

Biopolitical Implications of the Surveillance, Spectacle, and Performance of AIDS Education in Rural China

Eduardo Hernandez
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This conceptual study explores China's reaction to the AIDS crisis using a Foucauldian concept of biopolitics in order to theorize the implications of AIDS education in the culture of rural China in terms of the surveillance, spectacle, and discipline of biopolitics.

China is considered a major battleground in the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the early years of the epidemic, the Chinese government painted AIDS as a Western disease that could be isolated away. In time, the disease spread through whole communities and provinces. It became clear that governmental action was not working (Wang, 2007). More education was necessary for restraining the disease. One program sought to teach medical students about the disease so that they could pass the knowledge down to other people. A major concern for China was the young, smart, urban students who were crucial to the social economic future of the country (Gao, Lu, Shi, Sun, & Cai, 2001). With time, it became clear that people in urban areas also needed help (Cheng et al., 2008). In essence, urban educators would have to come into rural areas and help people change their way of life (Gao et al., 2001). A variety of cultural issues has also affected the fight against AIDS in rural areas (Wu et al., 2002).

AIDS can create a social death for people in rural China (Kutcher, 2003). In biopolitics, governments offer people a range of life choices that could help people thrive if they support them or lead to a form of social death if they go against the government. Educators are one of the main agents of biopolitics (Foucault, 1979). The problem is that the biopolitical implications of having AIDS educators serve in rural China have not been explored. This conceptual study explores the biopolitical implications of AIDS education in rural China. The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on AIDS education and modernity. The research question explored in this study is: *What are the implications of AIDS education in the culture of rural China in terms of the surveillance, spectacle, and discipline of biopolitics?*

This study is important because AIDS education and modernization are major issues in China and the rest of the world, and what affects one country affects all others (Rosen et al., 2003). First, China's reaction to AIDS, the use of education in rural areas, and rural China's cultural issues are discussed. Then a Foucauldian framework, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion from a case study using biopolitics to explore how China's cultural issues are affected by AIDS education is explored.

China's Reaction to AIDS

The first reported case of AIDS in China occurred in 1985 to a foreigner, leading China to paint AIDS as a foreign disease in a 1987 governmental plan. Denial and quarantine measures followed (Wang, 2007). The disease continued to spread and as the government learned more about the disease, the response promoted by a 1990 plan became moralistic. It centered on specific groups, such as female sex workers (FSW), intravenous drug users (IDU), and men who have sex with men (MSM; Sun et al., 2007). The government had to expand its focus on safety measures and other groups when many victims became infected through blood donations and transfusions. A 1998 plan argued for long range goals for specific groups with more education,

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but a 2001 plan showed a growing awareness of the issue for the general population (Balzano & Ping, 2006). China moved from passive surveillance of HIV/AIDS surveillance to a more aggressive approach over the years. Instead of simply noting cases, a large online database was created for various institutions to frequently report and become informed about AIDS-related information.

Behavior is a major focus. AIDS is monitored by a vast range of clinics, hospitals, and other healthcare-related institutions. Various institutions have been set up to monitor AIDS in specific groups, such as rehabilitation centers for IDUs and research groups who monitor FSWs in the field (Xiao, Kristensen, Sun, Lu, & Vermund, 2007). Many groups, such as law enforcement agencies, that routinely deal with AIDS victims have also been added to the network. China has used a top-down approach with the government sending out messages about AIDS through red-header documents to give the people an idea where the country stands on an issue. Over time, AIDS awareness has begun to enter the legal system and mainstream (Balzano & Ping, 2006). China's reaction to AIDS is spurred in part by pressure from outside forces such as the United Nations (Hesketh, 2007), the fear of economic problems such as those created by the SARS epidemic which affected trade and travel to and from China (Jiang, 2003), and fear that the disease will wipe out populations important for the future of China (Cheng et al., 2008). In order to spread AIDS awareness and prevention to the population, the government has had to educate itself on the disease (Wu, Sullivan, Wang, Rotheram-Borus, & Detels, 2007).

