

Sex and sexuality in the Shenzhen *tongzhi* circle: HIV risk context and migrant men who have sex with men in China

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(Received 9 September 2008; final version received 17 April 2009)

The paper explores the HIV risk context of migrant men who have sex with men, or *tongzhi*, in Shenzhen, China. Findings from 42 qualitative interviews indicate that respondents are living within a complex risk environment, characterised by the realities of migration and a ‘weak ties’, virtual men who have sex with men community, which offers little emotional support but many opportunities for sexual engagement. Male sex work has proliferated in Shenzhen, with respondents informally participating in a type of buy-sell circuit. Respondents’ portrayal of their environment and conflicts were underscored by three interacting elements: sexual freedom, migration and traditional Chinese values. The confluence of these factors, and how they may influence risk prioritisation in a multi-risk environment, is explored.

Keywords: men who have sex with men; China; HIV; risk; sexual networks

Introduction

Shenzhen is a special economic zone in Guangdong Province, adjacent to Hong Kong. Founded in 1980, it has been the fastest growing city in China for the past thirty years and one of the most rapidly evolving in the world. Shenzhen is home to nearly 10 million people, three-quarters of whom are unregistered internal migrants, meaning that they do not have access to health or social services. As a large city, culturally juxtaposed between East and West, Shenzhen has attracted many people looking to explore non-traditional ambitions and lifestyles, including a substantial population of migrant men who regularly or occasionally have sex with other men. This has led to, among other things, the development of an explicit ‘gay scene’ and a male sexual economy.

Of increasing concern in this setting is deteriorating sexual health. HIV prevalence among men who have sex with other men in Shenzhen was found to be between 0.8 and 4%, depending on the location from which the participant was recruited ($n = 1146$) (Hong et al. 2009). The same survey found syphilis prevalence to be 24% among men who have sex with men recruited from clinics, 21% among men who have sex with men recruited from saunas and 2.4% among men who have sex with men recruited from bars. Although these data may not be generalisable, they are certainly worrying, particularly as reported condom use is low, with less than half reporting consistent use (Choi et al. 2004; Lau et al. 2008; Liu et al. 2006; Zhang et al. 2007).

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Cultural theory

Cultural theory holds that aspects of one's environment anchor perception and guide (risk) behaviour, including the ways in which we prioritise risks (see Douglas 1985; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). According to such a theoretical perspective, Chinese society is best described as 'hierarchical' with collectivist traditions, of which Confucianism is the unifying order. Confucianist philosophy emphasises hierarchy, duty, obedience, a strong authoritarian government and filial piety. However, Shenzhen's migrant environment may be characterised as 'individualist', consumerist, irreverent – forgiving of self-exploration or even what may be seen as moral transgressions within traditional Confucianist belief.

Risk behaviour in Shenzhen is undoubtedly influenced by both traditional and more contemporary cultures. The dearth of literature on the influence of these conflicting cultures on individuals' orienting dispositions (Scambler and Hopkins 1986), and how these dispositions influence how risks are prioritised, triggered this research. The work presented here is part of a wider study exploring the construction of risk perceptions and the factors influencing sexual (risk) behaviour among men who have sex with men in Shenzhen, China (see Chapman 2007). The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the 'positioning' of Shenzhen men who have sex with men vis-à-vis their environment and explore the confluence of contextual factors and HIV risk.

Methods

We conducted qualitative interviews with 42 men who have sex with men over two phases of data collection: 32 in Phase I and 10 in Phase II, applying a snowball sampling approach.

The Institute of Dermato-Venereology in Shenzhen has carried out a number of research and health promotion projects with men who have sex with men over recent years and has established a reference group of men who have sex with men (hereafter, the reference group), with whom they develop their projects. This project was conceived following discussions with this reference group and recruitment efforts were led by members of the group.

The sampling frame for both phases consisted of all men reporting previous same-sex behaviour and/or same-sex sexual desires, residing in Shenzhen between late 2005 and early 2006 and aged 18 or over. Procedures for sampling were inspired by the grounded theory approach. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research methodologies are not intended to result in statistically significant research conclusions based on pre-defined outcome measures but, rather, aim for theoretical generalisability of, in many cases, unset variables. Theoretical sampling, described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is:

... the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges ... the process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory ... (p. 45)

In line with the principles of theoretical sampling, a range of participants was recruited to reflect diversity in age, socioeconomic status, marital status, HIV status and participation in sex work.

