

The Great Leap Backward:

The Chinese Government's Response to the Growing AIDS Epidemic in Rural China

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Introduction: The Rise of HIV/AIDS in Rural China

In 1985, China's first known AIDS victim died in a government hospital. Subsequent to the patient's death, hospital officials burned both the man's clothing and furniture.¹ Although less than 20 years have elapsed since this first reported incident of AIDS in the country, startling reports from China's government in June of 2001 reveal that the country has upwards of 600,000 people infected with the virus. Even worse, some Chinese AIDS experts place the number of people infected with the virus much higher. The United Nations believes that there are an estimated one million people infected with the virus living in China's Henan Province alone.² The international community was shocked at the sudden announcement because China had never reported any significant problem with the disease until 2001. Additionally, while the problem of AIDS evolves differently in every nation, the transmission of the disease has taken on a particularly unique form in China. While most countries worry about AIDS being spread through drug use or sexual intercourse, the majority of people now afflicted with the disease in China are rural villagers—most of whom live in Henan—and many of them contracted AIDS through unsanitary methods of blood collection.

Due to unsafe blood collection centers, infection rates in Henan are among the highest in the world, with estimates as high as 65 percent in some villages.³ As a result of the country's rural AIDS epidemic, the Chinese government has responded within the past decade, and in particular over the past year, with policies specific to the rise of AIDS in the country's rural provinces. These policies—which range from educational programs to new treatment clinics—however, have been slow in coming and currently lack the monetary support from the government to effectively curb the spread of the disease.

A "Western Disease": The Chinese Government's Slow Response to AIDS

In the early 1980s China's leader Deng Xiaoping instituted broad economic reforms that caused China's economy to transition from a centrally planned Maoist state to a more modern market economy. While Deng's reforms brought growth to both cities and rural villages, the benefits of economic reform have been highly variable, and China's interior provinces—with less human capital and natural resources—have actually often witnessed increased poverty.⁴ Consequently, Deng's economic reforms have left some 35 million Chinese—mostly rural villagers in the interior—to fall below the poverty line.

¹ *Newsweek*, "Out Into the Open: Long a taboo topic in China, AIDS is finally being discussed publicly. The faces of victims and the struggle against the plague." *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 2000. pp.1-3. On-line. California Digital Library, <<http://www.cdlib.org>> (20 Feb. 2002.).

² Rosenthal, Elisabeth. "Spread of AIDS in Rural China Ignites Protests." *The New York Times* 11 Dec. 2001, late edition. pp.1-5. On-line. Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

³ Pomfret, John. "China Blocks Trip to U.S. By AIDS Award Honoree." *The Washington Post*. 30 May 2001, pp.1-3. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

⁴ Saich, Tony. *Governance and Politics of China*. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001.

Faced in the early 1990s with this increasing poverty, many rural villagers found another source of income by donating blood at local collection centers. Regrettably, these centers have proven to be the largest source of AIDS transmission in China, especially in the interior province of Henan. Large numbers of peasants, and oftentimes whole villages, would each donate a pint of blood at a collection center, where it was spun with the blood of other peasants of the same blood type. When a specific company's desired blood element—often plasma—was collected, the remaining red blood cells were then divided up and transfused back into the peasants. Consequently, this practice left peasants sharing the blood of anywhere between six to twelve other villagers. The high levels of poverty also caused many farmers to go more than once a month to donate blood.⁵ The fact that peasants donated blood at such a high frequency may in part explain why the disease was able to take hold over such a large part of the population. The problem was only further inflamed by the presence of so-called “blood heads” (*xietou*), criminal gangs that illegally collected blood for profit, and often used unclean needles in collecting blood. These gangs also rose out of the economic vacuum created by Deng's reforms because villagers with paltry incomes saw that both the government and foreign companies were willing to pay for blood used in medicines and research. Thus, a black-market structure parallel to the government's blood collection centers created another venue by which peasants could contract AIDS.

