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## Dying for Money: The Effects of Global Health Initiatives on NGOs Working with Gay Men and HIV/AIDS in Northwest China

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*Drawing on 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2007–2011), this article critically examines the consequences of two global health initiatives (GHIs), the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation, on NGOs engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment among gay men in northwest China. I argue that a short-term surge in funding provided by GHIs between 2008 and 2010 exacerbated preexisting conflicts between NGOs by promoting a neoliberal process in which the state outsourced public health services to civil society organizations, deliberately encouraging a climate of competition among NGOs. I also show how GHIs encouraged the bureaucratization and medicalization of one grassroots gay NGO, channeling its activities away from broader political and social objectives and compelling the group to develop a narrower and more entrepreneurial emphasis on HIV testing and treatment. This article contributes to a deeper ethnographic understanding of the complex and perhaps unintended consequences of GHIs. [global health initiatives, NGOs, gay men, HIV/AIDS, China]*

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I think it will be good when [the global health initiatives] are over. Even though money will be very scarce, the entire working environment will be a bit better. . . . Right now, speaking truthfully, things are a bit chaotic. Because sometimes having projects can be a good thing, but they can also bring with them a lot of trouble. (Tianguang, 2011, gay NGO leader)

I thought it would be a good thing that there were a lot of resources; then we could really get some practical work done. But, on the other hand, sometimes having a lot of resources isn't a very good thing. . . . China has an old saying: "Men will die for money, just like birds will die for food" (*ren wei cai si, niao wei shi wang*). (Yuanzi, 2010, gay NGO staff member)

These quotes are from two members of Tong'ai,<sup>1</sup> a grassroots gay (*tongzhi*)<sup>2</sup> NGO in northwest China dedicated to fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS and

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advocating for the increased awareness and acceptance of gays and lesbians in Chinese society. They demonstrate some of the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the impacts of global health initiatives (GHIs) on local communities, health systems, and civil societies. When I began fieldwork in July 2007, Tong'ai was a cash-strapped community-based organization operated by a small but dedicated group of volunteers with a vision that far outstripped their meager resources. In addition to offering community programming and a free telephone hotline that dispensed support and advice to gay men, Tong'ai was one of the only NGOs in northwest China providing HIV/AIDS testing and prevention services to what they and others have called MSM, or men who have sex with men (*nannan xingxingweizhe*).<sup>3</sup>

By September 2010, the situation had changed dramatically. Due to a substantial increase in funding from two GHIs, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (Global Fund) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates Foundation), the local availability of resources had expanded, but so had the number of organizations providing HIV/AIDS-related services to MSM. Relations between these groups ranged from the collaborative to the combative, with local, gay community-based NGOs like Tong'ai struggling to survive in the face of stiff competition for limited resources from various regional, national, and international organizations.

Over the past decade, increasing critical attention from a variety of academic disciplines has been brought to bear on the organization, implementation, and effects of GHIs (Cohn et al. 2011; Hanefeld 2010, 2014; Kapilashrami and McPake 2013; Kapilashrami and O'Brien 2012; Khanna 2009; Spicer et al. 2010). The newest and perhaps most momentous evolution of the global "AIDS service industry" (Patton 1990), GHIs are complex international humanitarian initiatives that raise and disburse resources for the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS. GHIs have proven especially effective in rapidly mobilizing the scale-up of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment; the three largest GHIs—the Global Fund, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, and the World Bank Multi-Country AIDS Program—now provide the majority of external HIV/AIDS funding for low-income countries, including supporting the roll-out of antiretroviral treatment for over four million people living with HIV (Cohn et al. 2011:688; Hanefeld 2010:94).

In addition to increasing funding for fighting HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, GHIs have also been credited with other positive outcomes, including increasing political attention and commitment to disease control and prevention; broadening the participation and engagement of stakeholders, including civil society organizations and affected communities, in HIV/AIDS programs (Hanefeld 2010:99, 2014:55–56; Spicer et al. 2010); and lowering overall morbidity and mortality rates for target diseases (Cohn et al. 2011:692). However, GHIs have also had various negative consequences, such as further burdening already weakened country health systems (Cohn et al. 2011:69; Spicer et al. 2010:2); hampering national and sub-national coordination of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment due to the complexity of aid infrastructure, overlapping programs, and competition for scarce resources among NGOs (Hanefeld 2014:55; Spicer et al. 2010:12); prioritizing rapid scale-up

of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment over long-term sustainability (Hanefeld 2010:99); and encouraging depoliticization and donor dependency among recipients (Kapilashrami and O'Brien 2012:448).

