

# Microbicide Readiness in Southern Chinese Sex Workers: Cultural Meanings of HIV Prevention Options

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## AIDS in China: A Growing Epidemic

- Estimated **1 million Chinese people** are living with HIV
- Estimated **10-20 million infected by 2010**
- Different **regional epidemics\*** around the country:
  - **Injection drug users** in northwest (Xinjiang—40-50%), central (Hunan-8%, Guizhou-14%), south/southwest (Yunnan, Guangxi-25%, Guangdong), and Beijing
  - **Commercial sex workers** around the country, especially in economic development zones ("coastal"-11%)
  - **Blood donors** in impoverished provinces (Henan-12.5%, Anhui, Shanxi)- possibly 30-50,000 already infected

\* Prevalence rates determined through sentinel testing sites and reported in UNAIDS AIDS Epidemic Update, December, 2002, or communication with local researchers

## Contributors to HIV/STD Transmission in China

- 80-120 million **migrant laborers**
- Increasing **sex trade** composed of migrant female labor especially in economic development zones
- Increasingly tolerant attitudes toward the sex industry, despite its illegal status; **200,000 sex workers arrested annually** in 1990s
- 2-3 million **illicit drug users** nationwide
- Severe limitations in health education, STD screening, HIV testing, appropriate treatment, and follow-up; stigma concerns



## Research Methods: Ethnographic Component

- **Free List elicitation exercise** with 16 women from each town (N=48) to explore knowledge and use of HIV/STI and pregnancy prevention methods, including contexts of use of different prevention options.
- **Pile Sort exercise** with 20 women from each town (N=60) to explore cultural constructs about prevention and to generate cognitive map of different prevention options.
- **Purposive sampling plan** to recruit non-overlapping samples to both exercises, representing a range of women from different sex work establishments, ages, and local ethnic groups.

## Prevention Methods: Women's Responses from Elicitation Exercise

### Male Condoms:

I used it with 'guests' in the roadside restaurant .... But if he wouldn't use it, I refused to have sex. (Fushan, single, Han, age 17)

The female boss and 'sisters' told me about [condoms]. In the past, I also had sex without a condom if the guests gave me more money. After that, I would use liquid medicine or toothpaste to wash. (Fushan, single, Han, age 19)

I don't use condoms with my husband or lover. I dislike that they're easily broken, and you feel dry and it's torturous. (Yongfa, married, Han, age 33)

### Other Methods/Usage:

**Antibiotic shot:** After sex I feel my body is 'hot' and I want to get a shot. When I feel itching I also want to get a shot. (Fushan, single, LI, age 17)

**Antibiotic pill:** Every 10-20 days I take antibiotic pills. I take them when my under-parts feel hot. (Yongfa, married, Han, age 33); The first time, I took this from a prescription of a physician. Later, sometimes I took the pill myself. (Yongfa, married, Han, age 40)

**Douche/Wash:** If the client didn't use a condom, I use [Fu yin jie] lotion to douche. (Yongfa, single, LI, age 19); After I have sex I will use toothpaste to wash in the hotel. (Pingxiang, single, Han, age 23)

**Squat after sex:** If the man ejaculates in the body, go to the toilet and squat for 5 minutes. (Fushan, single, Han, age 19); After sex, drink water and squat for half an hour. (Yongfa, single, LI, age 20)

**Non-penetrative sex:** Ejaculate outside the body. It's not good, but I can use it in an emergency situation. (Fushan, single, Han, 19)

**Ice water:** After sex, drink ice water; you should have really icy water, not just cold water. This can prevent pregnancy. (Fushan, single, Han, age 17)

**Check the penis:** If a man refuses to wear a condom, the sisters taught me to look at his penis to see whether there is pus or a sore on the skin. (Yongfa, Han, age 18)

### Study Sites

**Fushan Township:**  
Chengmai County Hainan Province

Population: 19,000  
Key features: Economically poor; failed resort area in vicinity  
Sex Industry  
• roadside restaurants near resort; beauty/massage parlors in town  
• many Li ethnic minority (migrants from mountainous central area)  
• estimated 150 women in 20 establishments in 2000



**Yongfa Township:**  
Chengmai County Hainan Province

Population: 20,000  
Key features: Economically strong; seasonal market; beverage and brick factories hiring migrant labor  
Sex Industry  
• beauty and massage parlors and boarding houses for sex workers  
• some Li migrants; primarily Han women  
• estimated 200 women in 20 parlors & boarding houses in 2000