Following preliminary analysis of the Phase I data, we determined a need for a second set of interviews with a slightly different focus. Our aim this time was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which Chinese men who have sex with men in Shenzhen characterised, assessed and managed risks that presented themselves in their daily lives.

The majority of participants were recruited through the aforementioned reference group. Others were recruited when they came to the hospital for an HIV or syphilis test. YC presented interested and eligible men with study information including confidentiality clauses, rights to refuse participation and to choose not to answer any question, as well as rights to withdraw from the study and seek redress. We emphasised that participation was voluntary. YC was responsible for obtaining verbal informed consent from all interviewees prior to interview.

Slightly different topic guides were used for each of the two phases of data collection. JC drafted both guides in English and these were subsequently translated into Chinese, back-translated and revised following discussions with bilingual members of the research team and the reference group. Both guides were piloted with three men. All pilot interviews involved a local volunteer from within the men who have sex with men community to enable feedback and ensure that interviewers were acting sensitively.

The Phase I topic guide contained question lines on sexual health knowledge, sexual behaviour, HIV/STI risk perceptions and health seeking behaviour as well as possible future interventions. The Phase II interview guide contained question lines on risk generally, being same-sex attracted and views about HIV/AIDS, including risk perceptions. No quantitative information regarding numbers of partners, condom use etc. was collected.

Phase I interviews were conducted in late 2005; Phase II in Spring, 2006. The 32 Phase I interviews were carried out by two university students from Hong Kong. The 10 Phase II interviews were carried out by YC, a medical doctor working in Shenzhen with extensive outreach experience with men who have sex with men. A member of the reference group and YC were available before and after each interview to discuss with the interviewee any potential areas of discomfort and to reassure the interviewee of confidentiality.

Interviews took between 30 minutes and one hour and were conducted at the Shenzhen Institute of Dermato-Venereology. All interviews were tape-recorded with explicit informed verbal consent. Interviewees received RMB 50 (£3.50) in compensation for attending the interview and were offered a free HIV and syphilis test (a value of RMB 50).

The study was approved by the Infection and Immunity, Bart's and The London NHS Trust departmental research governance and peer-review committee. Study protocols and instruments were also approved by the Shenzhen Institute of Dermato-Venereology peer-review committee. No identifying information was collected as part of this research. All participants provided witnessed verbal informed consent. Data is stored at Queen Mary, University of London in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act.

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in Chinese by YC in accordance with agreed transcription guidelines, covering formatting, accuracy, attention to syntax and confidentiality. Transcriptions and translation guidelines (developed with translators through a considerable review process, see Chapman 2007) were sent to one of six translators who liaised with interviewers regarding points of uncertainty in the translation.

Data from Phase I and Phase II were analysed together for common themes. Our analysis process was multi-stage, involving in the first instance an in-field 'pre-analysis' stage that marked the differentiation between phases of data collection and sampling/recruitment. Substantive data analysis was in line with the Framework method (Ritchie and Spencer 1994). In the first instance, JC and SH read through all transcripts and both coded six transcripts (three from each Phase) and generated a working coding framework informed by the nature of the data generated. JC then made use of the 'focused coding' method (Charmaz 2006) and went through all remaining transcripts, coding them

according to the emergent 'macro' coding framework. Following charting, JC and SH collaboratively explored the data for associations, identity markers and theoretical linkages evident both within and between charts. Findings were discussed with all authors and the reference group.

Results

The 42 study participants originated from 20 different provinces; all were migrants to Shenzhen and one was from an ethnic minority. Men were aged between 20 and 45 (mean age 26). One interviewee reported being married at the time of interview, two others were divorced. Respondents were relatively well educated compared to the general population with nearly one-third reporting tertiary education and all but two reporting secondary education. The majority of participants reported monthly mobility between Shenzhen, other urban centres and their hometowns. Two men reported being HIV-positive.

There were some demographic differences between respondents interviewed in Phase I compared to Phase II in terms of educational attainment and employment status. Data are summarised in Table 1.

We identified three key, overlapping themes that underscored respondents' orienting dispositions to HIV risk: sexuality, community and sexual norms in Shenzhen.

Understanding tongzhi

Respondents' portrayals of their sexuality and sexual desires were influenced by their perceptions of the legitimacy of same-sex sexual behaviour and taking on of some form of 'homosexual' identity, as well as wider discourses around family and relationships.