Although scholarly attention to GHIs is increasing, most studies focus on the effects of GHIs at the national level. Critical ethnographic investigations of GHIs (Khanna 2009; Pfeiffer 2013; Whyte et al. 2013) are rare, and little is known about the complex interactions between GHIs, government agencies, and civil society actors at the sub-national and local levels, particularly outside of Africa and South Asia. As João Biehl and Adriana Petryna argue, ethnographic approaches that “put people first” are of crucial importance in creating a “critical global health” that questions and complicates the epistemic assumptions underlying GHIs: “Ethnographers are uniquely positioned to see what more categorically minded experts may overlook: namely, the empirical evidence that emerges when people express their most pressing and ordinary concerns, which then open up to complex human stories in time and space” (2013:19).

This article contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complicated and perhaps unintended consequences of GHIs by presenting an extended, critical ethnographic case study of the changes that took place in the local civil society environment before and after the arrival of the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation in northwest China. In doing so, it builds on and departs from recent studies on the effects of HIV/AIDS and GHIs on Chinese gay NGOs. For example, Elsa Fan (2014) criticizes GHIs for “reproducing the social and political marginalization of MSM” (p. 95) in China by representing them as “almost always already infected” (p. 92) with HIV and extending invasive forms of state surveillance into their lives. However, Fan’s analysis does not question the assumption that GHI-supported scale-up and outsourcing of HIV testing will necessarily promote the long-term sustainability of Chinese gay NGOs. Lynette Chua and Timothy Hildebrandt (2014) report that HIV/AIDS funding can exert a depoliticizing and “de-pinking” influence on Chinese gay NGOs, steering them away from other forms of gay advocacy toward an exclusive focus on HIV/AIDS. However, their analysis does not elucidate the mechanisms that cause the “de-gaying” of some Chinese gay NGOs and not others. Tiantian Zheng (2015) places the blame on Chinese gay activists and NGOs themselves, attributing what she describes as “the failure of the tongzhi to stage collective action” (p. 143) to their “false consciousness” (p. 15) and “schizophrenic existence” (p. 190), which she argues are caused by internalized homophobia.

In the following, I utilize Weber’s theory of bureaucratization and the routinization of charismatic authority as a conceptual framework to explore the effects of GHIs on NGOs engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment among MSM in northwest China. I show that before the arrival of GHIs, Tong’ai was a grassroots gay NGO with well-defined political goals, an ethos of volunteerism, and strong connections to the local MSM community. A temporary increase in HIV/AIDS funding provided by the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation between 2008 and 2010 splintered the local civil society environment by exacerbating existing tensions between rival charismatic NGO leaders who were already engaged in contests over territory, followers, and resources.

GHIs further worsened relations between local civil society actors by promoting a neoliberal process whereby the state outsourced public health services to NGOs, which were required to compete with one another to secure projects and funds to continue providing HIV prevention services to MSM. This increase in competition also encouraged processes of bureaucratization and medicalization within Tong'ai, shrinking its volunteer base, weakening its connections with the local MSM community, and channeling its activities away from broader political and social objectives toward a narrower, more entrepreneurial emphasis on HIV testing and treatment. These findings not only shed new light on processes of depoliticization among Chinese gay NGOs, they also challenge neoliberal, market-based logics and discourses embedded within GHIs in which competition becomes synonymous with progress and underline the need to better understand the complex effects of GHIs on local health systems and civil societies.

## Methods

This article uses ethnographic data collected during a larger research project examining the intersections of gender, sexuality, civil society, and HIV prevention in China. Data were gathered through a variety of qualitative research methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, involving more than 70 informants over 17 months of fieldwork conducted in urban Shaanxi Province<sup>4</sup> during the summers of 2007 and 2008 and from September 2010 to September 2011. Conducting fieldwork in the same location over a five-year period allowed me to document the impacts of the arrival of GHIs and a temporary increase in foreign funding on the local civil society environment between 2008 and 2010.

Fieldwork was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and consisted primarily of daily participant observation within Tong'ai. I was usually present at the NGO office during normal working hours, from two in the afternoon to 10 in the evening or later, six days a week. Although I always made my status as a researcher clear to my informants, I also became a volunteer, working alongside other group members, helping with daily office tasks, and taking part in community outreach activities in local gay meeting places such as bars, bathhouses, and cruising areas in public parks. I also attended and documented meetings between Tong'ai and government officials from district, regional, and provincial offices of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC). Data collected during participant observation, including accounts of events and conversations with informants, were recorded in detailed daily field notes.

In addition to participant observation, I also conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus groups with NGO leaders and volunteers, local gay community members, and CCDC officials. Altogether, I interviewed 51 separate individuals, many of them multiple times. In all but two instances, I received oral consent to record our conversations. People sometimes shared their most interesting and revelatory remarks with me after the recorder was switched off; in such cases, I recorded as much of this information as I could in my notes. During and after fieldwork, data from field notes, interviews, and focus groups were partially transcribed, translated into English, and coded to generate key themes and categories for data analysis and interpretation.

