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Book review: "the hidden public health costs of doing business in China" Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China by Elanah Uretsky

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Hildebrandt, Timothy (2016) Book review: "the hidden public health costs of doing business in China" Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China by Elanah Uretsky. The Lancet Infectious Diseases, 16 (12). p. 1341. ISSN 1473-3099

DOI: [10.1016/S1473-3099\(16\)30485-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(16)30485-6)

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68567/>

Available in LSE Research Online: December 2016

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'The hidden public health costs of doing business in China'

Elanah Uretsky (2016) *Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Middle class heterosexual men are rarely portrayed as a vulnerable population, as far as HIV is concerned; in China they are neither included in official statistics nor in HIV prevention programs. But there is an unseen vulnerability to this otherwise powerful group, one that Elanah Uretsky masterfully reveals in *Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China*. This wonderfully written and empirically rich book shines an important light on the unintended public health consequences of *yingchou*, an informal practice common amongst Chinese businessmen involving heavy drinking, eating, smoking and, sometimes, commercial sex. More than mere indulgences, this practice represents another kind of 'sex work', where extramarital sex functions as a demonstration of elite masculinity and is seen as a requirement for building the homosocial relationships necessary for succeeding in business.

The book's strength lies in Uretsky's revealing ethnography and a refreshing first-person narrative rarely seen in social science writing. The most vivid field research was conducted in Ruilin, a town in southwestern China bordering Myanmar, situated at the crossroads of southeast Asia and at the heart of the HIV epidemic. Here the environment is ripe for the spread of infection generally, and amongst those driving economic development specifically. Impressively employing participant observation—which at first seems a questionable method given that she is a Western woman in an otherwise insular and often misogynistic setting—the author presents deeply personal stories, having gained the genuine confidence of her subjects. So trusting are her subjects that one casually revealed to her his plans to take on another mistress!

The first (and lengthier) of the book's two sections draws linkages between the practice of *yingchou*, masculinity, male sexuality, and the public health risk that they pose. This section shows the frenetic, 'Wolf of Wall Street'-like culture required of Chinese men who want to share in the country's economic success. It vividly chronicles the burdens of being male in China, a mentally and physically exhausting life where work starts at 8am and ends at 2am (often in the bed of a previously unknown women). It is within this sociocultural space that not only business is done but also masculinities are (re)constructed. Masculinity in China, she argues, is closely tied to a social and professional status that is achieved only when men play the role of a successful man *fully*, which includes sexual promiscuity. This discussion is situated within broader conversations on how economic development and social transformations have awoken male sexuality. Not coincidentally, the political space for expressions of sexuality has change in China. While the Communist Party still wants to be seen by the public as the protector of 'traditional morality', it must also ensure continued economic growth, which can paradoxically mean turning a blind eye to the immorality of *yingchou*. This fascinating study of heterosexual sexuality also shows how even though awareness of HIV is quite high, the primary research subjects, straight businessmen, see themselves as immune. This is due to the virus being viewed as a problem for those on the margins of society, not those at the centre of it.

The first section of the book is social science research at its finest, marked by Uretsky's page-turning ethnographies and lively prose. But when, in the second section, the book turns away from its discussion of *yingchou* and businessmen and toward the HIV epidemic more broadly in China, it is less compelling (despite being well argued and

supported). Chapters 5 and 6 largely put aside individual analysis and ethnographies in favour of general examinations of the spread of HIV and how the state must contend with local idiosyncrasies to tackle it. Disappointingly, there is little specific attention paid to how the state, or societal actors, might effectively address the problem of HIV amongst this heretofore unseen high risk population. Given that the compelling story earlier in the book suggests that sociocultural practices play a strong role in creating vulnerability in this population, policy solutions—barring unpopular and difficult ‘cultural engineering’—might be limited. Moreover, knowing how closely linked the behaviours in *yingchou* are to masculinity generally, policymakers might be unable to address the problem at all. All that said, policy solutions might not be completely out of reach. Uretsky opens the book with a telling vignette about how the government’s austerity measures restricting government officials to ‘four dishes and soup’ in their entertaining could indirectly, and unwittingly, help tackle a growing public health problem. This suggests that policy interventions might need to take the form of indirect, and decidedly unintended fixes—what Reinhold Niebuhr might call ‘proximate solutions to insoluble problems’.

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