After recognizing that thousands of people were becoming infected with AIDS during the 1990s, the Chinese government began to take policy measures — often toothless — to deal with the spread of AIDS in Henan. China's polices (or lack thereof) with regard to the

spread of AIDS in rural Henan have fallen into three categories: the government's attempts to crack down on unsanitary methods used at blood collection centers and by illegal “blood heads,” the establishment of educational and prevention programs informing villagers of the nature of HIV/AIDS and how it is spread, and the institution of treatment programs for those rural villagers already infected with the disease.

Although the unsafe collection of blood in Henan appears to be the largest contributor to the spread of AIDS in China, the Chinese government's corrective policies towards the blood centers have been both slow and ineffective. Reports suggest that prior to 1995, China's Health Ministry and provincial authorities embraced and actually ran the for-profit blood drive.⁶ In 1997 when reports of mysterious illnesses began to appear in Henan and large numbers of people began to die of pneumonia, local health officials suddenly urged villagers to stop giving blood. These vocalizations from local leaders, however, are the only clear efforts made by the Chinese government during the 1990s to attempt to curb the spread of AIDS.⁷ Indeed, the Chinese government even denied the existence of AIDS in the countryside, and continually reported small numbers of cases until June 2001.⁸ Because of the lack of government-provided information, reports are unclear as to what extent the government has been able to improve upon its practices of blood collection, besides simply telling peasants not to donate. While the Chinese government has repeatedly banned the *illegal* collection of blood in order to stop the spread of AIDS, money allocated by the government for rural healthcare during the 1990's was extremely low, and the ban was never fully implemented.⁹

In May of 2001, China attempted to take bolder measures to try to combat unsafe blood

⁵ Rosenthal, 11 Dec 2001, Ibid

⁶ Pomfret, Ibid

⁷ Rosenthal, 11 Dec 2001, Ibid

⁸ Gill, Bates, and Sarah Palmer. “The Coming AIDS Crisis in China.” *The New York Times* 16 July. 2001, late edition. pp.1-3. <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

⁹ “China Stops Denying AIDS Epidemic,” CNN.com. 9 Aug. 2001. pp.1-2, <<http://www.cnn.com>> (22 Feb. 2002).

collection and the growing AIDS crisis by issuing a “China Action Plan for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control.” In this document, the government allocated \$117 million towards the purpose of ensuring “the safety of blood and blood products.”¹⁰ The action plan specifically suggested that sanitary measures should be taken when collecting blood and that all blood should be tested for the presence of HIV/AIDS before being used in products. Furthermore, the plan allowed for a “reporting mechanism” through the Health and Public Security Ministries to lead the battle against illegal blood collection.¹¹ Because of its recent implementation though, reports are unclear about the efficacy of the plan in cleaning up the blood collection process.

Prior to its new action plan, the Chinese government had likewise been both apathetic and repressive in its efforts to educate people and prevent the spread of AIDS. AIDS appeared to be on the rise most notably in Henan province, but government officials did little to inform rural villagers about the nature of the disease or how it is spread.¹² China’s Deputy Health Minister Yin Dakui announced this previous August that increased educational and preventative measures were not taken because “leaders and the general public have not fully realized the hidden dangers of a large-scale,” epidemic.¹³ Whether or not the government was actually ignorant of the growing AIDS problem, reports from villagers suggest that many knew very little about the disease. In 2001, China’s State Family Planning Commission conducted the largest national survey concerning AIDS, and results showed that a full 20 percent of Chinese in twelve counties had never even heard of the disease. In Henan’s Shangcai County, results show that 40 percent of the county’s residents did not know how AIDS could be prevented. As a result,

one can see that strong educational measures were not taken by the government during the 1990s, with a corresponding lack of improvement in knowledge about the nature of AIDS over those years.