## HIV/AIDS and the Rise of Gay NGOs in China

From 1985, when China's first case of HIV was diagnosed, until 2004, the epidemic remained concentrated among certain geographic areas and subgroups, mainly among injecting drug users in southwestern Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces and commercial blood and plasma donors in central Henan Province (State Council AIDS Working Committee Office and UN Theme Group on AIDS 2004:1–2). In 2007, sexual transmission became responsible for over half of the estimated 50,000 new HIV infections in China each year, 44.7% occurring during heterosexual contact and 12.2% between MSM (Wang et al. 2009:417). By 2011, MSM accounted for 29.4% of new HIV infections (UNAIDS 2012).

In response to rising rates of HIV infection among MSM, in 2003 the CCDC began working with unregistered and quasi-legal gay community-based NGOs to offer HIV/AIDS testing and treatment to MSM (Kaufman 2009:159–160). By 2005, more than 10 community-based gay NGOs had sprung up in cities all over China, offering a variety of HIV/AIDS education and prevention services (Zhang and Kaufman 2005:125). By 2008, dozens of local gay NGOs with more than 6,000 volunteers had been organized in over 35 Chinese cities, where they provided telephone hotlines, online social networking, peer education, and other forms of community-building and support (State Council AIDS Working Committee Office and UN Theme Group on AIDS 2008:14).

### Before the Arrival of GHIs

#### *Developing the Heart and Serving the Community: Becoming a Gay Volunteer*

Tong'ai, northwest China's first gay NGO, began in 1998 as a group of volunteers led by Tianguang, a local AIDS and gay activist, that distributed copies of *Friend Exchange* (*Pengyou Tongxin*), a magazine published by Dr. Zhang Beichuan<sup>5</sup> that was one of the earliest sources of social and psychological support and information on HIV/AIDS available to Chinese gays and lesbians. At the time, civil society groups risked being labeled illegal organizations and being shut down by the state. By 2002, the political climate had relaxed enough for them to begin operating more openly.

Tong'ai's first office was a dilapidated one-room structure that Tianguang rented from the family of a friend. Initial funding for the fledgling organization came from a 5,000 RMB<sup>6</sup> monthly grant from Barry and Martin's Trust, a British charity that has supported HIV/AIDS education, prevention, and care in China since 1996. These funds, although modest, allowed the group to start a free hotline that offered information about STDs including HIV as well as emotional, psychological, and legal support to gay men across northwest China. In 2005, Tong'ai participated in its first project, a small STD and HIV testing campaign among MSM supported by the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences.

As Tong'ai grew and began conducting more HIV testing, it eventually moved into a cramped yet cozy two-bedroom apartment located on the sixth floor of an aging eight-story walk-up. It was here that I first encountered Tong'ai in June 2007. At the time, Tong'ai resembled something like an underground gay community center; staffed entirely by unpaid volunteers, during the afternoons and evenings the

office was always busy and crowded with people holding meetings, participating in activities, preparing project reports, administering HIV and STD tests, answering the hotline, conducting online outreach or publicity, or simply socializing with friends. Outside the office, every week Tong'ai organized several community outreach events in which groups of volunteers wearing colorful red and gold sashes visited local gay bars, bathhouses, and cruising areas in public parks to distribute condoms, personal lubricant, and information about HIV/AIDS and safe sex.

The Chinese word volunteer (*zhiyuan*) is a compound word formed from two characters, *zhi* 志, whose radicals can be interpreted as signifying developing the heart and that means will, aspiration, or ambition; and *yuan* 愿, which can mean hope or desire as well as being willing or consenting to do something. Although the primary goal of most Tong'ai volunteers was to spread information about HIV/AIDS and to encourage MSM to adopt safer sex practices, many also saw their work as a way to build a stronger sense of gay community (*shequ*). Some found the sense of social solidarity created through volunteering empowering; others argued that volunteering helped them develop feelings of pride and self-worth. As one volunteer told me in 2008, "Doing a bit of work—doing activities for the gay community makes me feel very good, very proud."

While Tong'ai was dedicated to fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS among MSM, the organization also pursued broader social and political goals, including developing local gay and lesbian culture and community and promoting the rights and visibility of gays and lesbians in Chinese society. In fact, these two goals were often seen as intimately linked; healthy bodies, I was told repeatedly, would lead to healthy minds and spirits, which would, in turn, gradually lead to increased tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality. As Zhiming, an older volunteer in his late 30s, said to me in 2008, "Because of China's current situation, [our] working goal . . . is health intervention." He paused before continuing. "But this isn't the long-term goal; I believe that the long-term—the most long-term goal is gay culture and an increase in gay rights."

