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# The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine And Sexual Desire In Contemporary China (Critical Global Health: Evidence, Efficacy, Ethnography)



## Synopsis

Since the 1990s China has seen a dramatic increase in the number of men seeking treatment for impotence. Everett Yuehong Zhang argues in *The Impotence Epidemic* that this trend represents changing public attitudes about sexuality in an increasingly globalized China. In this ethnography he shifts discussions of impotence as a purely neurovascular phenomenon to a social one. Zhang contextualizes impotence within the social changes brought by recent economic reform and through the production of various desires in post-Maoist China. Based on interviews with 350 men and their partners from Beijing and Chengdu, and concerned with de-mystifying and de-stigmatizing impotence, Zhang suggests that the impotence epidemic represents not just trauma and suffering, but also a contagion of individualized desire and an affirmation for living a full life. For Zhang, studying male impotence in China is one way to comprehend the unique experience of Chinese modernity.

## Book Information

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Everett Zhang was conducting fieldwork in two Chinese hospitals, documenting the reasons why men sought medical help for sexual impotence, when Viagra was first introduced into China's market in 2000. He therefore had a unique perspective on what the media often referred to as the "impotence epidemic", designating both the increased social visibility of male sexual dysfunction and the growing number of patients seeking treatment in nanke (men's medicine) or urological

hospital departments. At the time of Viagra's release, Pfizer, its manufacturer, envisaged a market of more than 100 million men as potential users of "Weige" (Great Brother) and hoped to turn China into its first consumer market in the world. Its sales projections were based on reasonable assumptions. The number of patients complaining from some degree of sexual impotence was clearly on the rise, reflecting demographic trends but also changing attitudes and values. There was a new openness in addressing sexual issues and a willingness by both men and women to experience sexually fulfilling lives, putting higher expectations on men's potency. Renewed attention to men's health issues since the 1980s had led to the creation of specialized units in both biomedical hospitals and TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) clinics. There was no real competitor to Pfizer's Viagra, as traditional herbal medicine or folk recipes clearly had less immediate effects in enabling sexual intercourse. And yet Viagra sold much less than expected. In hospitals and health clinics, Chinese patients were reluctant to accept a full prescription. Instead, they requested one or two single pills, as if to avoid dependence. The drug was expensively priced, and customers were unwilling to sacrifice other expenses to make room in their budget.

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