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## HIV/AIDS AND SHIFTING URBAN CHINA'S SOCIO-MORAL LANDSCAPE: ENGENDERING BIO-ACTIVISM AND RESISTANCE THROUGH STORIES OF SUFFERING

Johanna Hood\*

Australian National University, Australia

email: [jh@johannahood.com](mailto:jh@johannahood.com)

### ABSTRACT

*In this article, I address the lack of research in current scholarship on the impacts China's changing media is having on those who consume messages about HIV and AIDS, and on the political, social, celebrity and corporate activism which have resulted from the improved circulation of knowledge about the virus in society. To do so, I position current ways of understanding the virus, its marketability and the myriad activism that knowledge of the virus encourages, in light of the impact that initial knowledge of HIV and AIDS sufferers in China had when introduced to the general, urban public. I first discuss the fragmented history of the virus in telling AIDS in China. I then turn to the changes in Chinese society, politics, economy and legal fields which followed the media's sudden publication of stories about HIV/AIDS within the country. I argue that the media's introduction of Chinese "AIDS sufferers" (aizibing huanzhe) through local stories of extreme suffering were critical to the broad-based changes and sustained successful bio-activism that followed their publication.*

**Keywords:** telling AIDS, bio-activism, disease economy, image politics

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\* Johanna Hood is a postdoctoral fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World at the Australian National University. She is the author of *HIV/AIDS, Health, and the Media in China: Imagined Immunity through Racialized Disease* (Routledge 2011). Johanna has published translations of Chinese literature, and articles on HIV communication and celebrity and activist involvement in HIV in China in edited volumes *Celebrity China* (Hong Kong University Press 2009) and *Unequal China* (Routledge 2012), and in journals such as *Modern China* (forthcoming) and *Asian Studies Review* (2004). The research for this article was supported by the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada, the Canada-China Scholar Exchange Program, and an Australian Government Endeavor and International Postgraduate Research Scholarship.

## INTRODUCTION

HIV/AIDS in China is not simply a virus that 700,000 people are predicted to have. It has become a sensational topic with complex social, political and economic realities which have altered the socio-moral, emergent activism, and development and health aid landscapes of China. Today, HIV is something individuals and organisations now lobby around, become famous through and spend millions on. Alone, the Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis has distributed almost 200 million American dollars over six rounds to China's HIV/AIDS projects (The Global Fund to Fight AIDS 2009). HIV/AIDS projects now provide employment and volunteer experience for thousands of well-educated, patriotic, opportunistic and motivated youth. Some of China's most well-known universities and staff members, often together with corporate partners, have opened HIV-related research centres and developed courses to study its various impacts. In sum, the unprecedented role and the attention HIV/AIDS receives has caused new practices and significant social, political, economic and legal change far beyond the lives of those who are HIV-positive in China.

The various forms of attention HIV now receives represent new, often ill-understood phenomena with less than two decades of history. However, the changing reporting techniques used to present information on and discuss HIV in China's media have played an important role in catalysing action around what first appeared to be a lack of political and social regard for China's HIV positive. Frequent media coverage on HIV in China has also ensured that attention remains focused on HIV above other infectious diseases.

In this article, I address the lack of research in current scholarship on the impacts China's changing media is having on those who consume messages about HIV and AIDS and on the political, social, celebrity and corporate activism which have resulted from the improved circulation of knowledge about the virus in society. To do so, I position current ways of understanding the virus, its marketability and the myriad activism that knowledge of the virus encourages, in light of the impact that initial knowledge of HIV and AIDS sufferers in China had when introduced to the general, urban public. I first discuss the fragmented history of the virus in China. I then turn to the changes in Chinese society, politics, economy and legal fields which followed the media's sudden publication of stories about HIV/AIDS within the country. I argue that the media's introduction of Chinese "AIDS sufferers" (*aizibing huanzhe*) through local stories of extreme suffering were critical to the broad-based changes and sustained successful bio-activism that followed their publication.

## TELLING AIDS

Prior to the late 1990s, the category of "Han Chinese HIV-positive" or "Person Living with HIV or AIDS" (HIV-positive hereafter)—more commonly known in Chinese as "AIDS sufferer"—was practically unknown to most people living in China. Then, knowledge of HIV was created through sparse reports in China's urban media and through public health campaigns which illustrated HIV as a terrifying disease existing mainly outside the country (Hood 2011). The types of people shown as at risk for HIV infection were very poor Africans, often with large families and extravagant, homosexual Euro-American men. Rarely were local people shown in campaigns and information about HIV. The virus, and all subsequent secondary infections caused by it, came to be embodied in specific types of sufferers residing in other places with questionable moralities and low socioeconomic status. In short, for most Chinese people HIV became defined and understood mainly by its non-local characteristics and as a problem that could be prevented from entering the country if local citizens behaved appropriately.