The Use of Education in Rural Areas

For much of Chinese history, sex education was practically non-existent. In ancient China, the family of the bride may have left a small manual or set of illustrations hidden in a gift to be revealed after a wedding, for example. In the last century, Chinese leaders began to see a need for it, but plans were derailed by the cultural revolution. In the last two decades, the first sex education textbooks began to appear. The AIDS crisis in China has spurred a push for sex education, in general, as well as HIV/AIDS education, in particular (Gao et al., 2001).

The AIDS epidemic has pushed China to send delegations of government officials, health professionals, academics, and researchers on international tours to learn from other countries, such as Australia, Brazil, and the United States. The government has also begun to promote AIDS education within the various departments of its network including those not directly related to health issues. AIDS education has been sent down the system to include universities as well as hospitals (Wu et al., 2007). The economics structure has created a mobile population, outside of family restraints, that is prone to high-risk behavior (Wang, 1997). Urban university students are a particularly mobile population who affect or could affect various institutions in Chinese society presently and in the future (Li et al., 2004). Medical students, in particular, have been taught AIDS education so that they could, in turn, teach it to others (Gao et al., 2001). Rural students lack secondary, or higher, education and need AIDS education because they leave school and become active in the social world earlier (Cheng et al., 2008). Therefore, AIDS educators needed to go into rural areas since the disease was gaining strength in those areas and the governmental presence was not as strong there. As the AIDS epidemic and AIDS education developed, the promotion of sex education, in general, and AIDS education, in particular, was affected by cultural issues in rural China (Gao et al., 2001).

Rural China's Cultural Issues

Although rural China faces AIDS in a different way than urban China, China's educational program is based on urban realities. For example, the government's education program focuses on sex work and intravenous drug use, which are more rampant in urban areas,

because populations there are employed and can afford it. In rural China, men often have to leave town to find work, and their wives and children sell their plasma to make up for the loss of their income. Improper use of tubes, as well as town leaders who take advantage of the men being away to sleep with local women, helps spread the disease (Wu et al., 2002). Age is also a factor. Many older Chinese people, for example, do not want young people to learn about sex because they fear it promotes promiscuity (Li et al., 2004). There is also a fear and hatred of homosexual men and Westerners. Many rural people still see both Westerners as primarily responsible for AIDS transmission and AIDS as punishment for homosexuality (Kutcher, 2003). There is also a taboo on direct sex talk. Sex, if discussed at all, is discussed in euphemisms, indirect talk, or allegorical imagery that is confusing. Two butterflies may be used to symbolize intercourse for example. This is further complicated by the fact that many rural Chinese people are also so unfamiliar with modern resources, education, and sex education concepts that they can perceive instruction in distorted ways. A rural couple, for example, could not understand why they continued to have unwanted children after being taught how to use a condom. It turned out that the husband took instruction from a sex educator literally and wore the condom on his finger in the same way the sex educator had done so in a demonstration (Gao et al., 2001). There is also an orthodoxy to the way governmental laws or messages are viewed. A rural person may look at an AIDS education message and agree with it in public but disagree with it in private and in practice, in part, because it comes from the government. For example, rural people may look at AIDS as a Western problem even after the government contradicts that message. The fact that the government is perceived to have lied in the past (Kutcher, 2003) or contradicts itself because of outside forces (Jiang, 2003) makes the issue worse. Finally, AIDS creates a social death in rural China, where not only the victim is ostracized but everyone related to the victim. Houses can be burned down and people run out of town (Kutcher, 2003).

Foucauldian Framework

In modernity, people begin to see their identity as part of a nation and not just as individuals, members of a family, tribe, or other group or association. Even though they can not come into contact with everyone in that nation, they can believe themselves to be part of an imagined community of the nation through the media presence of the nation in the forms of narratives, concepts, and symbols. Books, newspapers, and other instruments of communications make this possible (Anderson, 1982).