China appears to be evolving away from its policies of the 1990s by addressing measures in its “China Action Plan” that would increase the amount of money spent on educational programs with regard to AIDS prevention and blood transfusion safety. The government has specifically allocated \$12 million for AIDS education. The government hopes to bring programs, bulletin boards and educational materials not only to rural villagers but to the population at large.¹⁴ To what extent the Chinese government will actually follow through on these policies is yet to be seen. In the same month that the action plan was released, the Chinese government forbade Dr. Gao Yaojie—a retired Chinese physician who has explored the link between AIDS and blood transfusions in Henan—to travel to the United States to accept the Jonathan Mann Award for Global Health. In addition, the Chinese government has confiscated AIDS educational pamphlets made by Gao, and she has been warned not to speak to the press.¹⁵

Besides analyzing policies that seek to crackdown on the for-profit blood industry and increase educational standards concerning the spread of AIDS in the countryside, one must also examine policies that China has taken in the countryside with regard to individuals already infected with the AIDS virus. While the government’s policies have been borderline negligent with regard to preventing the disease, they have been almost nonexistent concerning treatment. For example, the government currently offers little medical assistance to

¹⁰ China State Council. *China Action Plan for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control (2001-2005)*. trans. 25 May 2001

¹¹ China State Council, *Ibid*

¹² Rosenthal, 11 Dec 2001, *Ibid*

¹³ Rosenthal, Elisabeth. “China Now Facing an AIDS Epidemic, A Top Aide Admits.” *The New York Times*, 24 Aug. 2001, pp.1-5, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

¹⁴ China State Council, *Ibid*

¹⁵ Pomfret, John. “China Blocks Trip to U.S. By AIDS Award Honoree.” *The Washington Post*. 30 May 2001, pp.1-3, <www.washingtonpost.com> (23 Feb. 2002).

those infected with AIDS. At this time, the Western anti-AIDS drug mixture known as the “cocktail” costs anywhere between \$10,000 and \$30,000 for a yearly prescription in China, and the government refuses to manufacture the drugs domestically. Nor does the government help patients pay for the drugs through subsidy programs. Currently, only 74 people nationwide are taking the drug.¹⁶ Furthermore, while China manufactures generic forms of other Western anti-AIDS drugs, licensing in the country only allows these drugs to be exported to such countries as Brazil and they cannot, at this time, be used for domestic treatments.¹⁷ Consequently, older and cheaper drugs that are used to control the symptoms of AIDS are not widely available in infected regions such as Henan.

The lack of effective drugs is compounded by the fact that most doctors in China, especially rural ones, lack sufficient training in diagnosing and treating AIDS. Indeed, because many Chinese doctors lack training and medications, local clinics often charge villagers for worthless saline solutions and anti-diarrhea medications that ultimately do not help. The central government has been largely unresponsive to villagers’ sufferings. When infected villagers have attempted to go to Beijing for treatment in the past, they have often been turned away, accused of illegally leaving their towns, and pressured to leave.¹⁸ Consequently, many sufferers’ lives are cut short, ending in severe pain because they receive no medical attention from any level of the bureaucracy. Furthermore, China’s action plan from May

2001 outlines few specific measures for those patients already suffering from AIDS, and calls upon “traditional Chinese” medicine to help those already afflicted.¹⁹

Government Culpability, Social Taboos and Economic Incentives: China’s Difficulty in Dealing with AIDS

China’s apathy towards, suppression of, and only recent interest concerning the AIDS problem in the countryside is a result of the

social, political and economic constraints that have been placed on the Chinese government during the past decade.

A host of social and political constraints caused China’s government to react slowly in establishing better standards for blood donation and cracking down on “blood heads.” For example, even

though China had its first recorded incidence of AIDS in 1985, many of the country’s leaders often categorized the disease as a Western problem that would not encroach upon the Chinese population. Because of this cultural misconception concerning AIDS, the government continued to look upon local blood collection centers as a viable means for peasants to obtain money, and not as a source of possible AIDS infection.²⁰ Officials also hoped that by increasing peasant incomes, some of the negative attention would be deflected away from the post-Mao economic reforms that left some villages economically weakened and angry at the government. Furthermore, China had nearly eradicated most sexually transmitted diseases under the Mao era, so concern over the spread of AIDS through blood transfusions was not monitored as

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¹⁶ *Newsweek*, 4 Dec. 2000, Ibid.

¹⁷ Rosenthal, Elisabeth. “AIDS Patients in China Lack Effective Treatment.” *The New York Times* 12 Nov. 2001, pp. 1-6. <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

¹⁸ Rosenthal, 12 Nov 2001, Ibid.