### *One Mountain Cannot Contain Two Tigers: Charismatic Authority and Conflict among Chinese Gay NGOs*

Despite the dedication and enthusiasm of Tong'ai volunteers, the local civil society environment was not without conflict and competition even before the arrival of GHIs. In fact, according to many of my informants, the biggest obstacles facing groups like Tong'ai were not negative social attitudes toward homosexuality, restrictive state policies regarding civil society, or a lack of HIV/AIDS funding, but rather endemic infighting between gay NGOs and what they described as the despotic (*baquan*) management styles of their leaders.

Several observers have commented on the systemic conflicts that exist among Chinese gay NGO leaders. For instance, Joan Kaufman writes that:

There is damaging infighting among groups, especially within the MSM community. . . . This basic lack of trust, compounded by desire for visibility and competition for scarce funding, has fragmented rather than unified groups working on similar issues, playing into the hands of the central

government by preventing the needed alliance building among these groups. (2009:169)

One example of such a conflict is a long-running dispute between Tianguang, the founder and leader of Tong'ai, and Chengji, the founder and chairman of the Yi De Foundation, a national AIDS foundation based in Hong Kong. In 2004, the two organizations began collaborating on a MSM project funded by the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS. Relations between them quickly soured, with Tianguang accusing Chengji and his organization of encroaching on his territory and surreptitiously poaching his volunteers. The conflict died down until late August 2007, when it suddenly flared up again. One day I received a cryptic phone call from Xiao Jun, a Tong'ai volunteer, instructing me to meet him beneath a dusty highway overpass. When I got there, Xiao Jun filled me in on the details: Tianguang had discovered that Old Huang, a senior Tong'ai volunteer who managed the group's hotline, was a turncoat who, for the past several months, had been secretly working for Chengji to establish a satellite branch of Yi De in the same northwest Chinese city where Tong'ai was located. Moreover, Old Huang had covertly been recruiting Tong'ai volunteers to join his new group, which was holding its inaugural event this very day in a nearby building. Just then, Tianguang, who everyone thought was in Beijing attending an HIV/AIDS conference, dramatically arrived at the highway underpass and led the assembled group of Tong'ai volunteers to gate-crash the clandestine Yi De event and confront Old Huang.

I would argue that conflicts between NGO leaders like Tianguang and Chengji can be understood as contests among rival charismatic leaders over territory, followers, resources, and authority. According to Weber, charismatic leaders naturally emerge in response to extraordinary circumstances or challenges due to their holding "specific gifts of body and mind" that ordinary people do not possess. Their authority highly transient, individualized, and bound to a specific social or political group, the charismatic leader "seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission" (Weber 1968a [1956]:1111–1112). Kaufman's observation that Chinese gay and AIDS NGOs are "usually started by a visionary champion willing to take risks and navigate local politics" (2009:169) resonates with Weber's description of charismatic authority and with my own impressions of Tianguang, whose charm, eloquence, and zealous devotion to grassroots gay and AIDS activism made him well equipped to attract followers and navigate Tong'ai through uncertain political waters.

Weber argues that charismatic authority is absolute and cannot be shared between rival leaders:

When such an authority comes into conflict with the competing authority of another who claims charismatic sanction, the only recourse is to some kind of contest, by magical means or even as an actual physical battle of the leaders. In principle only one side can be right in such a conflict. (1968b:51)

During fieldwork, I overheard a number of Chinese expressions used by gay NGO volunteers to describe the bitter rivalries between their leaders that recall the absolute nature of charismatic authority. One such expression was the phrase

*shantou zhuyi* or “mountaintop ideology,” which describes a kind of factionalism where everyone wants to occupy the top position, as in the English expression “king of the hill.” Another idiom also used by volunteers to explain struggles for power and prestige among gay NGO leaders was *yi shan bu rong er hu* or “one mountain cannot contain two tigers.” This idiom refers to the notion that in any given social group, there is only room for one leader. Yet another way factionalism was explained to me was that gay NGO leaders were not willing to share power or territory with others, each wanting to be the *laoda*, which literally refers to the eldest sibling but can also describe someone who is the “number one” or “boss.”

Apart from his ongoing conflicts with rival gay NGO leaders, Tianguang’s undemocratic leadership style also recalls Weber’s description of charismatic authority. One of the main complaints I heard from Tong’ai volunteers concerned how Tianguang wielded absolute power within the organization. This sentiment was often voiced through the expression *yi ge ren shuo le suan* or “whatever one person says goes.” Others complained about a lack of rules and regulations, which they saw as a way for Tianguang to increase his power by creating an atmosphere of ambiguity. However, one volunteer admitted that sometimes such tactics were necessary to get things done, citing the Chinese proverb “you cannot raise fish in clear water” (*qing shui bu yang yu*), a management philosophy that is the converse of the clear rules and regulations favored by bureaucracy but is the sine qua non of charismatic authority. According to Weber, “Genuine charismatic justice does not refer to rules; in its pure type it is the most extreme contrast to formal and traditional prescription” (1968a:1115). As another member of Tong’ai put it to me, “If we don’t have any regulations, then he is the regulation; he can decide everything. [In] this organization, whatever he says goes.”