According to the concept of biopolitics, promoted by Foucault (Foucault, 1979), countries were once ruled by kings who literally had the power of life or death over their subjects; those citizens who obeyed the king were allowed to live, and those who did not were allowed to die. In modernity, the state replaced the king and expanded the power of life or death to a wider range of options for citizens; options promoted either a better life in various ways for the citizens who obeyed the state or a social death, lesser life, or literal death for those who disobeyed the state (Foucault, 1979).

Biopolitics could play out in the spectacle of an event. For example, an execution was a performance that displayed the power of the state since the condemned broke a state law and the state, represented through the executioner, could punish the criminal without consequence to the state. The spectacle was public so the audience could learn from the event. The state enforced discipline not only by punishing the condemned but also, in the process, by showing what is possible and not possible within the state. As modernity progressed, many institutions such as prisons and hospitals became areas where people, like the condemned, could be placed in a fixed space and monitored. The state began a process of surveillance by taking notes, making reports,

and conducting other observations both to improve the way it did things and to enforce obedience and discipline to the state (Foucault, 1979).

Education became another key institution for promoting the state and biopolitics. Those who learned to obey the state through school were rewarded with better careers or opportunities than those who failed school and disobeyed the state. For biopolitics to flourish, there had to be order. Education had to become a spectacle that could be performed, viewed, learned from, and graded. The state had to go into the private sphere and set up surveillance of the activities of its citizens. Through education, the state had to discipline and punish the citizen/student in order to gain obedience. This meant taking students out from their homes or traditional schools and putting them into modern schools with desks ordered for surveillance, setting up schedules for learning such as class periods, and creating ways to measure their progress such as testing and the use of standardized content and pedagogy (Foucault, 1979). Eventually states began using this approach beyond their own borders in order to expand their empires. In Egypt, for example, the modernization and colonization of the country was helped by the school system model brought from Europe that promoted surveillance, spectacle, and discipline (Mitchell, 1988).

Eventually it was not necessary for citizens to be in institutions such as schools in order to become part of the modern state because the structures, regulation, and discipline of these organizations followed them throughout all facets of their life. There is no private sphere as the state intrudes more and more into the lives of its citizens, making everything public (Foucault, 1979). Images, concepts, and symbols of what it means to be part of this imagined community and how a person defines himself or herself develop (Anderson, 1982). Modernity can shape gender and sexual identities about what is male or female, feminine or masculine, and what is acceptable to the state in terms of gender and sexuality and its performance (Butler, 1990).

In many countries, formal and informal literacy campaigns into rural areas not only affect literacy but also promote nation building and a common culture and ideology (Torres, 1991). Health literacy campaigns such as AIDS awareness campaigns, however, can cause people to rethink what it means to be a citizen (Robins, 2004). Rural China is a space where health literacy is needed but the presence and surveillance structures of the state are not as strong as in the rest of the country. The government of China is still seeking to demystify what is going on in rural China. Sending educators into rural China to promote AIDS education is a part of that process (Wu et al., 2002).

This study takes the perspective that the biopolitics of AIDS education can lead not only to the literal life or death of a student but also to a range of social life options for the citizen that follows the state and social deaths for those that do not in modern rural China. The culture in rural China has to be put into order through spectacle, surveillance, and discipline for the biopolitics of AIDS education to flourish and create the modern Chinese citizen.

