

## **Spreading the word: Monks mitigate HIV/AIDS**

By Wen Chihua, China Features

The monk has auspicious patterns tattooed on his forearms because of a belief that these will chase away evil spirits and protect him from contracting any incurable disease.

That belief is being put to the test in the wake of the HIV/AIDS threat looming over this subtropical part of south-west China and reaching to the very doors of the 1,400-year-old Manchunman Temple where Du Su, 24, was ordained 14 years ago.

“Being a monk doesn’t necessarily immunize you from HIV. Really, nothing can keep that evil away unless you live a healthy life – no drug abuse, no unsafe sex,” says the young monk shyly, glancing at his tattooed right wrist.

He became aware of the dreadful disease when it claimed the life of the younger brother of his master, a senior monk. The death shocked Du Su and other young monks. It is believed the brother contracted AIDS through promiscuous behaviour in Myanmar, Du says. His death forced the senior monk to resume secular life to take care of his widowed mother.

Shocks such as this have incited most of the 6,000 Buddhist monks in 563 temples of China’s Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan province to join hands against the spread of HIV/AIDS, says Yang Wenyao, a local AIDS control officer.

And UNICEF is supplying them with the tools they need to be successful. The results of a UNICEF-funded training programme are reverberating throughout Xishuangbanna. Thanks to the in-depth instruction, a virtuous cycle is under way, with monks educating youngsters and older people, changing behaviours, thus preventing new HIV infections and ultimately, saving lives.

Started in 1997, the UNICEF Yunnan Mekong Subregion HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care project has trained 562 monks from Xishuangbanna in HIV/AIDS awareness and counselling skills, says Yang, who has been involved in the project for six years. UNICEF spent a total of US\$41,000 on training monks up to the end of 2002 and the estimated budget for Buddhist monk initiatives in 2003 is US\$50,000.

The monks regard it as their obligation to fight the AIDS scourge. “The Buddha has set us the example by delivering people from suffering and relieving society from disasters,” says Ma Hazhuang, the 32-year-old assistant abbot of the Xishuangbanna Buddhist Central Temple in Jinghong. “Now our society is threatened by an AIDS epidemic, we as followers of Buddha cannot stand idle. Without a healthy society our temple, and even Buddhism itself, cannot survive.”

Given that Xishuangbanna has 300,000 (mainly Dai-speaking) Buddhist followers, more than one third of its population of 860,000, says Yang, “We want to use the monks’ impact on the community to educate people, both the secular and the sacred. An effective way is to combine the Buddhist doctrines with scientific information to lay bare the issue’s severity to people.”

Du Bing, a 20-year-old monk, says the first person he actually talked to directly about AIDS prevention was his mother, who, after a divorce, formed a new family. “I told her to be aware of unsafe sex and never to touch drugs. She didn’t know anything about this incurable disease before,” he says.

Since taking a religious vow of chastity at the age of 10, Du Bing thought he was well insulated from the kinds of risky behaviour that can cause HIV infection. But from the UNICEF training programme, he learned that even innocent activities, such as head shaving and being tattooed, could be dangerous if the blade or needle was not clean.

With UNICEF’s help, Buddhist monks are producing their own HIV/AIDS education materials in the Dai minority language and using sermons and spiritual counselling to teach men, women and young people about the disease.

The monks are also getting the message across with illustrated lectures and videotapes, as well as by singing songs that they wrote and composed themselves. The lyrics are adapted from Buddhist scriptures, “based on which we created lines about HIV/AIDS prevention,” says Ma Hazhuang.

Indeed, “the monks have a far greater impact on local communities than we do,” admits Yang Hongwen, an official of the local Communist Youth League. Two years ago, she recalls, when she and 120 volunteers launched a campaign against HIV/AIDS in rural communities, “very few people would take the leaflets that illustrated three ways of HIV transmission.” To her amazement, however, more than 200 leaflets were instantly distributed when the monks began talking to people on the topic in the Dai dialect.

Immensely popular and empowered with scientific knowledge, the monks have trekked to rural villages to dispel ignorance and misconceptions about HIV/AIDS.

Yu Wen, the 41-year-old mother of a teenage boy in Ganlanba village, is grateful to the monks, who have not only taught her family how to prevent AIDS but also helped dispel their phobia about the disease. “The disease is lethal. But we know now that it is unlikely to find you as long as you don’t sleep around and don’t use drugs,” she says.

According to official figures, in the decade from 1992, there were 168 cases of AIDS in Xishuangbanna. Throughout Yunnan, 11,567 HIV/AIDS cases and 477 deaths have been reported since 1989. “Actual HIV infections could be seven times as high, hitting 70,000,” says Wang Yunsheng, director of the provincial HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care project since 1996.

Yunnan’s HIV prevalence rate is estimated at 0.17 per cent, compared to 0.1 per cent for China as a whole.

In Yunnan, which borders the poppy-producing Golden Triangle region, HIV transmission is mainly through intravenous drug use, which accounts for 82.4 per cent of the province's infections, while unprotected sex accounts for 10.9 per cent of the cases, Wang says.

Aside from campaigns on prevention and to remove the stigma and discrimination against those living with the disease, the Central Temple is planning to initiate care and support programmes for AIDS patients and orphans with the financial and technical support of UNICEF and other international agencies.

UNICEF got the ball rolling in the battle of the monks against the deadly disease, and the results so far are inspiring. "Thanks to their participation, the momentum of the AIDS epidemic in ethnic rural villages along the border lines in Xishuangbanna has been checked," says Wang Yungsheng, "although the situation in the province as a whole is still grave."