## After the Arrival of GHIs

### *There Will Only Be Progress when There Is Competition: GHIs, Foreign Funding, and the Fracturing of Local Civil Society*

Although the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation began operating in China as early as 2003 and 2007, respectively, they did not begin funding HIV/AIDS projects in northwest China until 2008. Global Fund and Gates Foundation projects were jointly administered by the CCDC and so-called government-operated NGOs or GONGOs, like the Chinese Association of STD and AIDS Prevention and Control. Because grassroots NGOs like Tong’ai are unable to legally register with the government, they cannot accept funds directly from GHIs; GONGOS therefore act as trustees on their behalf, funneling funds from donor agencies to local civil society recipients while diverting some of the resources to support themselves.

By 2012, the Global Fund planned to invest \$369 million in China (Global Fund 2012), with the Gates Foundation allocating \$50 million over a five-year period (Jacobs 2009). While most of these funds were captured by government agencies and GONGOs, GHI grants nevertheless represented a significant increase in funding for Chinese civil society organizations. One result of the sudden spurt of foreign funding was a swift growth in the number of NGOs involved in HIV/AIDS work, especially among MSM, the fastest-growing risk group in China’s AIDS epidemic

Table 1. List of NGOs Involved in HIV/AIDS Work among MSM in Shaanxi, China

Group Name	Active Since	Group Type
Tong'ai Working Group	1998	Local gay NGO
Yi De Foundation	2007	National AIDS foundation
Brotherly Love	2009	Local gay NGO
Jishi Aid Association	2009	Regional charity organization
Reproductive Health International	2009	International sexual and reproductive health NGO
Qingtian Working Group	2010	Local gay NGO

and the sector toward which most of the new resources flowed. In the northwestern Chinese city where I conducted fieldwork, between 2009 and 2010 the number of NGOs providing services to MSM quickly grew from two organizations to six (see Table 1). The result was an often fierce competition between NGOs that was actively encouraged by the way funds were administered and distributed by the CCDC and GHIs themselves.

GHI programs heavily prioritized HIV testing over other forms of prevention. Project contracts compensated NGOs for every vial of blood they collected, with cash bonuses for blood samples that tested positive for HIV. For example, the Gates Foundation paid 62 RMB per HIV test, with a "reward" of 300 RMB for each HIV-positive blood sample. Global Fund projects were similarly structured, paying 60 RMB per blood vial. These practices were controversial, with the *New York Times* running a story about a Gates Foundation project titled "H.I.V. Tests Turn Blood into Cash in China" (Jacobs 2009). Many local gay activists also pointed out the problems that such programs caused. Tianguang argued that "the main problem with the Gates Foundation project is that how much money they pay you depends on how much blood you collect. After this, many groups stopped doing anything; all they did was collect blood." Paying NGOs for blood samples also increased competition for HIV tests. Xiao Jun, a former Tong'ai volunteer who was now the leader of Brotherly Love, a new local gay NGO, explained it this way: "Someone who gets tested in one place isn't likely to go get tested in another place. . . . This is where the competition for funding lies."

The way GHI projects were administered by the CCDC also encouraged competition among NGOs. Every year, the CCDC arbitrarily increased the target number of HIV tests stipulated in new GHI-funded project contracts, regardless of whether groups like Tong'ai had managed to meet their previous testing targets. At the end of each project cycle, the CCDC ranked NGOs according to the number of HIV tests they performed and the percentage of HIV-positive blood samples they produced, with groups who performed more tests and discovered more HIV-positive MSM given larger, more lucrative contracts in the future. This shows how, rather than promoting a strong and independent civil society, GHI-supported HIV testing projects encouraged competitive clientelism among NGOs, who were forced to vie for state approval to secure future financial resources. For example, Dongdong, the 31-year-old director of the MSM program at Reproductive Health International, a global sexual and reproductive health charity that began participating in HIV/AIDS

testing projects in 2009, told me: “If you have done more tests, if you have discovered more infected people, that means you have performed really well. I think that this is the reason why there is this kind of competition.”

