught in only limited fashion in some schools in China's larger cities. At home, conversations about sex-related matters are taboo. "Parents in China," laments gay/AIDS Web site creator Lin Zhixiao, "still just focus on how well you do in school. They show no concern for their children's sexual or emotional well-being."

After the 2000 AIDS conference, says Lin, the government's AIDS Prevention Society decided to lend its stamp of approval to volunteer AIDS prevention efforts among gays in some of China's larger cities. Gays were told that they could become society members and, after Ministry of Health training, could receive a certificate officially permitting them to continue their previously unrecognized volunteer work, such as distributing condoms, with a bit of state financial support. The problem is this: The AIDS Prevention Society has boxes of condoms and safe-sex brochures but doesn't know where or how to distribute them. Huge swaths of the Chinese population will not acknowledge that they engage in the kind of behavior that might call for protection against HIV. Failure to admit need even exists among the university student population, where one might expect a more enlightened view. Lin Zhixiao says that the Ministry of Health, through campus authorities, tried to install a condom vending machine on a major Beijing university campus but met formidable resistance from students who resented the assumption that they engaged in sex and were vulnerable to HIV infection.

Even if the population were more welcoming of AIDS education, only a small number of Chinese volunteers in a few large cities are even willing to step forward to conduct such work. AIDS educators are assumed to be gay (many are), and few gays wish to divulge their sexual orientation, even through good deeds that will help society at large. Yet government needs gays—and others—to distribute AIDS information.

Looks Can Be Deceiving

ON MY LAST SATURDAY NIGHT IN BEIJING I am standing in Brad's long, narrow kitchen a little after 7 P.M., brushing elbows with an assortment of handsome, twentysomething men busily helping their host to prepare snacks and piña colodas for one of his famous gatherings. They look like a young, gay, cosmopolitan crowd you'd see anywhere—in short-sleeved T-shirts, tight blue jeans, and studs in one ear—just having a good time.

I work my way out into the living room, where throngs of guests are waiting for the music to start. I had come that night with Stanton Pang. He is a small-framed, thirty-year-old graduate of Beijing Foreign Studies University whose first name was given to him by a former American lover, nostalgic for his Midwestern hometown. Stanton was applying to graduate schools in Australia. Getting a foreign M.A. will not only help land him a better job than what he can get in China, he says, but Australia permits gay partners to immigrate so is probably more tolerant of gays than is China. Stanton learned about AIDS at an exhibit at Beijing's Workers' Cultural Palace; he also saw an educational film about it on a Web site. "I'm very careful," he assures me.

I strike up conversation with "Wei Wei," who six years ago left his family in a provincial city 150 miles southwest of the capital to come to the big city for a job as

secretary to an academic official. The job ended, and Wei Wei, a college graduate with a B.A. in English, eventually became a freelance Chinese tutor and tour guide. The friendly and talkative thirty-year-old, wearing a University of Paris sweat-shirt, fancies foreign men. The proliferation of Western businessmen in Beijing has greatly expanded his social outlets. He had a one-night stand with a Briton he met on a street one day near Tiananmen; he also lived with a German man until the relationship soured, leaving him burned about the possibility of finding true love, but still hopeful. “Are you afraid of getting AIDS?” I ask him. Despite the multiple sexual partners he seems to have had, he tells me he practices safe sex.

This makes sense, I think to myself, as loud music begins to blare, precluding further conversation. The people at this party are savvy, sophisticated urbanites with access to accurate information about AIDS through word of mouth, the city’s many Internet cafés, and AIDS-knowledgeable foreigners. But it turns out I’m wrong. Stanton Pang and Wei Wei may know how to prevent AIDS, but they are probably the exception among these partygoers. Brad tells me he is certain that many of them don’t practice safe sex. He is even more confident that most Chinese gays who frequent the public toilets are not using condoms, because “they feel about AIDS sort of how we feel about the Ebola virus: It’s from a different country, it has nothing to do with me. We Americans all know someone with AIDS, but the Chinese don’t, so it’s not been brought home to them.” China is like the United States in the early 1980s, he says—before the AIDS sword dropped.

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Overwhelmed at last by the cigarette smoke and noise, I slip out of the apartment quietly. Once in the fresh night air, I peek back up at Brad’s fourth-floor windows, open and teeming with life. Beyond providing a safe place for Beijing’s gays to meet, at his next party social butterfly Brad might well offer something they need more if they wish to escape the wrath of the blade: a box of condoms and a brochure about AIDS prevention.

I wonder with great sorrow if heart-wrenching death-from-AIDS stories will provide common ground for China’s next generation, just as the deaths and shattered lives caused by the ten-year Cultural Revolution defined the generation of Chinese with whom I studied in 1979. At least one million people are estimated to have died during China’s terrible “decade of chaos.” That is probably a low estimate, but even if the actual number was many times higher, it still would be a small fraction of the devastation that AIDS may yet wreak on this long-suffering nation.