Aside from media reports of several young Chinese haemophiliacs who became infected by tainted blood imported into the country in the mid-1980s, HIV-positive Han Chinese and their struggles to survive, be diagnosed and treated, remained unknown to the majority of urban Chinese until the late 1990s. It was not that they did not exist or that the government was unaware; it was just that, despite making certain preparations, many officials turned a blind eye and ignored a mounting problem. Stories about how and why certain sectors of the population contracted HIV were rarely encouraged to circulate and had no politically sanctioned means to enter public and media discourse. In the very late 1990s and early 2000s, however, this changed. After HIV was recorded in each of China's twenty-six provinces, international organisations such as Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO) began to vocalise concerns on both domestic and international platforms about China's lack of accountability and involvement in HIV education, surveillance and treatment. In 2002, UNAIDS released a dramatic report called *China's Titanic Peril*, which predicted that if no major action was taken by Chinese leadership at the time of its publication, then in 2010, China and its already struggling health system would be overrun by the demands of between ten to twenty million HIV-positive people (United Nations Theme Group on HIV/AIDS 2002). Around the same time, local doctors, such as Gao Yaojie, Gui Xi'en, and Zhang Ke, began to make sense of the previously unseen "strange illnesses" (*guai bing*)

detected in rural people in the central plains area, diagnosing them as having HIV and reporting it to authorities and China's media (Chen and Chen 2004; Chen et al. 2004; Li 2000; Zhang 2000). Many of the sick contracted HIV through contact with contaminated equipment used in injection drug use in Guangdong, Yunnan and Xinjiang, or through participation in China's plasma economy through the sale of blood<sup>1</sup> to unsanitary collection facilities popular in Henan, Shanxi and Anhui (Anagnost 2006; Erwin 2005; Jing 2007; Zaccagnini 2009). These people typically hailed from socio-economically marginalised areas in inland provinces, where hard lives of farming brought few economic benefits. Among them, the lack of awareness about HIV and blood-based transmission facilitated the rapid spread of the virus.

Since the early 2000s, stories of "local" HIV-positive people, institutional reports, and the actions of those lobbying and working to save lives, alleviate suffering and spread knowledge about HIV/AIDS within China were increasingly covered in China's media. Along with the growth of available information about HIV in the form of posters, pamphlets, etc., the dramatically accelerated frequency of media reports allowed over ninety per cent of urban Chinese to learn about HIV/AIDS. Locally defined by such studies, media includes television, internet, posters and pamphlets (UNAIDS et al. 2008; Wang and Yang 2004).

The narrative created through media reports was unsettling. Gruesome and chilling descriptions of HIV frequently included images captured by a now internationally recognised photographer Lu Guang, for example, of rural agriculturalists lining up in droves to sell their blood and of agricultural fields turned into mounded cemeteries stretching as far as the eye could see (Lu 2004b; Lu 2004a; Zhao 2006). These stories of sickness, ostracism and uncertainty, and images of rural suffering caused by AIDS had significant reading and viewing audiences as well as virtual traffic. They included sources in print media, such as local magazines, newspapers, journals, weeklies; online articles and BBS chatrooms; and state television programs, particularly those around World AIDS Day (CCTV 2008; Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2004; Qian 2004; Zhaoguoliangzi 2007). Over time, stories of orphaned and abandoned children, extreme physical pain and corporeal wastage, loneliness, sadness and death became the norm for the expanding coverage of the everyday suffering of those with HIV/AIDS. Over years of fieldwork I have collected thousands of articles, and hundreds of VHS,

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<sup>1</sup> In this process, donor blood was typically extracted, pooled and, following the extraction of the valuable plasma, re-injected.

VCD and DVD recordings and online video stream of these stories of suffering and sadness.