The CCDC also promoted competition among NGOs by recruiting organizations outside the gay community, like Reproductive Health International, to work on MSM HIV testing projects, and encouraging Tong’ai volunteers like Xiao Jun to start their own NGOs, further dividing and fracturing the local civil society. Director Zhang of the Shaanxi Provincial CCDC AIDS Department told me that “there will only be progress when there is competition.” She also argued that competition was necessary for the development of grassroots NGOs like Tong’ai: “I think that an organization’s normal development should include competition. Otherwise they don’t know if they are doing a good job or a bad job.”

Director Li, the leader of Reproductive Health International, also expressed enthusiasm for increased competition among NGOs, using the language of expanded consumer choice. “From the perspective of the target community it is a good thing,” she asserted. “This community can choose whose services are better. They will have more rights to choose.” Comparing groups like Tong’ai and Reproductive Health International to rival fast-food chains, Director Li continued: “It’s just like McDonald’s and KFC. If people are willing to eat garbage, then they can go to McDonald’s. It would be better if there were no McDonald’s. But then how would people choose KFC? So I think that competition is better.”

Members of Tong’ai expressed a more ambivalent attitude; while welcoming competition, they objected to the lack of a level playing field. Because larger national and international NGOs like the Yi De Foundation and Reproductive Health International could effectively communicate in English, they had greater access to international funding sources than smaller, local, gay community-based groups like Tong’ai. Well-connected national and international NGOs were also able to legally register with the Chinese government and receive GHI project funds directly without relying on government agencies or GONGOs to act as middlemen, giving them an even greater financial advantage over grassroots, unregistered NGOs.

Tong’ai members also accused national and international NGOs of employing improper or illegitimate competitive practices. For example, Reproductive Health International and the Jishi Aid Association, a regional charity organization, attempted to recruit trained Tong’ai staff by offering them a 3,000 RMB monthly salary, twice what Tong’ai could afford. Lacking connections within the local MSM community and desperate to complete a large number of tests for a Gates Foundation Project, Reproductive Health International also began paying the owner of one gay bar a kickback of 40 RMB per blood test carried out on the premises.<sup>7</sup> Such practices excluded other groups from performing HIV prevention and testing in the same venues and damaged the relationships that grassroots NGOs had cultivated over many years with local gay business owners. As Tianguang explained: “They had been cooperating with us for such a long time, and we had never given them any money before. Now those [gay] bosses think that all this time we have been keeping the money for ourselves.” Such practices also threatened the long-term sustainability of HIV prevention work after GHIs like the Gates Foundation and the Global Fund left China. As Tianguang put it: “When the resources have run out, how are we going to give the bosses their money? How will we do our work?”

*The Demise of a Hotline: Bureaucratization and Medicalization within a Grassroots Gay NGO*

The arrival of GHIs not only had a disruptive effect on the local civil society environment, it also had a profound impact within Tong'ai itself. On the surface, many of the changes within the organization seemed positive. After participating in GHI-funded HIV/AIDS projects in 2008, Tong'ai had more funding than ever, which, in April 2009, allowed it to move to a much larger office in a newly constructed 18-story residential building located above a shopping center. Additional funding also allowed Tianguang to hire three volunteers to work as full-time paid staff members in August 2010. However, the group was shrinking; most of the volunteers I met during earlier visits had left, many founding or migrating to other NGOs. The large, clean, sterile rooms of the new office were empty and quiet, a far cry from the cramped and boisterous conditions of previous years.

In Tianguang's eyes, Tong'ai's decreasing number of volunteers was a sign of the group's development from a volunteer organization to what he proudly described as a "professional service agency." "The changes between now and when you came in 2007 and 2008 are actually very large," Tianguang told me one afternoon in November 2010. "Back then you probably felt that we were a very lively organization, that our foundation in the community was very good. But even though it seemed like there were a lot of people, the work they were able to do for society was very limited." According to Tianguang, the problem with volunteers is that they are unreliable, only showing up when it suited them and more interested in having fun and looking for one-night stands than doing work. "The efficiency of that type of work was actually insufficient to meet the needs of the community," Tianguang argued. "For example, in 2007 and 2008 we were able to provide roughly 200 to 300 people with [HIV] tests. Now, in one year we can provide tests to between 2,000 and 3,000 people. Think about it: the rate of efficiency has increased tenfold."

However, not everyone was as enthusiastic about the changes that were taking place within the group. One former volunteer argued that with the loss of Tong'ai's volunteers, it was no different from outside groups like Yi De and Reproductive Health International: "In the past, [one] difference was that Tong'ai had a group of capable and knowledgeable volunteers. Now, I don't think that there is any difference. The only difference is in how much money you can bring in."<sup>8</sup> Although he agreed that Tong'ai had become more professionalized, he argued that this had come at a high cost: "In 2007, everyone was a volunteer, no one was making money. . . . We all had a sense of enthusiasm and responsibility when we did this work. Now it more resembles a professional organization."

