

Tracing China's HIV Epidemic: A Story of Cross-border Geopolitics

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This paper discusses the paradoxical trajectory that China's HIV epidemic has taken and the important role that its border with Burma plays in determining this unique epidemic pattern. After providing some brief background on the region that serves as the 'ground zero' for China's HIV epidemic I offer a discussion on the meaning of borders. Borders take on various meaning and significance to local, national, and international governing bodies. They assume a different level of importance, yet, to the people who inhabit the border. The Chinese-Burmese border is remote yet economically and strategically significant to the Chinese and Burmese governments in Beijing and Rangoon. It also, of course, holds great significance to the local governments that directly control and inhabit the territory on either side of the border. And it holds different significance, yet, for the local people who call this borderland home. A discussion of the various meanings this border holds both locally and nationally will explain why the HIV epidemic in China started in such a remote area before spreading to more urban centers. It will also highlight the need for directing more programmatic and policy related attention toward this important and strategic border area. I describe a nexus of relationships at the local and national levels that have become economically interdependent in a region that is fairly removed from the global economy. Their situation in a region where they have access to illicit yet economically lucrative resources has created what Manuel Castells calls a 'perverse economy' (Castells 1998); a black hole in the global economy that easily nurtures the development of an HIV epidemic. The black hole I describe, however, sits at the crossroads of Asia, giving it strategic significance in the region.

Keywords: China, HIV/AIDS, borders, ethnic minorities, Burma.