¹⁹ China State Council, Ibid

²⁰ Gill, Bates, and Sarah Palmer, 16 July 2001, Ibid

closely as it should have been. During the late 1990s, the government additionally attempted to crack down on “blood heads” with harsher penalties for those caught, but reductions in rural healthcare made plans for implementation unrealistic.²¹ The most obvious constraint to China’s policies regarding the cleaning up of blood collection centers is possibly the government’s own culpability in spreading the virus. In Henan, reports now suggest that provincial officials were responsible for and involved in the for-profit blood drives, and consequently helped to spread the disease further into the population. Owing up to this mistake—the infection of possibly over one million people with AIDS—could seriously tarnish the reputation of the Chinese Communist Party. Indeed, in an August 2001 interview, Deputy Health Minister Yin offered increased information regarding the AIDS crisis in rural regions including Henan, but stressed that Health Ministry officials were not responsible for the spread of AIDS in the countryside, and stated that “it is not appropriate to blame the Chinese government.”²² Thus, the need to retain power and reputation, despite the loss of millions of lives, has compromised the government’s ability to act as an agent of change in a situation that it contributed to.

Traditional societal constraints and international pressure also hindered the government’s ability to quickly implement educational and prevention programs dealing with AIDS in rural provinces. Indeed, China is still a sexually conservative society, and misconceptions and taboos continue to pervade the culture with regard to sex and AIDS. The government, fearful of more liberal discussions concerning sexual activity, has thwarted programs that would

educate people about safe sex. Commercials and billboards promoting condom use during the late 1990s were quickly retracted, and consequently, frank assessments and effective preventative measures concerning AIDS have been difficult for the government to implement.²³ China was also unwilling to implement mass educational and preventative programs in villages in the late 1990s simply because it did not want to draw negative attention from the foreign press during its bid for the 2008 summer Olympics. If the international community had discovered that the Chinese government had been responsible for the exponential rise of AIDS in the countryside, questions concerning China’s treatment of its people’s basic human rights could have been brought to the forefront. Marred with a record of ignoring human rights—particularly since the Tiananmen Square massacre—the Chinese government knew that the human rights issue could have proved pivotal in the final voting for the games, and, in turn, did not want to create a media situation in which the country could lose the games to rival bidder France.²⁴

In the realm of treatment, economic and political issues overshadowed AIDS sufferers’ needs. For example, with the economic reforms of the 1980s, healthcare, especially in rural areas, has taken a backseat to industrial growth. Although the government initially allowed localities to keep a proportion of revenues from local industries, the government has slowly decreased the availability of healthcare for peasants.²⁵ Consequently, medications and training for doctors has not been a focal point of investment for the Chinese government.²⁶ Additionally, access to medications has been limited by China’s inability to manufacture

²¹ Gill and Palmer, 16 July 2001, *Ibid*

²² Rosenthal, 24 Aug. 2001, *Ibid*

²³ Rosenthal, Elisabeth. “China Seems Uncertain About Dealing Openly With AIDS.” *The New York Times* 14 Nov. 2001, pp.1-3, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

²⁴ “Mixed Reaction to Beijing 2008 Win,” CNN.com, 14 July 2001, pp.1-4, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

²⁵ Saich, *Ibid*

²⁶ Saich, *Ibid*

China its own drugs. Because China is a new member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the country does not want to break international laws concerning patent rights. In a report dated November 2001, Zhao Enli, a spokesman for the newly established Chinese AIDS Prevention and Control Center explained that it would not produce and sell generic versions of anti-AIDS drugs because of WTO restrictions on international patents. Manufacturing drugs illegally would further damage China's reputation as well because the country is notoriously known for making bad duplicates of goods such as name-brand clothes and videocassettes. Consequently, the government is now instead seeking to bargain with drug manufacturers to bring down the exorbitantly high costs of imported drugs. Officials have announced that this process may be successful "within two years."²⁷

A Banquet of Consequences: The Effects of China's Stagnant AIDS Policy

Because the Chinese government failed to realize and deal with the immediacy of the AIDS problem in rural China, the country's leaders must now face a banquet of consequences—some positive, but most negative—that will undoubtedly influence the shape of the country in proceeding years.