The replacement of Tong'ai's previous ethos of volunteerism with one that valorized professionalization is a form of bureaucratization, or the rationalization of charismatic authority. According to Weber, as soon as the extraordinary social or political conditions that created it have subsided, charisma becomes increasingly "routinized" to gain access to more permanent sources of material resources and followers (1968b:54). Weber's observation is reflected in Tianguang's attempts to transform Tong'ai from a grassroots volunteer organization into a commercial enterprise. For example, in November 2010, he described how Tong'ai had begun to provide what he called a "one-stop service," offering HIV/AIDS awareness raising, testing, and treatment all in one convenient location. In spring 2011, Tianguang

rebranded Tong'ai as the Tong'ai Community Development and Service Center, arguing that "right now we need to consider a more entrepreneurial model in order to develop."

Tong'ai's bureaucratization was the direct result of GHI-funded HIV/AIDS programs and the competition they encouraged among NGOs in northwest China. To compete with other organizations for funding, the paid staff and the few remaining volunteers at Tong'ai became increasingly focused on performing ever-higher numbers of HIV tests, while community outreach and other comprehensive HIV-prevention activities slowly ground to a halt. With a decrease in volunteers and community outreach activities, many people complained that Tong'ai had lost its connection with the local MSM community. In the words of one former volunteer: "They have become divorced from the community. They only play with themselves; they no longer truly go down to the bars, the parks, the bathhouses and make friends." Referring to the organization's reliance on blood tests, another former volunteer told me that people had even begun comparing Tong'ai staff to vampires or *xixuegui*: "Some people say that they rely on HIV/AIDS to support themselves; a lot of people think that they feed off of HIV/AIDS."

Tong'ai's increasingly narrow focus on HIV testing also took away from the group's broader social and political goals of developing local gay culture and promoting the rights and visibility of gays and lesbians in Chinese society. This transformation was encouraged by the actions and priorities of the state and the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation, which may have regarded combating HIV/AIDS as being easier or more acceptable than addressing the more socially and politically sensitive issues of sexuality and gay rights. This dynamic resembles medicalization, or the process whereby a biological, social, economic, or political problem becomes understood and addressed primarily as a medical problem that can be treated or cured through biomedical intervention.<sup>9</sup> As Irving Zola observes, "The labels health and illness are remarkable 'depolicitizers' of an issue. By locating the source and the treatment of problems in an individual, other levels of intervention are effectively closed" (1972:500). By tying HIV/AIDS projects and funding directly to HIV testing, GHIs and the CCDC compelled Tong'ai to become progressively more "medicalized" or risk being outcompeted by rival organizations for the funding they needed to survive.

A poignant example of Tong'ai's bureaucratization and medicalization is the fate of its free telephone hotline. Wenqing, who began managing the hotline after Old Huang moved to the Yi De Foundation in 2007, shared his memories with me during an interview in August 2011, several months after he had also left to join Yi De. "Back then, Tong'ai still had many dedicated volunteers," he recalled. "Even though we didn't have any full-time staff, everyone was very dedicated." I asked Wenqing what it was like to operate the hotline, and he replied:

Some people thought of the hotline as a part of their lives. They would call every week and chat with me about their situation, and when they hung up their hearts would be more comfortable. It was like I had completed a mission. One person that I remember the most would call every week, and when he called he would thank us, saying how hard we worked to answer

the hotline every day. He was in Xinjiang, working in a railroad construction team. He would often call. Where he worked was very far from the city; he said when he went outside he was in a desolate wilderness. Therefore he had a lot of loneliness in his heart.

When I asked Wenqing how many calls he had answered as a hotline operator, his face broke into a broad grin. "Oh, there were a lot of hotline calls!" he said.

On some nights there would be as many as six or seven, but sometimes there would be two or three. Several people would help out with answering the hotline, each person coming in on a different day of the week. When they were busy, I would cover for them. I answered the hotline like this from 2006 until 2011. And then the hotline was over.

Wenqing's smile faded as he finished his story:

Through the latter half of [2010], no one paid the telephone fee. I started coming in less and less often. A few months after the [2011] New Year the hotline finally closed down. They told me that they were going to use the [hotline] office for something else, and that they weren't going to answer the hotline any more. . . . The next day I didn't come back.

