

## AIDS VILLAGES AND ORPHANS IN CHINA

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### INTRODUCTION

After the death of ex-president 毛澤東 *Máo Zédōng* in 1976, the new leader 鄧小平 *Dèng Xiǎopíng* and his cabinet re-introduced capitalism and profit-making into the socialist system, such as in the case of what is called the “health revolution”. Today “privatization” and a philosophy of “to be rich” dominate the health system.

The serious increase of the AIDS epidemic in Henan Province (河南省 *Hé'nán shěng*) of China is well-known. People also know that public health authorities were responsible for it to a great extent because they organized and supported commercial blood banks. According to experts, there are between 500.000 and 700.000 people in Henan Province who have contracted the AIDS virus. AIDS has already become national disaster for China.

In this article, several central key themes related to AIDS in China are discussed: the nature of the overall crisis, AIDS villages, AIDS orphans and Chinese government policy to restrain AIDS.

I present this paper in the hope that all Chinese people, both local populations and the government, can work together to help the victims of HIV/AIDS and in the future to control the growth of HIV/AIDS.

### **Overall Crisis of HIV/AIDS in China**

The AIDS virus first appeared in China at the beginning of 1980s, and the number of infected persons has intensified since 1994. In 1998, there were 31 provinces where infections were registered and more than 400.000 people had the virus. The refusal of authorities to recognize the problem and to provide treatment for many years allowed the disease to extend beyond the initial risk groups. According to the official statistics, there were 23.905 patients registered with HIV/AIDS in China at the end of March of 2001. However, health workers affirm that the real number could be more than 600.000. In this same year 2001, the Chinese government for the first time admitted tacitly that it faces a serious crisis due to a significant increase of AIDS in the central regions of China.

In 2003, a preliminary survey made by the Ministry of Public Health, with technical attendance of the World Health Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), revealed that in China at the present time there are about 840,000 “zero-positives”, distributed across 31 provinces, municipalities directly under the Central Government and autonomous regions. Among this group of people, there are more than 80,000 full-fledged cases of AIDS. The total number of infected people puts China in the second place in Asia and in fourteenth in the world.

According to the UNAIDS, there will be more than ten millions “zero-positives” in 2010 if China government does not take fast and effective measures to control the growth of AIDS.

### **AIDS Villages**

According to the Chinese Ministry of Health, in the past, the most rapid increase in numbers of people with HIV/AIDS was among those infected by injections of intravenous drugs and by sexual transmission. However, over time, the greatest percentage of HIV carriers in China has been people infected through blood transfusions. This population is concentrated in seven poorer provinces in the central part of the country, including Henan (in 黃河流域 *Huánghé liúyù* ‘the basin of Yellow River’), one of the most populated provinces in China, with nearly 100 million inhabitants, and in isolated villages in other regions.

Henan Province became the focus of global attention in 2001 when international mass media reported an HIV epidemic of more than a million people in the rural province.

“*Selling blood to become rich*”, was an attractive governmental propaganda campaign introduced in the middle of 1980s in Henan Province. Local governments encouraged farmers to sell blood to increase their income. Since then several blood extraction centers were established in this province, and numerous poor farmers tried to relieve their financial distress by giving their blood for a handful of bills. They received 45 Yuans for 400 cubic centimeters blood, at a time when the average monthly income was 200 Yuans in the countryside.

The practice was made without adequate sanitary measures in the blood extraction centers of public hospitals and clinics directed by civil employees and their relatives. Needles were reused indiscriminately and blood of donors, once the actual plasma was extracted, was reinjected in the person selling the blood to avoid anemia and allow them to sell blood more often.

Until the middle of the 1990s, due to the negligence of authorities, the greed of the underground blood extraction centers, and the 血頭 *xiětóu* ‘blood heads; blood merchants’ who organized blood sale, there was an enormous

uncontrolled and illegal sale of blood plasma in many villages in eastern and southern Henan province. This led directly to the eruption and spread of AIDS. Some villages where there had been much illegal sale of blood plasma became known as 艾滋村 *àizīcūn* ‘AIDS villages’.