By not implementing swift policy maneuvers in rural areas, China has benefited from certain short-term gains in both politics and economic standing. For instance, because the government did not crack down on blood collection centers and the blood heads, it was able to temporarily deflect attention away from the problem of AIDS. Whether officials actually believed that the AIDS situation would go away is unclear. The government did not want to attract any negative attention to itself by implementing policies aimed at the blood

centers or AIDS.²⁸ Additionally, by using policies of indifference during the late 1990s, the Chinese government was not only able to maintain its political reputation domestically, but was also able to obtain international economic rewards that might not have come if the international community had known the full extent of China's AIDS situation. Throughout the 1990's China sought entrance into the World Trade Organization. One must question China's policies during the government's courtship of the World Trade Organization because the country did not reveal its problems concerning AIDS with the world community until June 2001.²⁹ This announcement of an AIDS problem occurred long after the government seemed to realize in 1997 that blood collection centers were infecting a large portion of the rural population with the virus. Furthermore, the announcement came after the United States dropped its social and labor demands concerning China's entrance into the trade organization. The United States, which has questioned China's human rights policies since the crackdown of student and worker dissidents in Tiananmen Square in 1989, could have vocalized stronger pleas for basic human rights reform in China before the country could be allowed into the World Trade Organization.³⁰ If such an injustice to China's domestic population had been revealed earlier, consequently, China's entrance into the World Trade organization could have taken longer or been halted altogether. In addition, during the same time China was competing to win a bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, and may have not wanted to jeopardize its chances. If the International Olympic Committee had discovered that not only were a large number of peasants infected with AIDS, but that many of them were beginning to protest in Beijing, China may have lost the bid to host the games—

²⁷ Rosenthal, 11 Nov. 2001, Ibid

²⁸ Pomfret, 30 May 2001, Ibid

²⁹ Rosenthal, 12 Nov. 2001, Ibid

³⁰ Rosenthal, Elisabeth. "Thorny Rights Disputes Await Bush in China." *The New York Times* 14 Feb. 2002, pp.1-6, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

a fact that China's leadership is no doubt acutely aware of. Consequently, because China was able to keep the growing AIDS problem muted, the World Trade Organization and the International Olympic Committee provided China with political and economic opportunities, both of which could have been threatened by the knowledge of an impending AIDS crisis.³¹

Although the temporary financial rewards have been large due to China's avoidance of the growing rural AIDS problem, China could ultimately face dramatic and negative consequences for its failure to deal with the disease. In truth, while the Chinese Communist Party may have been able to retain its reputation with the rural population by not cracking down on blood collection centers, the government may have ultimately caused the disease to spread further. Infection rates in some villages of Henan, near 65 percent, are among the highest in the world.³² In addition, although the problem has become most obvious in Henan, other provinces such as Shanxi also took part in blood selling practices.³³ Because AIDS can take years to incubate, it is unclear what the magnitude of the situation in Shanxi and others provinces. Furthermore, by not implementing policies to educate people about the nature of the disease, the government may have compounded the problem even further. Because a large portion of Chinese people do not even know what AIDS is, let alone how it is spread, much of the population could be unknowingly spreading the disease now through sexual intercourse, or intravenous drug use. This current state of ignorance concerning AIDS is frightening when put in the context of the effects of China's recent economic reforms. Many farmers are now leaving their villages to

search for work in cities at state owned enterprises or in villages that are more prosperous.³⁴ Consequently, nearly 100 million itinerant workers—referred to as the floating population—may be bringing the disease to different economic levels of society as well as other geographic regions. There are an estimated 3 million of these people living in Beijing alone, and the odds that many of them are AIDS infected villagers from Henan is quite high.³⁵ Because intravenous drug use, prostitution, premarital sex, and the practice of having multiple sexual partners are all on the rise in China, the population at large is increasingly endangered.³⁶