Respondents reported diverse sexual identities. The term *tongzhi* was utilised by all participants and may be understood as a halfway point between a behavioural and

Table 1. Demographic features of respondents, by study phase.

| | Phase I (n = 32) | Phase II (n = 10) | Total (n = 42) |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Age range (mean) | 21–43 (26) | 20–45 (27) | 20–45 (26) |
| Educational attainment (%) | | | |
| Tertiary | 6 (19) | 4 (40) | 10 (24) |
| Secondary | 19 (59) | 2 (20) | 21 (50) |
| Primary | 2 (6) | 2 (20) | 4 (9) |
| No information | 5 (16) | 2 (20) | 7 (17) |
| Current employment (%) | | | |
| Professional | 8 (25) | 7 (70) | 15 (36) |
| Unskilled | 11 (34) | 1 (10) | 12 (28) |
| Money boy | 4 (13) | 1 (10) | 5 (12) |
| Not employed | 6 (19) | 1 (10) | 7 (17) |
| No information | 3 (9) | – | 3 (7) |
| Marital status | | | |
| Married | – | 1 | 1 |
| Divorced | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Transactional sex* | | | |
| History of selling | 8 (n = 25) | 3 (n = 9) | 11 (n = 34) |
| History of buying | 5 (n = 23) | 1 (n = 6) | 6 (n = 29) |

*Not all men provided responses to questions around transactional sex.

an identity description, possibly linked to same-sex sexual desire particularly. Approximately half of the men who provided information on their sexuality (12 of 26) stated that they were *tongzhi* and four others said they were 'towards homosexual' (*xing qu xiang qu xiang yu tongzhi*) – perhaps reflecting an earlier stage of acceptance of their sexuality. Seven respondents reported that they were 'bisexual' (*shuang xing lian*) and three said that they were 'unsure' (*bu que ding*) of their sexual identity. Sexual identity was not necessarily reflective of recent or intended sexual behaviour – only three men reported sex with a woman in the three months prior to interview.

Although most respondents had come to terms with their same-sex attraction, all had 'struggled' (*zheng zha*) with this. No respondents reported being completely 'open' (*gong kai*). A number of interviewees voiced serious concerns about the repercussions on their families if people in their hometown were to find out about their same-sex sexual activities. Indeed, respondents' desires to 'save face' and avoid bringing shame to their families underlined many of their narratives.

Nearly all respondents differentiated between types of *tongzhi*. Men who felt they were born *tongzhi* were considered 'pure'; men who felt or were felt by others to have 'become' *tongzhi* over time were considered 'impure'. This latter category includes men whose first sexual experience with another man was as a sex worker and underlines a notion that homosexual behaviour is addictive or can be habitualised:

I've met so many people, lots and lots of them ... some were pure *tongzhi*, who just loved *tongzhi*; while others joined the circle of *tongzhi* simply to make money, because they were unable to get settled in Shenzhen – unable to find a job – and some of them later became *tongzhi* themselves. (ID 1-6, aged 32, 4 years in Shenzhen)

Furthermore, for some, their *tongzhi* identity was limited in time and/or place. A number of respondents noted that they would only be *tongzhi* until they married. To 'try out' (*chang shi*) homosexuality was acceptable; to commit to a long-term gay identity was considered illegitimate and out of line with cultural conceptions of being 'a good Chinese':

I'm probably in between *tongzhi* and common people. I'm not the kind who insists on being a *tongzhi*. I have thought about getting married too ... If [I get married], I'll turn myself around. I [won't be] a *tongzhi* anymore. (ID 2-10, aged 33, 2.5 years in Shenzhen)

Overall, the degree of centrality placed on sexual identity and sexuality in men's lives was diverse and was linked to men's degree of interconnectedness with the local *tongzhi* community over sexual behaviour. Although a number of men felt strongly about the legitimacy of their sexual identity, few felt a strong desire to express their sexuality, particularly over the longer term. Indeed, interviewees expressed a strong desire to marry or be in a long-term, committed relationship – preferably with a man, but if not, with a woman – and feel loved. There was some consensus that an eventual heterosexual partnership was the only way to ensure a normal, legitimised life:

I think it's me who wants to get married. For example, if I like a boy right now, I'll want to get married ... However, if [the relationship] can't last, I'll choose to get married to a woman, a woman who loves me. (ID 1-13, aged 24, commutes from nearby Dongguan)

Overall, seven men (of 35 who gave information and were not already married) reported that they intended to marry and a further nine reported that they may consider this in the future. Of the men who remarked that they had no plans to marry, this was not stated definitively. Marriage plans bore no clear relationship with age.