**Pingxiang City:** Guangxi Province

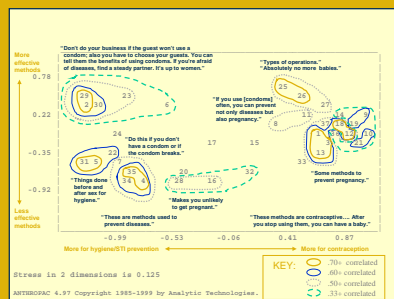
Population: 100,000  
Key features: Economically prosperous; well-developed commercial center; regular trade with Vietnam; hotels for business conventions  
Sex Industry  
• based in beauty & massage parlors & hotels (young women), boarding houses (married women), and the "cave" (very poor)  
• primarily Han; some Chinese minorities and Vietnamese  
• estimated 400-500 in 30 parlors, 10 hotels & 7-8 lodges, in 2000



## Examples of Pile Sort Cards



## Cognitive Map\* of Pregnancy & HIV/STI Prevention Methods from Pile Sort Exercise: Han Women



## Free Listed Items Used for Pile Sort Exercise Cards\*

1. Contraceptive film
2. Refuse sex with a man who looks filthy
3. Contraceptive gel
4. Wash after sex
5. Anti-inflammatory shot or pill
6. Sex without intercourse, e.g. masturbating the man
7. Lotions for douche or washing genitals
8. Male condom
9. Contraceptive shot
10. Contraceptive patch
11. Male condom with spermicides
12. Contraceptive foam
13. Contraceptive cream
14. Diaphragm
15. Withdrawal
16. Drink cold water immediately after sex
17. Rhythm method
18. Sponge
19. Norplant
20. Insert pill or suppository into vagina before sex
21. Stick a medicine patch on belly button
22. Regular check-ups
23. Avoid sex
24. Have same partner for a long time
25. Vasectomy
26. Tube ligation
27. IUD
28. Pee after sex
29. Take a look at penis
30. Refuse to have sex with a man who doesn't use a condom
31. Anti-inflammatory shot after period
32. Get semen out by squatting down after sex
33. Morning after pill
34. Wash before sex
35. Douche vagina with an applicator
36. Birth control pill
37. Female condom

\* Use item numbers above as key for cognitive map.

Inconsistent explanations of similarly clustered piles, indicating differences in the meanings women assign to the groupings

**Cards 28, 16 and 32:** Makes you unlikely to be pregnant (Yongfa, married, age 21); These are common [folk] knowledge about intercourse (Yongfa, single, age 20). Cannot prevent pregnancy and diseases (Pingxiang, single, age 20); Prevents virus-caused diseases in vagina after sex with a man (Yongfa, married, age 31).

**Cards 35, 4, 34 and 7:** In order to protect my health, I douche to prevent pregnancy and diseases (Fushan, single, age 17); These are only washing to make you clean; they can't prevent pregnancy or diseases (Pingxiang, single, age 20); They can prevent STI but not AIDS and pregnancy (Yongfa, single, age 20); These are all used for washing or douching, a sort of preventive medicine (Yongfa, single, age 19).

## Summary of Ethnographic Findings

- Women in the study indicated **significant knowledge** of contraception and HIV/STD prevention methods, including male condoms. However, they also indicated **significant misconceptions** about effective prevention approaches.
- Many women said they insist on condoms every time with clients, but they encounter many difficulties ensuring consistent condom use, resulting in much exposure to risk.
- The majority of women are taking multiple steps to protect themselves from infection, even if they are unable to ensure 100% condom use. They use a combination of more and less effective methods to maintain their health.
- Many women reported douching and frequent antibiotic use as methods to prevent HIV/STD and pregnancy. Frequent douching may have the opposite outcome by reducing the natural protections in the vagina; regular antibiotic use may facilitate resistant strains of STIs.
- Ethnic differences in concepts of prevention methods were significant, suggesting the need to tailor prevention messages to different ethnic groups and address specific areas of misinformation for each.
- Many women reported learning about prevention from the "boss" of the establishment or other "sisters" who work there. This indicates the promise of working within the establishments to develop supportive prevention interventions.