China also faces consequences in the spheres of international and domestic politics. The United Nations was shocked at China's announcement in spring 2001 concerning its sudden increase in AIDS cases. Furthermore, reports in newspapers and discussions in international organizations have placed increasing pressure on China to adopt policies to better handle the spread of the disease.³⁷ Domestically, the government has also had to contend with increasing protests, both at local levels and in Beijing. Poor farmers at the peak of desperation are now making their way from places such as Henan to seek treatment, protest and speak out. The Chinese government media, in November of 2001, also began to report more on these protests. While the government has been successful thus far in putting down the protests and sending many villagers back to the countryside, the reservoir of peasant despair appears deep.³⁸ Unlike many of the protests in industrialized villages and cities that are often isolated incidents directed at corporations or corrupt managers, most of the protests coming from rural Henan are focused directly at the

³¹ Rosenthal, 14 Feb. 2002, *Ibid*

³² Pomfret, 30 May 2001, *Ibid*

³³ Rosenthal, 11 Dec. 2001, *Ibid*

³⁴ Saich, *Ibid*

³⁵ Saich, *Ibid*

³⁶ Gill and Palmer, 16 July 2001, *Ibid*

³⁷ The World Bank Group "China: Preventing the Problem Before it Starts – Programs aim to curb spread of HIV." 10 Dec. 1999, pp.1-15, <<http://www.worldbank.org/developmentnews/archives>> (22 Feb. 2002).

³⁸ Gill and Palmer, 16 July 2001, *Ibid*

China Chinese Communist Party, and increasing in frequency. In December alone, protests had to be put down by villagers in Chenglao and Wenlou, two villages in Henan.³⁹ Consequently, public protest over AIDS may become a larger thorn in the side of the Chinese Communist Party as it tries to deal with the issue.

The most obvious, and eventually the most devastating consequence of China's inability to deal with the AIDS epidemic in a quick and open fashion is the massive loss of life it may see in future years. A United Nations report estimates that "China is on the verge of a catastrophe that could result in unimaginable human suffering, economic loss and social devastation."⁴⁰ In a rare and open move, Health Minister Dakui announced that HIV infections in China rose 67.4 percent in the first six months of 2001 in comparison with the same period in 2000. These statistics, coupled with the fact that millions of people in rural China are already infected with the virus, could lead to the loss of millions of lives in the countryside. As mentioned, though, the problem has a high probability of moving into other provinces and larger cities. The impact of such a large loss of human life at this point is incalculable, but it will no doubt have both political and economic ramifications as China loses lives in its labor force and is forced to confront the political consequences of not properly informing its people about the epidemic.

Avoiding an Epidemic: China's Policy Failures and the Need for Further Reform

The "China Action Plan for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control," will allocate \$117 million dollars for monitoring the practices of blood collection centers and \$12 million for educational programs related to AIDS.⁴¹

Last November, China also opened its first national conference on AIDS, taking another step towards a more open policy regarding the disease. The conference, despite the presence of kiosks promoting condoms and safe sex, was largely government run, and those people infected with AIDS were never allowed to speak to the foreign press. Rather, they appeared on stage with their faces hidden.⁴² The conference highlighted China's still lingering inability to openly face a possible AIDS epidemic. Although China is taking measured steps towards a more effective AIDS policy, its efforts are simply not enough. In order to combat the disease effectively, the Chinese government needs to make the issue of AIDS—with regard to healthcare and AIDS education—one of the nation's top priorities or it may find itself in a disastrous situation in coming years.

Although the government is allocating a combined total of \$129 million dollars for cleaning up blood centers and for AIDS education, this figure pales in comparison to the amount of money spent on AIDS in other countries. The United States, with a population a fraction the size of China's, allocates \$744 million every year to AIDS prevention programs, which does not include additional funds allocated for the nation's blood collection process.⁴³ Furthermore, the World Bank estimates that China's gross domestic product doubled between 1993 and 2001, but the amount of money spent on healthcare has declined as a percentage of the government budget.⁴⁴ Thus, an effective policy stance for the government to take would be to dramatically increase spending on rural healthcare, and to target the spread of AIDS specifically. An increased budget for rural healthcare should cover both the blood

³⁹ Saich, *Ibid*, and Gill and Palmer, 16 July 2001, *Ibid*

⁴⁰ Rosenthal, Elisabeth. "With Ignorance as the Fuel, AIDS Speeds Across China." *The New York Times* 30 Dec. 2001, pp.1-5, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com>> (23 Feb. 2002).