The Shenzhen tongzhi circle

A perception that discriminatory attitudes against *tongzhi* were less commonplace in Shenzhen had led 12 respondents to move to Shenzhen. Men felt that there were a higher number of *tongzhi* in Shenzhen than in other Chinese cities, making the *tongzhi* community less conspicuous:

Shenzhen is a pretty open city for *tongzhi*. There seems to be more *tongzhi* in Shenzhen because they don't mind revealing their *tongzhi* identity. I think *tongzhi* lead a very carefree life in Shenzhen without many constraints. Usually they dare not reveal their identity in their hometown, but they don't feel that kind of pressure here in Shenzhen. They have their own space to live their life. (ID 2-4, aged 24, 18 months in Shenzhen)

Many men referred to a budding '*tongzhi* circle' or community, in Shenzhen. This 'circle' may be best described as a shifting network characterised by 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973). In other words, the character of the circle appears extended in nature (rather than closed), which enables nearly limitless encounters with 'friends of friends'. Respondents were tied to the *tongzhi* circle to varying degrees, though few men exhibited 'strong ties'.

The circle appears relatively 'low-key' and porous, with an emphasis on 'fun' and sentimental attachment. Some interviewees expressly indicated that they were not part of the circle nor did they ever intend to be a part of it. In men's views, being a part of the circle was not linked to men's *tongzhi* status as 'pure' or 'impure' as distinguished earlier, nor to sexual behaviour, but may be associated with social needs, characteristic of younger men.

All respondents who felt part of the 'circle' reported entering it via *tongzhi* friends that they had met either online or in *tongzhi* venues (which they had identified online). Many respondents expressed that they entered the scene passively:

I only learned about it when I came to Shenzhen . . . I checked it online. Because the first few friends I met [in Shenzhen] were all *tongzhi*, they brought me into this social circle. (ID 1-26, aged 25, 3 years in Shenzhen)

The Internet has played a prominent role in the shaping of the *tongzhi* circle. There are a considerable number of *tongzhi* websites with chat room facilities and study participants reported a large number of Internet friends across China. Indeed, many interviewees reported meeting their first sex partners over the Internet and a number of men (17) reported using the Internet at the time of study to meet sex partners across China.

Love and sex

There was consensus among all interviewees that *tongzhi* relationships were inherently unstable. Respondents suggested that the community was hedonistic in nature and sexual relationships were overemphasised at the expense of more loving ones. Love and relationships were felt to be 'easy come, easy go' (*lai de kuai, qu de ye kuai*) and *tongzhi* sexuality, if not their own sexuality, was characterised by respondents as promiscuous:

Within this circle it's not easy to have love. Even when it comes it's pretty unstable. A friend of mine may become another's tomorrow. This is a fast transitional period . . . We don't have a protection from marriage but within the context of sex we are searching for a sense of novelty. (ID 1-16, aged 24, 3 months in Shenzhen)

In the quote above, the interviewee notes that the search for 'novelty' (*xin qi de shi*) in sex hampers the development of longer-term relationships. This may be particularly relevant as a majority of respondents noted that Shenzhen was their first opportunity

to 'sexualise' as it represented an anonymous environment far from the pressures associated with 'being a son' (*zuo wei er zi*). The interviewee also suggests that marriage offers 'protection' (*bao hu*) against unstable relationships and that without this state-enforced commitment, long-term male partnerships are difficult.

The pressures of the migration environment also had negative sexual implications. Some interviewees expressed a link between engaging in casual sex or one-night stands (referred to colloquially as '419' – for-one-night) and feeling lonely or bored:

I can say that in Shenzhen the 419 situation is quite ubiquitous. We don't know what to do as we are coming to a strange city. Sometimes we feel it necessary to chat with a friend on the Internet. (ID 1-16, aged 24, 3 months in Shenzhen)

Lastly, a motivation for financial gain framed *tongzhi* relationships. Partly due to oversampling, our sample contained at least four male sex workers (*wei tongzhi ti gong xing fu wu de nan hai* or 'money boys' as they are commonly called in China) and seven other men reported a history of selling sex opportunistically. Money boys in Shenzhen work in bars (many of which explicitly offer sex for sale on site), parks, saunas and via websites/chat-rooms. Respondents working as sex workers reported charging RMB 300–1000 (£20–65 at the time of interview) depending on the service provided and whether an overnight stay is requested. (The average salary in Shenzhen at the time of interview was approximately RMB 2000 per month.)