Through coverage in China's media about the virus, HIV sufferers and the new HIV-based activism, a certain awareness and knowledge of HIV and the existence of local sufferers and their experiences spread in general society. In the many conversations I had with local people in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen, I found only one urbanite who did not admit to knowing the term AIDS. Everyone else I spoke to about HIV, AIDS and its sufferers during the years 2003 to 2008 had an understanding of HIV/AIDS, were aware of the stigma associated to it and also knew the importance of the media's role in their knowledge of it. Additionally, vocabulary such as *tongxing lian* (homosexual), *huodong renshi* (activist) and *fei zhengfu zuzhi* (Non Governmental Organisation) was translated into Chinese and/or popularised through association with the virus. Over time, the term *aizibing* (AIDS) became a household word, despite its belated inclusion as a term in the Chinese language in 2004 ("New Edition of Xinhua Dictionary Released" 2004).

Another social consequence the lack of reliable information about HIV, its transmission and the stories and images of suffering of those who have HIV and AIDS, is the considerable impact this has on the way HIV is imagined by the general public. This has resulted in a condition local scholars describe as *aizibing kongjuzheng* or AIDS panic. The media coverage has helped stigmatise HIV, and people continue to fear HIV positive people and the possibility of infection, often along pre-existing fault lines involving class, occupation and ethnicity in Chinese society. An example of this may be found in the violent protests in August 2009 by Uyghur populations in the capital of Xinjiang Province, Urumqi. Hundreds of Han Chinese went to hospital emergency rooms fearing that they had been pricked or injected by Uyghurs carrying HIV-tainted blood in syringes (nkpopper 2009; Li 2009; Xu 2009). Although this panic merged popular racist fears about China's minorities, together with the fear of what HIV can do to one's social standing and physical health, it is not the first time moral panics over real and imagined needle prickings have occurred, with one of the earliest incidents being in Tianjin in 2002 (Qing 2002; "How Did Rumors Spread out of Control?" 2002).

By telling and embodying HIV/AIDS in certain ways, and by allowing commercial media to serve as the main industry through which people learn about HIV and AIDS, the media has been conducive to the spread of this kind of misinformation. The eye-catching, heart-wrenching and sensational reporting techniques used in China's media and public health campaigns have encouraged panics about "contagion" which ensure

that living with HIV/AIDS is and will continue to be difficult. This style of reporting also keeps many HIV/AIDS organisations busy with projects to re-engineer public understandings of HIV and AIDS while fails to truly address the greater issues that underlie infection in China. Despite campaigns over the past years encouraging people to "love and care" (*guan'ai*) for those with HIV, ostracism, suspicion and high suicide rates remain the norm (Shao, Jing 2006; Zhou 2007; Zhou 2009). HIV, and how it is known and stigmatised, is deeply connected to power and inequality in China. Additionally, many of those who suspect they have HIV or are "at risk" do not come forward to participate in voluntary counselling and testing services, because they fear what will become of them and how they will be treated if their test result is positive, or believe themselves immune. An example of this is that although China's estimated infections are approximately 700,000, only 234,246 are confirmed (Te 2009).

## HIV BIO-ACTIVISM

Telling AIDS creates new categories of persons and new ways of embodying disease that have been produced through local reports about this once foreign disease. The subjects of this coverage were not only rural areas and rural people; similarly disturbing stories from urban areas were aired and heard as well. The publication of these stories gave voice to this previously silent and unknown suffering, and they challenged what it meant to be human in fearful ways. The coverage and the immediacy of the suffering and uncertainty, coupled with the dire predictions for China's future infection rate, encouraged both HIV-positive and HIV-negative urbanites to organise around the virus and increase their murmurings about what they felt was injustice and an inadequate state commitment and responsibility. Further encouraged by incentives which I discuss later on, individuals also came together to form organisations in the space created through the relaxation of regulations towards group formation and activities, which previously had been impossible outside of official state organisations. Activists also rallied against the state repression of their activities using new technologies, which caused Chinese officials to lose face or become nervous, confronted by something they did not fully understand (Yu 2007). Due to the political nervousness that the perceived independence of NGOs (translated into Chinese as "organisations without any ties to government" or "anti-government organisations") caused, people later formed their organisations into alternatively-named *minjian zuzhi* (people's or popular organisations) or *caogen zuzhi* (grassroots organizations) and GONGOS

(Government Organised NGOs). Although the intention was often to avoid creating a political impression of their activities, certain HIV/AIDS organisations challenged political authorities and official narratives on HIV, and created trouble at home and overseas for the government's image as a responsible and caring force.