⁴¹ Rosenthal, 24 August 2001, *Ibid*

⁴² Wired News, "AIDS Conference in China: A First," *Wired News*. 13 Nov. 2001. pp.1-3 <<http://www.wired.com/news>> (22 Feb 2002).

⁴³ Rosenthal, 24 August 2001, *Ibid*

⁴⁴ The World Bank Group, "Press Release: 1997 Annual Meetings Program of Seminars: Financing Health Care in China," *The World Bank Group*. 22 Sept. 1997, pp. 1-2. <<http://www.worldbank.org>> (22 Feb 2002).

collection centers as well as AIDS education and prevention programs. A majority of the population still appears to be uninformed or misinformed regarding the nature of the disease and the safety methods needed for blood transfusion. Consequently, China should follow the lead of countries such as Thailand, which faced a similar outbreak of AIDS during the 1990s, and has already allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to curb the spread of the disease.⁴⁵ The government

needs to design programs that focus on every level of education.

Pamphlets, billboards and educational programs need to inform peasants about the nature of AIDS and how it can be spread through bodily fluids, and also about the importance of clean and safe procedures in blood collection. This last aspect—the sanitary

collection of blood—may prove crucial to the livelihood of villagers because if illegal blood trade continues in the future, more informed peasants may be deterred away from donating blood.

With regard to treatment, the government's efforts have failed to bring about significant change. Although the government opened an AIDS treatment clinic this July in Wenlou—one of the hardest hit villages in Henan—Dr. Gao criticized the clinic as a cosmetic gesture for the foreign press, because no substantial services are offered at the clinic. In truth, the clinic does not even offer AIDS drugs that treat common symptoms of HIV, such as pneumonias, fungal infections of the digestive tract, or epidermal herpes.⁴⁶ Therefore, despite China's action plan for HIV/AIDS, peasants are not obtaining viable medications and

solutions to the AIDS problem. The Chinese government, accordingly, needs to use money in an increased rural healthcare budget to establish better monitoring and treatment centers where people can find help for AIDS. This money should also go towards programs that train doctors to better recognize and treat AIDS, as well as the host of symptoms that can accompany it. In addition, the Chinese government should consider

invoking World Trade Organization rules that allow the off-patent production of materials and goods in certain emergencies. Just recently, Canada used the clause to begin manufacturing Ciproflaxin, an antibiotic that was used widely during the post September 11th anthrax scare.⁴⁷ If the government produces off-patent AIDS drugs, it may be able to more effectively treat the disease

for those already infected.

The international consequences of invoking the crisis clause at this point are uncertain. No doubt China wants to become a more significant player in the world economy, but the question becomes at what cost to its population? If the Chinese government and the Health Ministry fail to make AIDS one of the nation's top priorities, the consequences to China's human capital may be the most devastating to the nation since the Great Leap Forward, when an estimated 20 million people died of starvation. No doubt the road to effective AIDS policies will be difficult. An AIDS campaign requires massive amounts of money to be infused into prevention, education and treatment programs. The Chinese Communist Party, however, has a history of implementing large social

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⁴⁵ The World Bank Group, 10 Dec 1999, Ibid

⁴⁶ CNN.com, 9 August 2001, Ibid

⁴⁷ Rosenthal, 12 Nov 2001, Ibid

China programs, and they should pursue an AIDS policy program with the same vigor of initiatives such as the one-child policy. Likewise, although Chinese culture comes from a conservative social order, barriers concerning sex need to be broken in order to spare lives. What may be the most difficult subject, however, for the Chinese Communist Party to face is its own guilt in spreading the disease in Henan. The government is responsible on many levels for the spread of AIDS in Henan—from the blood collection centers, to the poverty that forced people to donate blood, and to the lack of healthcare causing thousands to now die. And finally, the problem is spreading. Because rural blood collection was undertaken in provinces other than Henan, one Chinese AIDS expert says that the current situation is “just the tip of the iceberg.”⁴⁸ Consequently, if the Chinese Communist Party refuses to face itself and effectively deal with the burgeoning AIDS problem, it may lose in the future more than just reputation and economic rewards, but also millions of lives.

⁴⁸ Rosenthal, 11 Dec 2001, *Ibid*