In addition to formal sex work, there also appears to be a normalised informal practice of buying and selling sex in Shenzhen – in the form of a buy-sell circuit. Men sell sex to men who approach them but to whom they are not necessarily attracted. They then use this money to buy sex from someone to whom they are attracted but who is not necessarily attracted to them. Respondents expressed that this buying and selling was inextricably linked to the consumerist culture in Shenzhen and men's priorities of making money and exploring their sexuality:

R: Sometimes in the bars, I don't like that person, but he likes me a lot ... I would probably change my situation and ...

I: And ask him for money?

R: Yes, or ask him to buy something for me, which actually is the same kind in character. (ID 1-20, aged 35, 12 years in Shenzhen, on and off)

The majority of respondents who reported a history of exchanging sex had done so opportunistically, not professionally, and likened these occurrences to 'being helped' or 'helping someone' (*bei bang zhu huo bang zhu bie ren*) – providing a 'convenience' (*ti gong bian li er bu shi bie de*) and not something tangible:

In fact I haven't [sold sex], but when I started to work, someone has given me a little money for transport. (ID 2-9; 24 years old, 15 months in Shenzhen, HIV-positive)

Some [relationships] can involve money, but it's not a trade for money, it's to provide you with some help and convenience, not a trade. (ID 1-26, aged 25, 3 years in Shenzhen)

An important distinction evoked by several men was the difference between buying/being given gifts and paying/being paid for sex. Men who bought gifts for their sex partners, whether they were money boys or other men who sold sex opportunistically, did not see the event as transactional per se:

It wasn't buying in that sense, because I was a bit active and bought him something ... I never gave money to anyone, but presents. (ID 1-20, aged 35, 12 years in Shenzhen on and off)

In general, respondents accepted the culture of buying and selling sex. It was thought to foster a convenience to men searching for a casual partner:

Like us, frankly speaking ... it's like ... tongzhi, you break up again ... this selling or buying are all welcomed by a lot of people. (ID 1-20, aged 35, 12 years in Shenzhen, on and off)

However, other men focused on the negative aspects of this trade – particularly that all partnerships were becoming transactional and that a mutual trust between potential partners was becoming more difficult to attain. Interviewees were frustrated with ‘devious’ (*pian li zheng dao de*) money boys, who were characterised as being out to swindle and cheat.

No quantitative data on condom use, either within commercial/transactional or non-transactional relationships, were collected as part of this study; however, respondents were asked about their condom use behaviour. Men held differing views about the necessity of using condoms, with most feeling that they were necessary for one-night-stands, but not for more regular relationships or with people known to them (regardless of whether these relationships were transactional or not):

Of course I [use condoms]. This is a must. Otherwise doing that might cause AIDS. People know to have safe sex for this. It's a must. (ID 1-8, aged 21, 8 months in Shenzhen)

Not every time. I understand [HIV] transmission methods and dangers, but when I actually do it, maybe I'm not that strict. (ID 1-31, aged 24, lives off an on in Shenzhen)

I: Are there any reasons that make you feel that you don't like to use condoms?

R: In that situation, I have to know a lot about his background and his past.

I: What level is a lot?

R: Quite well, at least his work, his personality, his character and whether he is a casual person. (ID 1-20, aged 35, 12 years off and on in Shenzhen)

The interviewee quoted above explains that his perceptions of how ‘casual’ (*ou ran*) a sexual partner is – which could be interpreted as sexually casual, and/or informal and non-traditional (in terms of Confucian values) – affects his condom-use decisions.

With respect to commercial sex, condom use appears to be the norm. Two money boys describe their behaviour:

We generally would use condoms. I have not met any one who refused to use a condom. (ID 1-4, aged 24, 4 years in Shenzhen)

You can persuade them to use condoms. Usually they will agree if you negotiate with them. (ID 1-5, aged 21, 2 years in Shenzhen)

However, the nature of the male sexual economy in Shenzhen is such that commercial/transactional and non-transactional relationships begin to blur as clients become regulars. This is significant in terms of condom use:

Although we are specialised in servicing these customers, sometimes we would meet some guys that we like. When we are together for a longer time, we definitely would not use that, I mean condoms – we would not request him to use that. (ID 2-2, aged 23, 3 months in Shenzhen)

This last quote sums up the shifting nature of relationships and risk perceptions and risk realities within the Shenzhen *tongzhi* circle.

Discussion

To our knowledge this is one of the first qualitative studies of sexual relations between men in China and the only study that has explored the unique Shenzhen HIV risk context. Respondents' portrayal of their environment and confusions were underscored by three interacting elements: sexual freedom, migration and traditional Chinese values. Exploring

the confluence of these factors with presented themes (sexuality, community and love and sex) and considering how they may influence risk prioritisation in a multi-risk environment is useful for HIV-prevention purposes.