This new generation of activists began online blogs about various aspects of HIV, and were joined by HIV sufferers who came forward to write and publish their stories of suffering and sadness as well as of hope. Among others, the now well-known activists Li Jiaming and Zhuliya (Julia) published diaries detailing their misfortune and experiences of living with HIV (Li 2001; Li 2002; Li, Xiang 2004; Zhu 2006). Additionally, documentaries and soap operas were produced which addressed the troubles faced by China's HIV-positive population. Popular celebrities such as Pu Cunxin starred in commercial soap operas featuring HIV positive characters, while real sufferers were featured in documentaries. Over time, these stories of suffering gave way to the occasional story of resilience, of ingenuity, and of the quest for acceptance in Chinese society. This trend continues with the 2011 popular film on HIV/AIDS by Gu Changwei (2011), as well as a documentary by Zhao Liang (2010) about the difficulties of making of Gu's film due to its engagement with HIV.

Following the publication of stories of suffering, these new ways of "telling disease" and new ways of organising around it had many ground-breaking effects on China's social, economic, political, and legal arenas. The social impact of the publication of stories of suffering associated with HIV/AIDS in China's media and public health campaigns is significant. For the ordinary citizen, what has changed is that an understanding about what HIV is; who gets it; why and how—be it correct or incorrect—has been built through China's media coverage. Additionally, awareness has spread regarding what HIV/AIDS was doing and could do to Chinese people, and what it could do to China's economic modernisation and future well-being as a nation.

However, for public figures and leaders I discuss below, the change is not simply about the creation of new knowledge, but that HIV/AIDS publicity has engendered new categories of celebrity and roles for those who have become widely known for their actions against disease and suffering. Although each public persona and leader has different reasons for being involved in HIV/AIDS, they all work to publicise issues surrounding the virus, as well as to ensure that attention and funding for HIV/AIDS remains consistent and hopefully grows. They also all gain in fame and in various forms of resources, and in order to do that they depend on the media to both publish and circulate stories of HIV and their activities combating it.

In ways similar to Paul Rabinow's writing on "biosociality," wherein individuals form support groups that use illness, biological deficiencies or abnormalities to lobby for rights and entitlements (1996) and the subsequent research his ideas inspired within anthropology and sociology, various forms of "bioactivism" have been taken up by Chinese AIDS celebrities, AIDS heroes and AIDS activists. Many earn rights and access to resources and entitlements unavailable to other sectors of the general population. Although not without struggles, the ingenuity and success of these individuals and groups challenge Foucauldian theorising of biopower. In the few writings Foucault undertook on bio and thanatopolitics (Foucault 1978, 1980, 2003; lectures 10 March and 17 March), he argued the state would increasingly use health as a means to allow sections of the population to live and other sections to die off (Foucault 2003: 246–248). In China, however, the examples of groups and individuals who challenge hegemonic power discourses and political norms and succeed, draw attention both to the ways certain portions of populations are encouraged to live, and concurrently illustrate the difficulties encountered when states "allow" populations to die off. Many of China's HIV positive, and those who lobby for them, negotiate and navigate the condition of being left behind economically, socially and medically.

China's AIDS celebrities have appeared at the nexus of international trends, local knowledge and ways of seeing. China now has its own troupe of what Richey and Ponte call "Aid Celebrities" (Richey and Ponte 2008, 2011). These are well-known entertainment figures, such as Bono and Bob Geldof, who use their fame to publicise causes of their choice with often very political effects. Their involvement in a "worthwhile cause" helps buttress their public image as caring and compassionate figures and also allows them to sit on political decision-making bodies which have traditionally been out of bounds to these otherwise unqualified pop and movie stars, and elite athletes as well.

The rise of the Chinese AIDS celebrity is a new phenomenon. Until recently China differed significantly from Euro-American traditions in that the former did not have a tradition of celebrity-based public philanthropy. The closest comparable figures in China's history are traditional heroes and critics of corruption, and/or figures of social justice from Chinese oral traditions, literature, and classics. Examples include: the *Outlaws of the Marsh* bandits and the morally minded Magistrate Bao; or the post-1949 "Stakhanovite" heroes, such as the good socialist Lei Feng, who was a politically correct model for the population to follow, "doing good" through his dedication to doctrine, and not necessarily due to his adherence to Humanism, his belief in the importance of modern values or for the benefits



of his public image. In fact, until the past century, actors and entertainers in China generally had a very low social standing. However, since the early 2000s, the use of HIV/AIDS as a platform to become well known has served as a catalyst for getting celebrities involved in HIV/AIDS projects, and this involvement and experience is then easily portable to different philanthropic causes.