Methodology

AIDS education in the culture of rural China is explored as a case study in order to answer the research question: *What are the implications of AIDS education in the culture of rural China in terms of the surveillance, spectacle, and discipline of biopolitics?* In order to gain a deeper understanding of the biopolitical implications of AIDS education in rural Chinese culture, the researcher conducted a literature review of AIDS education in rural China using search terms such as “AIDS”, “Health literacy”, and “Rural China” in search engines including Google Scholar and ERIC. The search focused on scholarly journals and medical journals primarily since AIDS is a constantly changing phenomenon and China’s AIDS response has changed dramatically in recent years. The content of the selected articles was read by the researcher and

notes were taken about their content. The articles and resulting notes were compared and analyzed for common themes. The researcher also kept a journal. The aforementioned rural Chinese cultural issues of age, orthodoxy, fear of homosexual men and Westerners, indirect sex talk, unfamiliarity with sex education, social death, and the contrast of urban versus rural realities appeared as themes in the analysis. The researcher reread and analyzed Foucault's (1979) *Discipline and Punish: Birth of a Prison*, taking note of how Foucault described the way education was used in biopolitics. The researcher decided to focus on the biopolitical concepts of spectacle, surveillance, discipline, and punishment because these issues lent themselves to the practical realities of campaigning in China more fruitfully. Focusing on the physical space of the school was impractical, for example, since the government could not construct more modern schools in rural China in time to stem the epidemic. It was easier to send educators to villages and existing schools. The researcher then viewed the themes in the literature reviewed through the biopolitical concepts of spectacle, surveillance, and discipline, and punishment to theorize implications for AIDS education by taking the perspective of the state, rural citizen, and educator in dealing with rural Chinese cultural issues during an AIDS educational campaign.

Results and Discussion

When it comes to age, the spectacle of the young urban university student pits the authority of the young expert against the Chinese elder. The implication can be that young people may seek to model themselves on the younger AIDS educator and not their elders. The sending of a youthful educator to conduct an AIDS education campaign sends the message that the state can not let elders in a village overrule their authority. The AIDS educator is also the surveillance of the state in human form. The implication can be that they are seen with suspicion since rural people may believe that they are there to spy on them on matters unrelated to AIDS. In terms of discipline, the age of the AIDS educator can be a factor. A young AIDS educator has incorporated the discipline of the government's message on AIDS and citizenship into their thought processes and actions. They can discipline their students in the way they think aloud and perform their work. They limit what is possible since by the time they enter a rural village they have a polished message instead of a contested concept. The implication can be that they upset the balance of power in a rural village since they teach the young, who eventually become the power brokers in the village, the message of the state.

When it comes to orthodoxy, the spectacle of the AIDS educator is a proxy for the state so they may be disbelieved. However their presence in a rural village cannot be ignored as easily as other resources that send governmental messages. The surveillance of the AIDS educator means that a message is sent and the state, through the educator, can see if the rural population follows through with it. Likewise, the rural population can see whether what the AIDS educator says is true through the lives and deaths affected by the education. The implications of discipline is that rural area people who believe what the AIDS educator says can be rewarded with more resources, which are sent through the educator, from the state. Rural areas that disobey or disbelieve are left to the ravages of the epidemic.

When it comes to the fear of the homosexual man, the spectacle of the educator provides a model for a modern Chinese man who can speak about a taboo subject. Those in a rural village upset with the message may seek to trivialize the educator by making them a proxy for a gay stereotype that is devalued in a heterosexually normative rural culture. The implication, however, is that the educator may speak about homosexuals in a way that is a further detriment to gay men. The surveillance of the educator is also a two-way street. The educator who teaches about homosexual men can attract homosexual men to a course that could improve their lives or

expose them to a community that could make their lives worse. The discipline is tied to connecting words with implementation. If the educator speaks about helping gay men but does not have the resources such as medicine or funds to do so, the message sent is that gay men are devalued by the state and homosexuality is to be avoided.