Respondents reported diverse sexual identities, which were only tangentially related to the Western 'gay' identity (Jones 1999; Pan with Aggleton 1996). Sexual identity was not necessarily reflective of recent or intended sexual behaviour and respondents were differentially comfortable with a *tongzhi* identity, consistent with other studies conducted among men who have sex with men in China (e.g. He et al. 2005; Liu and Choi 2006) and throughout Asia (e.g. Morineau, Song et al. 2004).

A dissonance between sexual behaviour and identity in this setting is not surprising considering the discrimination and stigma facing *tongzhi* in China. Firstly, to be defined by sexual preferences is an unfamiliar concept in China (Chou 2000 in Wang and Ross 2002). Jones (1999) considered that "In a society in which conceptualisations of the 'self' are intrinsically tied to kinship relations, the 'homosexual' is not just an isolated identity, but an incomplete one" (p. 170). Self-identities linked to social relationships are most important in the Asian setting where self-assertiveness is considered to be immature (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Secondly, cultural taboos surrounding homosexuality (and indeed, sexuality), emphasised by traditions of filial piety, prevent an easy acceptance of such a sexual identity. None of the study participants were completely open in their sexuality.

Thirdly, partly due to cultural taboos, homosexual behaviour in this migration setting may be viewed by some as akin to 'having fun' – a temporary lifestyle unlinked to sexual identity, as has been noted elsewhere (Cáceres 1996). Indeed, a number of respondents suggested that their 'impure' *tongzhi* friends might be 'having fun' until they get married. On the other hand, several men conceptualised homosexual behaviour as addictive and/or habitualised – something that one tries and 'gets used to' (*xi guan*). This idea was prominent in early-mid-twentieth century discourses of homosexuality in China (and indeed elsewhere). Recent studies have noted a fear among male sex workers in other countries of 'getting hooked' on homosexuality (Schifter and Aggleton 1999; Tan 1999). Possibly this notion of habitualised homosexuality is linked to perceptions of the legitimacy of homosexual behaviour as it reduces men's sense of personal agency in the production of their behaviour.

The men in this study expressed a strong desire to marry or to be in a long-term, committed and loving relationships – preferably with a man, but if not, with a woman. This desire for love and commitment is likely rooted in both men's historical orientations toward sex and relationships as well as their immediate risk environments. Firstly, respondents' views regarding sexuality and relationships have been shaped by more than 20 years of identity development within Chinese society – only recently have men's normative environments changed and only recently have their homosexual desires come to shape their identities and relationship pursuits.

In China, as in most Western countries (Middleton 1997), notions of 'love' and 'intimacy' are embedded in popular sexual discourses and thus the fact that men were looking for love in their sexual relationships is hardly surprising. Other studies have found that men's sexual debuts are weighted with a preoccupation of finding a relationship, perhaps stemming from years of sexual repression and social isolation (Maxwell 1997; Middleton 1997). (However, parallels could be drawn to young heterosexuals.)

Secondly, this desire for long-term love may be due in part to perceptions of the instability of *tongzhi* love, a need for something 'solid' and trustworthy to hold on to amidst migration anxieties and identity concerns. Interestingly, there was no clear

relationship between age and marriage plans among study participants. Reasons for this are only speculative, but some younger men may have been putting forward self-presentations that highlighted independence and non-conformism – characteristic of younger people, whilst others were still very filial-minded and uncertain of their sexual identity. Likewise, older men may have become more comfortable with their sexual identity over time and less bound by Chinese traditions.

The nuances and diversity of men's identities, and particularly the sidelining of the 'sexual self', have implications for targeted HIV prevention efforts in that initiatives targeted at *tongzhi* will clearly not reach men who do not identify as *tongzhi*, and/or are not part of the *tongzhi* community (e.g. Chng et al. 2003). Furthermore, targeted efforts may over-emphasise sexual identities and neglect other identities and risk alienating men in need of information.

There is evidence of a budding *tongzhi* community in Shenzhen, referred to by respondents as 'the circle' (*quan zi nei*). The circle may be described as a shifting network of weak ties (Granovetter 1973), with individuals migrating in and out over time. The community acts as a means through which individuals can explore their sexuality and offers some support for 'sexual transgressions' in this Confucian society (Foucault 1976). The migration context allows a degree of anonymity and fosters a sense of temporariness of these explorations, offering a validation or defence to those anxious about their transgressions.