According to 2003 statistics, there were more than 100 AIDS villages in Henan Province. The rates of infection by HIV in these tenebrous cities varied between 60 percent and 84 percent. Among these AIDS villages, the situation of 文樓村 *Wénlóucūn* ‘Wenlou Village’ of 上蔡縣 *Shàngcàixiàn* ‘Shangcai County’ was the worst. According to the official statistics of 2004, Wenlou Village had 3,211 inhabitants and 1,310 persons had sold their blood. In Wenlou Village 784 people had tested HIV positive, 455 had AIDS, and 78 had died of AIDS. 70 percent of the families were “HIV-positive”. In fact, Wenlou Village has become a prohibited village, considered as like a leprosy hospital, which nobody wants to enter and nobody wants any commercial contact with.

### **AIDS Orphans**

In almost all countries of the world there are children orphaned as a consequence of AIDS. All have undergone the tragedy of losing one or both parents, and they often grow up in traumatic circumstances and of deprivation, suffering from extreme poverty, neglect, discrimination, and isolation.

Speaking of the experience of AIDS orphans, it is difficult to understand the psychological anguish that a child experiences when he/she sees one or both of his/her parents dying. When one of the parents is infected by HIV, there is a great probability that the other will also be. Thus, it is common that children lose two beloved persons in a very brief time. This suffering is very often worsened by separation from their siblings. Many experience depression or rage, fear about their future or a strong impulse to assign blame. This situation may lead to serious psychological problems like posttraumatic stress syndrome, alcohol and drug abuse, aggression and even suicide. Poverty and social inequality are often added to the psychological anguish of the orphaned children. The loss of family income, the cost of treating diseases related to HIV/AIDS, and funeral expenses often leave the orphaned children in the misery. A father’s death also deprives orphaned boys of a source of learning and a way of acquiring values they need to become socially responsible and economically productive adults.

In the case in China, according to the study, in the central part of Henan province alone, there were about 3,500 children who lost one or both parents due to AIDS during the past few years; most of them were 6 to 15 years old. Some of them were also “zero-positive”. In the case of Houyang (後陽 *Hòuyáng*), a small village of 4,000 inhabitants, AIDS has taken 160 people’s lives and left 140 orphans, 82 of them forced out of school due to financial

difficulties, discrimination, and social stigma. A news report on AIDS orphans, said that it was not only scenes of separation from their families which remained in the memory of the interviewed orphans but also the discrimination of people. Their daily landscape becomes one of the desperation and the indifference of the world.

“During the last decade, I saw and I heard of too many cases of the death of ill parents with AIDS, which only left an increasing number of children, who grew up under an environment filled with hatred and desire of revenge” said Dr. 高耀潔 *Gāo Yàojié*<sup>1</sup>, during an exclusive interview with 新華社 *Xīnhuáshè* ‘New China News Agency’. She showed her great worry about the situation of the great number of AIDS orphans, who live isolated and discriminated. According to her, AIDS orphans cannot receive a normal education and ignore the law, which may cause great social problems. In order to address the issue, Dr. Gao has undertaken a series of measures, like the direct donation and adoption of orphans. From her point of view, the best method to solve the problem of AIDS orphans is to stimulate adoption. These orphans can have the opportunity to communicate normally with their friends and schoolmates if they are taken care of by a normal family. Nevertheless, Dr. Gao found that many relatives of the orphans and adoptive parents didn’t treat them well and they took advantage of obtaining donations offered by the society. Therefore, “it is necessary to choose the adoptive family carefully”, she said. In this sense three requisites are used: a) that the members of the worthy family are of good heart and of confidence; b) that the family is already in acceptable economic conditions; and c) that they are willing to at least subsidize the child finishing secondary school. That is to say, that they will provide love, food and education. In addition, “we urgently need a law to guarantee the rights of these children, and governments at different levels must pay great attention to the problems of survivors and their education”, stressed Dr. Gao. And she declared “I hope that the government elaborates as soon as possible a law to protect the rights of AIDS orphans.”