## Discussion

As I have shown here, the arrival of GHIs had complex and contradictory effects for NGOs working with MSM and HIV/AIDS in northwest China. In some ways, the temporary increase in foreign funding was a boon for grassroots gay NGOs like Tong'ai. "Right now all of our resources come from international society," Tianguang often reminded me. "Civil society organizations rely on those funds to survive; if you removed them these community-based organizations would all collapse." However, the manner in which HIV/AIDS funds were administered by GHIs and the Chinese government also had a number of more negative effects, including exacerbating existing trends toward infighting and factionalism among NGOs by encouraging them to compete for project contracts and monies that they became increasingly reliant on to survive. Increased competition between charismatic leaders and NGOs, in turn, caused processes of bureaucratization and medicalization within Tong'ai, which progressively narrowed its focus from working toward long-term social and political change and offering comprehensive HIV education and prevention services to performing ever-greater numbers of HIV tests.<sup>10</sup>

While it would appear that increasing HIV/AIDS funding and completing greater numbers of HIV tests among at-risk MSM are both obvious goods, this article highlights the crucial importance of ethnography in investigating and understanding the complicated and perhaps unintended consequences that GHIs can have for local civil society organizations. It also calls attention to the ways that marginalized populations (including MSM and people living with HIV) are affected by and interact with GHI-funded programs and projects and the neoliberal logics and discourses

that they represent and reproduce. Although many AIDS NGOs in China and elsewhere remain severely under-resourced, depending on how it is administered and distributed increased foreign funding can sometimes create as many problems as it resolves. This article also illuminates processes of depoliticization within Chinese gay NGOs; rather than simply blaming Chinese gay activists and NGOs (Zheng 2015), it shows how depoliticization is actually the result of complex interactions between GHIs, the state, and local civil society actors.

The prediction made by many Tong'ai members that GHIs would soon leave China began to come true before I left the field; in May 2011, the Global Fund temporarily suspended payments to its HIV/AIDS projects in China after an internal audit of a \$283 million grant revealed that the state had failed to meet its commitment to allocate at least 35% of the funds to civil society organizations (LaFraniere 2011). Suspension of the grant was particularly detrimental to grassroots gay NGOs like Tong'ai, which had come to rely on Global Fund projects for 50% of its annual budget. Although payments resumed in August 2011 (New York Times 2011), the Global Fund announced in November 2011 that their Chinese projects would be ending in 2013 (Jia 2012). The Chinese government has pledged to make up any shortfall in funds for NGOs involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS (Shan 2011); nevertheless, after the departure of GHIs from China, groups like Tong'ai face an uncertain and precarious future.

## Notes

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all names are pseudonyms. Tong'ai is short for Gay AIDS Working Group (*Tongzhi Aizibing Gongzuo Zuzhi*).

2. My informants used several terms to index their identities and same-sex attractions, including gay, *tongzhi* (comrade), *tongxinglian* (homosexual), and *huo*, a local dialect term loosely meaning goods. Each term has a specific set of historical and cultural valences: Gay is sometimes associated with the West; *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian* can imply positive or negative indigenous understandings and practices of same-sex attraction, respectively; and *huo* carries meanings of humor and local identification.

3. Although MSM was originally an epidemiological term that emphasized behavior, it has been taken up as a term of identification by male same-sex attracted people and communities around the world (Boellstorff 2011; Khanna 2011).

4. To safeguard my informants' anonymity, I refrain from providing the name of the city where I conducted fieldwork.

5. As Zhang Beichuan is a public figure, I use his actual name here. For more information on Zhang and *Friend Exchange* see Zhang and Kaufman 2005: 128.

6. At the time of my fieldwork, 1 USD was approximately equivalent to 6.2 RMB.

7. This strategy recalls how the Gates Foundation and the Global Fund paid NGOs for every blood sample they collected. Director Li told me that she halted the practice in March 2011 at the request of the Gates Foundation, perhaps due to criticisms of "spending money to buy blood."

8. Grassroots NGOs like Tong'ai were regarded by some in the local MSM community as having greater moral and charismatic authority than outside groups like the Yi De Foundation and Reproductive Health International, who many believed were only doing HIV/AIDS testing and treatment to capture GHI funds. Cohn et al. describe such groups as "briefcase NGOs" or "opportunistic organizations whose missions shift according to funding priorities and who do not have significant background or experience in the community" (2011:696).

9. This also resembles "philanthrocapitalism," which Vincanne Adams describes as a process whereby "life and labor are brought under conditions in which both public and private sector humanitarian relief efforts are beholden to market measures of success" and "grassroots volunteer groups are forced to scramble and compete for resources from wealthy donors by showing that they, too, can earn profits on the work of helping others" (2012:208).

10. The tendency to downplay or ignore issues related to sexuality is not limited to GHIs or the Chinese government but is also evident in U.S. federal funding for social science research. When my research abstract was published on a federal funding agency's website, I was shocked to discover that all mention of gay NGOs and even HIV/AIDS had been erased or replaced by vague phrases like "men's groups" and "a global health crisis." I was later told that federal grants for social science research had come under heavy congressional scrutiny in recent years and that the changes were made to avoid "unnecessary controversy."

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