This type of community may offer benefits vis à vis the transfer of information about HIV and other STIs (Granovetter 1973), but arguably the validation needed to initiate and sustain new behavioural norms requires reinforcement mechanisms typical of integrated, 'strong-tie' networks (Wallace 1991). Furthermore, the Shenzhen *tongzhi* network does not appear to have an external visibility, with cultural and political pressures making it difficult for *tongzhi* to gather momentum as a civil society group.

The Internet has played a large role in the shaping of the Shenzhen *tongzhi* network and has arguably been the key factor advancing *tongzhi* social capital – particularly in this transient setting where anonymity is coveted. The majority of respondents reported using the Internet to find sexual partners and also find out about being *tongzhi*, before becoming involved in *tongzhi* relationships, making the Internet a prime medium for HIV prevention efforts (Wang and Ross 2002).

The life circumstances associated with a migration context provide fortuitous opportunities for sexual risk-taking: for a majority of participants Shenzhen provided the first opportunities to 'sexualise' with other *tongzhi* and money boys. Moreover, respondents suggested that the migration context facilitated feelings of boredom or loneliness, which in some cases led men to seek out casual sexual relationships (Yang, Derlega and Luo 2007; Yang et al. 2006). For other men, particularly those who had relocated for financial gain and/or to explore their sexuality, migration provided both the impetus and opportunity for participating in the sex industry.

Very little research has been conducted among China's so-called money boys, with regard to the culture and practice of men selling sex. Partly due to sampling parameters, many respondents reported a history of selling sex to men and women. However, a high prevalence of sex work amongst men who have sex with other men has been noted in other studies in China (e.g. Choi et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2008; Wang, Lin, and Ross 2004) as well as in neighbouring countries (e.g. Morineau, Song et al. 2004). Indeed, there is evidence for a buy-sell circuit, as found in Shenzhen, in Cambodia (Morineau, Ngak et al. 2004).

Men may enter sex work for various reasons. Firstly, making money is a primary value in China, particularly characteristic of Shenzhen migrant culture, and sex work is often

seen as a way to make easy money (da Silva 1999; He et al. 2007). Importantly in China, it may be a greater loss of face to be poor and a financial burden (particularly as a returning migrant) than to participate in the sex industry, particularly as sex work can be hidden from one's family.

Secondly, studies in other settings have linked sex work with the opportunity to experiment with one's sexuality without permanently identifying oneself with a particular sexual preference (e.g. Larvie 1999). In other words, sex for money may provide the context for homosexual relationships but financial gain may not be the principal objective. Although we did not find any direct evidence of this, several respondents referred to money boys who were 'impure' *tongzhi* and who either eventually 'became' *tongzhi* or who 'returned' to the heterosexual community, possibly indicating resonance in this setting.

Importantly for HIV-prevention efforts, the line between clients and other partners, and likewise making money and having fun, is blurred – particularly in a setting where gift-giving in social relationships is a show of both respect and personal success. Money boys noted that their feelings about the necessity of condom use changed as they became familiar with a client or if they were attracted to a client. Over time, the line between commercial and non-commercial relationships blurs and behaviour that would normally be only acceptable in non-commercial relationships becomes acceptable in commercial ones.

Furthermore, as much of the transactional sex in Shenzhen appears to be informal and often spontaneous, involving men who may or may not view themselves as sex workers and partners who may or may not view themselves as clients, safer sex may not even enter the consciousness of either partner. If it does, the sex worker may be disempowered to insist on condom use if they are financially insecure and hope to lure the client on another occasion (Bloor 1995).

All of the men interviewed as part of this study were internal migrants. Some held professional jobs, and thus may have been registered, but the majority were most likely unregistered. Unregistered migrants have no access to formal social support systems, including healthcare insurance. Migrants who are struggling to establish some quality of life in Shenzhen may be less able to address their sexual health risks and may be a harder-to-reach group in terms of HIV prevention. Furthermore, migrants facing a plethora of challenges related to the migration environment are less likely to see sexual health as one of their key concerns, next to, say, housing or hunger.

A majority of respondents noted that coming to Shenzhen provided their first opportunity to explore their sexuality and socialise with other *tongzhi*. Respondents were focused on maximizing their independence and sexual freedoms whilst they were in Shenzhen, aware that one day they may marry or return to their hometowns. A clinical or risk-oriented approach to sex would reduce their ability to enjoy these freedoms.

Furthermore, study respondents were flirting with a new 'individualist' (*ge ren zhu yi de*) identity within China's hierarchical society. However, the men in this study were not wholly individualists or individualists all the time. Respondents struggled between this new sense of self and upholding more traditional Confucian principles, shifting between duplicitous presentations of self (e.g. moral or liberated) depending on audience and context (Goffman 1959), battling between their filial values and yearning for self-indulgence (Wong et al. 2006).