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<sup>1</sup> Retired doctor Gao Yaojie is 78 years old (in 2005) and is original from Henan Province, China. During the past nine years, Dr. Gao has maintained a solitary battle against AIDS in China, has spent more than one million Yuans (about 120.000 US Dollars) for the publication of materials on the prevention of AIDS. At first in 1996, it was talking about the relation between a strange disease and an alarming number of blood sales. At the moment, she is dedicated to look for support for AIDS orphans. Dr. Gao has received several national and international awards. In 2001, the Global Executive Council of Health gave her the Jonathan Mann Prize for the Global Health and Human rights as recognition to her contributions to the improvement of the public health and the prevention of AIDS. In 2002, she was elected as a “Star of Asia” by the **Commercial Weekly Magazine** and one of the “25 heroes of Asia” by the weekly magazine **TIME**. She obtained the Ramon Magsaysay Prize of Public Service in 2003. Kofi Annan, General Secretary of the UN, praised her work as a public figure in educational activities and propaganda for the prevention of AIDS in rural China.

## Measures to Restrain HIV/AIDS

Facing the explosion in numbers HIV/AIDS cases and strong international pressure, the Chinese government has enacted urgent measures to draft prevention policies from the perspective of health and education, promote laws that benefit the affected people, and open control centers for the disease.

In February of 2004 the State Council of China created a new working Committee on HIV/AIDS<sup>2</sup>, directed by the Vice Prime Minister 吳儀 *Wú Yi*. In April, the State Council summoned a high-level national meeting that included governors and representatives of the provincial ministries, to announce new policies on HIV/AIDS. As part of the central policy, well-known as “four gratuitous services and one unique attention”, the government promised to provide (1) free antiretroviral medicines (that prolong the life of the patients) to the poor, (2) free consultations and detection tests, (3) free prevention of the transmission from mother to child, (4) free school attendance for AIDS orphans, and health attention to AIDS patients and their families.

Diverse programs of prevention and control of HIV/AIDS are developed in several provinces and autonomous regions with financial help of the central and local governments and international institutions. According to Chinese sources, **The Program of Attention to AIDS in China** financed by **The Global Fund to Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria**<sup>3</sup> is the largest program of international cooperation on the prevention of AIDS applied to China and covers the areas where 70 percent of the persons affected with HIV are concentrated. The plan is carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)<sup>4</sup> and it includes providing classes given in Mandarin and dialects of several ethnic minorities to the drug addicts to encourage them to use condoms, avoid sharing hypodermic needles, and abandon narcotics. The fundamental goal is to induce them to adopt preventive measures against contagion, more than to abandon drugs per se.

Nowadays, 雲南省 *Yúnnán shěng* ‘Yunnan Province’ is the pioneer for giving free treatment against AIDS. Also, for the majority of impoverished infected persons who have difficulties accessing medical services, the

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<sup>2</sup> In 1996, the State Council created “Coordinating committee of the State Council to prevent and control HIV/AIDS” directed by the Vice Prime Minister Li Lanqing. But this committee only had four meetings and the efforts to revitalize it in 2001 did not have any result.

<sup>3</sup> The Global Fund to Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is a partnership between governments, civil society, the private sector and affected communities. The Global Fund represents an innovative approach to international health financing. It counts on more than 3.000 million dollars for more than 300 programs in 128 countries.