When it comes to the fear of the Westerner, the spectacle of the urban AIDS educator is complex. A university student can seem more Western to a rural person since university life exposes the educator to more Western ideas. Something as simple as the spectacle of their clothing or mannerisms can make the educator both a proxy for the Chinese state and the West. The surveillance of the educator becomes the surveillance of the West since many of the AIDS education practices are imported into China from Western countries. With increasing reporting and online work, the West, in fact, gains more and more access to data gained from Chinese surveillance. What an educator in China learns can find itself in the hands of Westerners. The implications for discipline are that the educator can choose both to paint bad behaviors as Western and to promote AIDS prevention as a heroic struggle won by China. However, information gained by educators can eventually be gained by outside Western forces and be used to discipline China. The Chinese government can then pass this down back to the educator. The educator, in essence, can create the conditions for disciplining himself.

When it comes to indirect sex talk, the spectacle of the educator can create a venue for safely talking more directly about sex. The educator has to basically role model direct sex talk. The surveillance of the sex educator allows the educator to better familiarize himself or herself with local languages of indirect sex talk and translate them to the state to improve instruction. Implications for discipline are that the educator can help create a common direct language for sex talk.

When it comes to unfamiliarity with sex education, the spectacle of the educator as a constant presence in a rural area creates familiarity with sex education. Surveillance of the educator can be delegated to the students they teach who, in turn, watch the people around them. What the educator teaches to a few people can make its way throughout a whole community in a short time. People who behave against the new norm created by sex education then stand out and can more easily be confronted. The discipline of unfamiliarity becomes clear as people become rewarded by the state when they are exposed to sex education. The couple unfamiliar with sex education gains an unwanted child or exposure to AIDS. Those who obey the state gain the child they want and a chance at a longer healthier life. When it comes to social death, the spectacle of the AIDS educator may be the only person who can stop a rural village from turning on an AIDS victim. This is in part because the educator as the surveillance of the state is demystifying a tragedy that usually happens away from the eyes of the state. If the educator can get the state to grant permanent shelter to the AIDS victim in that village, then rural people must not only challenge the victim and the educator but the authority of the state itself. The AIDS victim can also be the center of social life given by the state since potential jobs related to an AIDS prevention economy spurred by the state depend on having an AIDS victim.

When it comes to the contrast between urban versus rural realities, the spectacle of the educator creates a link from the urban culture to the rural culture that helps soften differences. The surveillance of the educator gives urban China the upper hand in monitoring rural China under its own terms and frames while rural Chinese gets a glimpse of an urban person. Both urban and rural cultures are bridged and both can see how AIDS develops in different contexts. Implications for discipline are that the urban educator is a conduit for urban societies that are more advantaged to funnel resources to disadvantaged rural communities. The urban educator

also opens up rural China for urban opportunists to follow in their footsteps by tapping into the rural networks created by AIDS education campaigns. This could be good or bad. An AIDS education campaign could lead to urban China sending a literacy campaign to a rural network that helps people or to a business created by China's new state capitalists that exploits them. What follows an AIDS campaign can eventually taint or support the original AIDS campaign. It becomes clear that the biopolitics of AIDS education in the culture of rural China suggests that educators have to think about how they are perceived and how they perceive, as well as the long-term and short-term consequences, of these actions.

Conclusion

This study theorizes the biopolitical implications of AIDS education in the culture of rural China. Much of the response against AIDS has taken a top-down approach from the state to the rural areas of China. This study is important because it theorizes other perspectives and the problems that could arise. It also highlights how the fighting of a disease is not only a health issue but also a cultural and political issue. In a closed society like China where the state controls much of civil society in urban areas and where society in rural areas is isolated from contact with the rest of China and the world, questioning the politics of an education campaign can be politically dangerous. Theoretical and conceptual work is important because other research work can be hard to conduct in the political climate of China. Currently, China also faces the problems of modernity and colonization that other countries faced in the past, because it has recently become more of a super power and has started opening itself up to the rest of the world. More work is needed in this area to understand what actually happens to educators and students in these campaigns. It is important to rethink what happens in health literacy campaigns since their respective governments and other institutions make a difference in how they influence the cultures of other countries. Many of these programs may have flawed or biased ideas that create as many problems as they resolve.

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