In summary, participants' responses to risk were inherently wedded to their 'being Chinese', to their 'being migrants' and to their 'being *tongzhi*'. Within these walls, their identities develop, their risk knowledges are constructed, their risk environments are formed and their experiences and actions are given meaning. The essence of respondents' 'beingness' gives rise to the 'orientating positions' (Goffman 1959, 1963; Scambler and

Hopkins 1986) that guide their action (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Careful attention to men's positions within their environments, and the factors that affect individual agency, will lead to the development of better HIV prevention models for this community.

It would not be appropriate to end without saying something about the limitations of the study. We aimed to recruit a maximum variation sample of men. Our participants were relatively diverse in age, education, employment and province of origin. However, we were not able to recruit as many married/bisexually active and HIV-positive men as hoped. Importantly, as this study was based on two community samples of men, snowballed from the *tongzhi* recruiter's social network, reported risk behaviours may not be indicative of the general population of *tongzhi* in Shenzhen (Qun et al. 2008).

Also, there were some differences between Phase I and Phase II interviewees. They did not differ in geographical origination or age, but Phase II respondents were generally more diverse in terms of their educational status and Phase I interviewees were more diverse in terms of their employment status (a majority of Phase II interviewees were professionals). However, all data were analyzed together.

Common to all cross-cultural/lingual research, this study necessitated multiple stages of data reproduction. There were three interviewers, a transcriber (YC, also an interviewer) and six translators. Data analysis was conducted by JC and SH and findings were vetted by the wider team; however, only JC coded all transcripts, with SH coding a sub-set to ensure rigour. Although it would be implausible to suggest that English transcripts represented an exact copy of the conversation between the respondent and the interviewer, we feel strongly that the methodological precautions exercised ensured that conclusions are based upon a careful analysis of findings and understanding of the context.

Acknowledgements

This study formed the basis of JC's doctoral thesis supervised by CE, SH and John Imrie, whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged. We are indebted to study respondents and colleagues based in Shenzhen who made this work possible. We also thank two student interviewers from Hong Kong and the six translators who supported the research process. The study was jointly funded by the Shenzhen Institute of Dermato-Venereology, the University of London Central Research Fund and the Department of Infection and Immunity, Bart's and The London NHS Trust. Finally, the Futures Group International is gratefully acknowledged for supporting JC to finalize this paper.

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Résumé

Cet article explore le contexte des risques liés au VIH parmi les hommes migrants qui ont des rapports sexuels avec des hommes (HSH), ou *tongzhi*, à Shenzhen, en Chine. Les résultats provenant de 42 entretiens qualitatifs indiquent que les répondants vivent dans un environnement à risques complexe, caractérisé par les réalités de la migration et les «liens faibles», ainsi que par une communauté virtuelle de HSH qui procure peu de soutien émotionnel mais offre de nombreuses opportunités sexuelles. Le commerce du sexe exercé par des hommes a proliféré à Shenzhen, les répondants étant eux-mêmes intégrés de manière informelle à un type de circuit «achat-vente». La description de leur environnement et des conflits par les répondants s'appuie sur trois éléments qui agissent les uns sur les autres: la liberté sexuelle, la migration et les valeurs chinoises traditionnelles. Sont explorés la convergence de ces facteurs et leurs modes d'influence sur la hiérarchisation des risques, dans un environnement où ces derniers sont multiples.

Resumen

En este artículo analizamos los riesgos del contagio del virus del sida en el contexto de hombres emigrantes que tienen relaciones sexuales con hombres, los también llamados *tongzhi* en Shenzhen, China. Los resultados de 42 entrevistas cualitativas indican que los entrevistados viven en un complejo ambiente arriesgado que se caracteriza por las realidades de la migración y vínculos débiles, y una comunidad virtual de este grupo de hombres que ofrece poco apoyo emocional pero muchas oportunidades de participar en actividades sexuales. El trabajo sexual de los hombres ha proliferado en Shenzhen, y los entrevistados participaron de modo informal en un tipo de circuito de compra y venta. En la descripción que los entrevistados dieron de su ambiente y sus conflictos destacaron tres elementos entrelazados: la libertad sexual, la migración y los valores tradicionales de China. Aquí analizamos la confluencia de estos factores y cómo podrían influir en la priorización de riesgos en un ambiente con muchos riesgos.