Such a trend has become an important part of the Chinese celebrity's public image. Particularly among high-level celebrities, there appears to be a need to come across to the public not just as an entertainment figure but also as someone who embodies worldly, modern, civilised and caring values. Actors Pu Cunxin and Jiang Wenli, folk singer, song writer and newly-appointed Major General of the People's Liberation Army, Peng Liyuan and international basketball superstar Yao Ming, share the commonality that their celebrity aid activism began with HIV/AIDS concerns. Now they are the trend-setters of China's own "Aid Celebrities," and what has followed their actions is that other notables have become involved in HIV/AIDS and other causes too. For example, female actor Zhang Ziyi who has made appearances for HIV, supports the Active Conservation Awareness Program ("Directory of International NGOs: WildAid" 2009), while male wushu champion and martial arts actor Jet Li has his own charity, The One Foundation, which supports, in addition to HIV-based projects, projects involving children's welfare, disaster relief and organ and tissue donation ("Jet Li's Charity Work" 2009). Yao Ming's appearance in Wild Aid anti-shark harvesting campaigns, which I saw across Beijing in late 2008 and online via their website, show him taking a stance against shark-fin soup, together with the decorated gymnast and sports entrepreneur Li Ning and 2008 Beijing Olympics *One Dream One World* musician Liu Huan (Knights 2009; Wong 2006).

Another group affected by China's stories of suffering are China's HIV and AIDS activists. They are people who work for the promotion of rights for HIV-positive people, whose public personas and involvement in the socio-moral aspects of HIV/AIDS keep them busy with HIV and visible in the public and/or virtual world. Some of the most notable, Drs. Gao Yaojie and Gui Xi'en and even the aforementioned actor Pu Cunxin, are recognised as "AIDS Heroes" and their actions have been published in a special issue of *Southern People Weekly* commemorating them as such (Chen et al. 2004; Zhou 2006). Even those who may not be as notable still have a significant social impact through their work in GO/NGOs or People's Organisations, the media publication of it, and the inspirational impact that such stories have in bringing others forward.

The legacy of China's HIV/AIDS organisations is that they have equipped a generation of young and motivated individuals with tools to broaden their activism and pragmatism into causes other than HIV/AIDS. Several of my Chinese colleagues who first gained their experience and their understanding of the practices and pitfalls in local and international GO/NGOs by working within HIV/AIDS, now work in organisations for the ageing, for brittle bone disease, for legal rights and for rights to education for economic migrant children.

## **ECONOMIES OF DISEASE**

HIV/AIDS in China is resource rich, and how politics and society has engaged this has engendered an industry of opportunism. This phenomenon is characterised by a mix of what Helen Epstein aptly describes of global mechanisms as "AIDS, Inc." (2007), and local Chinese practices Li Dun calls "eating the rice of AIDS" or "profiting from AIDS" (*chi aizibing fan*) (2004). One outcome of increasing numbers of citizens getting involved in what, at first, was a fledgling yet rapidly expanding disease economy, was that up-and-coming HIV and AIDS activists and organisers quickly learned to solicit eager international and local organisations for medicine and/or resources to build support facilities and programs to help those who needed assistance most. Funding began to pour in to meet their requests and the noise caused by this new generation of mainly young, urban, enthusiastic, patriotic social activists had many consequences. Importantly, it raised the social profile of HIV/AIDS, spread the word of HIV in Chinese society and forced the government to either get further involved or continue to lose face due to the various allegations brought forth by these individuals and organisations.

The latest statistics available indicate that there are over 250 registered organisations which manage HIV/AIDS projects in China (Couzin 2007). These include many local GO/NGOs, grassroots and people's organisations and most major international development/aid agencies, such as The Global Fund, The Red Cross, The Clinton Foundation, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Marie Stopes and DKT International. These organisations have significant budgets and are able to staff offices to develop and run HIV/AIDS support and awareness programs. They employ thousands of people and tie economic and social resources to projects and scholarship on HIV/AIDS-based topics. While I studied with anthropology graduate students in Beijing, I was surprised at how many students supplemented their living expenses by working for

projects, surveys and organisations which "traded" around HIV/AIDS awareness and activities. Several informed me that they chose HIV/AIDS as their area of research because job prospects upon graduation were much higher than for anything else they were interested in.