<sup>4</sup> CDC, known as the program “China Cares” or “China Comprehensive AIDS Response”, is the main national effort that has been specifically conceived to face the necessities of the ex-donors of plasma with HIV. This program aims at providing HIV tests, consultation and antiretroviral treatment; all of these services are free or subsidized to those affected people and communities.

governments of 河北 *Héběi* and 河南 *Hénán* have promised to offer medicine for free to the residents of the areas most affected. In addition, the local governments of Henan Province have eliminated school costs for children with HIV/AIDS and provided teachers with some training. Other measures include:

- a. Offering free consultation for all people who would like to have HIV tests
- b. Ordering all clinics, hospitals and health workers to use disposable needles and syringes for each injection
- c. Providing orientation activities on ways of avoiding HIV transmission from parent to child
- d. Constructing highways in AIDS villages to stimulate the local economy
- e. Supplying water to all homes to maintain good sanitary conditions and facilitate the agricultural work of families affected with HIV/AIDS
- f. Offering free flour and low-cost supplies to families in extremely difficult economical condition
- g. Exempting some local taxes for people with HIV/AIDS and their families

In addition, in big cities, including 北京 *Běijīng*, seminars, workshops have been given to the “zero-positives” to inform them about their rights; at the same time plans to address the needs of a great numbers of AIDS orphans have been developed.

In the middle of 2003, China began to distribute free or price-reduced antiretroviral medicine to ex-donors of blood plasma in nine provinces in central and northeast parts of China. By October of that same year approximately 5.000 persons had initiated the antiretroviral treatment. The final goal of the program is to provide treatment to about 40.000 people in 120 out of approximately 2.800 counties. The Chinese Ministry of Health esteems that by 2008 there will be around 300.000 AIDS patients in need of treatment throughout the country. The government also plans to finance infrastructure projects like the construction of schools, highways and orphanages to develop the economy in the areas badly affected with HIV/AIDS.

On November 26, 2003, Channel 1 of CCTV (China Central Television) transmitted a public announcement on using condom for the prevention of AIDS. Although this announcement was not broadcast for two weeks as had been anticipated, it was the first of a new type on the use of condom and genital health. Many commentators in the foreign media concluded that this was the beginning of a fight against AIDS, launched publicly by the Chinese government.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December of 2003, Prime Minister 溫家寶 *Wēn Jiābǎo* visited three AIDS patients in the Ditan Hospital of Beijing and chatted with them. This

is the first time in Chinese history that a Prime Minister has shaken hands publicly with AIDS patients. This encounter can be considered an important indicator of the prevention of AIDS.

On February 18, 2004, the Chinese government sent 76 civil employees to live with AIDS patients as close neighbors for one year in the 38 villages with the greatest numbers of AIDS cases, to supervise government programs of prevention and treatment: free medicine to prevent AIDS, free anonymous HIV tests, isolation of the infected mother from her child, attendance to AIDS orphans and attention to elders. It is hoped that these civil employees will stimulate confidence and facilitate the recovery of AIDS patients.

In August of 2004, the Permanent Committee of the National Popular Assembly of China approved a law that prohibits blood transaction. This is the first law designed specifically to limit the AIDS virus that spread freely for many years before programs of prevention were put in place.

### **CONCLUSION**

The epidemic of AIDS in China has caused great tragedy. The AIDS villages and orphans have suffered a great deal both physically, socially, economically and spiritually. There is no doubt that the Chinese government made progress in working for its people, from the negation of the epidemic in the beginning to the elaboration of major programs to restrain HIV/AIDS. Nevertheless, there is still a need for greater governmental effort and enthusiasm in putting into effect more effective programs, by which the Chinese population will know HIV/AIDS well and have the best possible prevention and control of the epidemic.

Although the Chinese government has established programs of prevention and treatment for ex-donors of blood and plasma who are infected with HIV, it is important and urgent that the government organize a national campaign responding to the propagation of HIV between socially marginalized populations and other social sectors where it is difficult to make contact, like intravenous drug users, sex workers and their clients, homosexuals, and the “floating population” of immigrants.

If a national response and commitment at high levels are essential to control the advance of the epidemic, application at the local level throughout China will be vital to in guaranteeing the long-term health, economical growth and stability of the country.

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