Big businesses, for example Global Business Coalition members such as the pharmaceuticals Beyer Schering and GlaxoSmithKline, are also involved in supporting HIV/AIDS projects, as are business-networking organisations such as Rotary International. The demand for corporations to "get involved" in various social projects is so high that organisations such as APCO Worldwide have branches which advise non-local business interests on where their philanthropy may be channelled without causing any political harm to their business prospects and goals ("APCO Worldwide Inc." 2009). APCO Worldwide also manages the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS China Working Group ("Private Sector: APCO China" 2009).

The Chinese state is also involved and has appealed directly to investment and business communities to help China fight HIV/AIDS. In 2005 Wu Yi, then former Minister of Health and member of the Communist Party's Central Committee Politburo, was famously quoted as saying, "to prevent and control HIV/AIDS is not only the obligation of the Chinese Government, but also the common responsibility of the entire society including the business sector" (Yan 2005; Holmes 2005). Such a request blends trade, aid and responsibility, but it was met with tremendous success. In one night, twenty-six initial, yet rapidly growing corporate commitments totalling millions of dollars and additional resources were secured. This show of support came from established corporations to business hopefuls, and from cosmetic companies to those trading in petrochemicals, sports and pharmaceuticals. Current World AIDS Day activities are also sponsored by multinational companies ranging from Bayer Group Pharmaceuticals, to Durex condom producers, to L'Oréal cosmetics.

## **IMAGE POLITICS**

Now that HIV/AIDS is an issue through which top-level leaders boost their philanthropic image, it has become connected to the political sphere in ways unlike any other contemporary disease before it. For example, the above quote from the now-retired Wu Yi comes from an exclusive dinner and Joint Summit on Business and AIDS in China, organised by APCO Worldwide in 2005, to discuss Corporate Social Responsibility strategy in China ("Award for Corporate Excellence - APCO Citation" 2007). In 2003 Wu Yi, along with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao—and later in

2008 President Hu Jintao and Vice President Li Keqiang—all appeared in public to shake hands with local HIV-positive people ("Handshake Highlights Fight against AIDS" 2003; "President Hu Visits Patients on World AIDS Day" 2008). Furthermore, coverage of Wu Yi's visit to China's "AIDS villages" in 2004 (Wan 2004), and Wen Jiabao's stay with rural HIV-positive families over the Chinese New Year in 2005 ("Wen Jiabao Chats with AIDS Patient" 2005), illustrate how the Chinese state's very public commitment to fighting HIV/AIDS has become a defining feature of its local and international political and health strategies. The timing of leaders' appearances on UN World AIDS Day (known locally as 1-2-1) and over the New Year, as well as the prime-time broadcast strategy for the events, the latter which occurs during spring festival (when the country is on a holiday of which TV watching is a major part), works to cement China's visual and political commitment to fighting HIV/AIDS. Although this does not address why certain sectors of the population are most vulnerable, this coverage of leadership concern reinforces the message that HIV-positive people should be accepted in society, and that it is a significant enough problem to engage top Chinese Communist Party leaders.

The image politics associated to HIV activism and publicity is not only demonstrated in the media coverage of the leadership making public gestures to show their commitment to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic; it is also exemplified in the issuing of new laws and regulations to protect and care for people living with HIV/AIDS. Legal change has been broad based, although this change has not necessarily filtered through to its often interpretive "rule by law" application in China (Xinhua 2004; "Local Chinese Authorities Declare HIV/AIDS NGO Illegal, Close Operation" 2006). Nonetheless, the reports and stories of discrimination suffered by HIV-positive people have impacted the 2004 revision of China's Law on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases, and led to the "Four Frees and One Care" (*simian yiguanhuai*) policy for those with HIV. The latter was introduced on World AIDS Day in 2003 and enshrined in China's 2006 AIDS prevention policy. It is meant to ensure that economically poor urban and rural people with HIV are able to access tests and life-saving antiretroviral drugs, including those which help prevent the transmission of the virus from mother to child, and can access other social support such as free schooling for their children (Shao, Yiming 2006; "The Regulations Governing the Manufacture of Products Containing Blood" 1996, Articles 1–62). Although there are many problems with this policy (Moon et al. 2008), and there are many other areas which need to be addressed, provisions for those with HIV/AIDS have come a long way (Chakravarthi et al. 2008). According to one NGO employee and acquaintance of mine, some

of the rural citizens he worked with in Henan tried to acquire HIV-positive diagnoses so that they too could bring some of the benefits to their families and children that such a diagnosis entails. Beyond this, changes in the social and legal systems attributable to HIV mean that it acts as a pioneer, inspiring marginalised groups and those with other illnesses to press for the implementation of anti-discrimination laws, and their rights to medication and compensation (Beijing Yirenping Center 2009, Beijing Yirenping Center 2008; Zhao 2009).

## CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO THE MEDIA

In comparison to other diseases in China, and in spite of the disproportionate amount of resources it consumes, HIV infection remains low, with pockets of high infection but with nation-wide rates on a par with Scandinavian countries. Although HIV has consistently been recorded in China's top five infectious disease killers over the past several years, there is a higher recorded incidence of rabies, tuberculosis, hepatitis, malaria and other prevalent diseases (China Center for Disease Control 2009). These diseases receive little, if any, media coverage and attention from government officials. Although this is slowly changing, very few NGOs exist to publicise rabies, or support sufferers of malaria or tuberculosis and, outside AIDS, I have yet to hear of specific recent legislation being passed ensuring that the ill receive "free care." For example, while those with HIV/AIDS are entitled to receive free education for their children, children infected with hepatitis are widely and frequently expelled from school ("Local Chinese Authorities Declare HIV/AIDS NGO Illegal, Close Operation" 2006). However, as health becomes an increasing concern for many Chinese due to the marketisation (*shichanghua*) of the once-strong socialist medical system, media outlets are also opening up to cover "less sexy" diseases such as hepatitis, which infects one in ten Chinese people and is notorious for being a trigger for work and school discrimination. Although I doubt hepatitis as a cause will ever overshadow HIV/AIDS, it is gathering more broad-based support as a local issue. There now are major websites for hepatitis sufferers, such as hbvhvb.com, and there have been several landmark cases addressing hepatitis B compensation and rights brought to trial by the NGO *Yirenping* (Jiang and Wang 2009), an organisation staffed and led by many activists who began their careers within HIV/AIDS-based groups.

What is important to note about the various changes to, and aspects of, China's contemporary celebrity and HIV/AIDS bio-activism is that it was

China's media which was the main catalyst for the initial social, and eventual political, corporate and legal, change. Although it was difficult to publish on HIV in the late 1990s, China's media began detailing the disastrous predictions from international bodies, such as the WHO and the UN (which are well respected in local society and politics), and began including stories about local HIV-positive people and HIV/AIDS volunteers and activists quite suddenly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was the key medium through which these missing stories finally found sympathetic and rather numerous ears and people to read and fear it. The horrific ways AIDS is shown to impact the body and the definition of new categories of people, first the AIDS sufferer (*aizibing huanzhe*), then the activist (*huodong renshi*) and finally the fighting AIDS hero (*kang'ai yingxiong*), have resulted in new understandings and ways of dealing with both disease and social activism, which in turn have caused broad changes to China's socio-moral, political, economic and legal fields. In the space of several years, HIV/AIDS has undeniably created a buzz, panic and a tremendous resource pool that no other disease, with the possible exception of SARS, has been able to parallel or sustain.

While it is true that a variety of factors have converged around the issue of HIV/AIDS in China to make it a special case, it is also true that without decisions of those in the media industry to publish profit-driven stories of suffering, without the resulting understanding of risk and suffering they incited, and without the marketisation of media industries more generally, the face of China's contemporary activism as well as general understandings of HIV and how it impacts Chinese people and communities would be very different. Though the case of HIV/AIDS in China is unique and often sensationalised, its corresponding social interest has paved the way for the development of bioactivism around other more common diseases such as hepatitis and illnesses caused by, for example, tainted milk or environmental pollution. Any investigation into the local shape of China's civil society (*gongmin shehui*) or the corporate social responsibility (*qiye zeren*) techniques it now supports needs to look to the past to understand the present. This will reveal that China's present state of affairs is rooted firmly within practices around HIV/AIDS and the tremendous opportunities for change that it presented for Chinese people, politics and society. These activities and new subjectivities do not necessarily serve as "dense transfer points of power" over which the biopolitical state exerts control (Foucault 1978: 101). Rather, the developments surrounding HIV/AIDS have helped create new spaces through which resistance may be leveraged, benefits gained, and through which a new modernity, and new conceptions of

suffering and humanism, rights and entitlements, may be given local meanings.

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