by HIV-tainted blood products, effectively orphaned by the infamous “plasma economy” of the 1980s and 1990s. Almost 58,000 Chinese—nearly 8 percent of the country’s official estimate of 740,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in 2009—were infected through contaminated blood, spread largely by roving blood dealers. The rural poor, normally reluctant to give away their life’s energy source, were assured they could make money by selling their plasma because once that was siphoned off, the red cells were re-infused into donors’ bodies. But pooling of cells from infected donors transmitted the virus in epidemic proportions. Although officially halted by the government in the mid-1990s, the plasma economy has deeply affected the next generation.

By visiting scores of villages throughout China’s rural heartland, To has found and helped about 12,000 such orphans through his Chi Heng Foundation (the Chinese phrase means “wisdom in action”). A Hong Kong-born investment banker initially based on Wall Street, To accepted a job transfer from the Swiss banking and financial services firm UBS in 1995 because he wanted to experience living and working in his native city (he has dual Hong Kong and U.S. citizenship). He had quietly come out as gay in the 1980s and, once he returned to Hong Kong, he was so moved by the vulnerability of Chinese men at risk of HIV/AIDS that he began volunteering as an AIDS-prevention educator in nightclubs and on help hotlines. In 1998, he launched the Chi Heng Foundation to help fight discrimination and the spread of HIV/AIDS; by 2001 he had abandoned his banking career to work full-time at the nonprofit. When he learned about the orphaned children during a trip through the countryside, he reoriented and expanded Chi Heng in 2002 to focus on helping them.

Chi Heng (chir-hung) is now the longest-running private program for educating AIDS orphans in China. Headquartered in Hong Kong, the foundation also has offices in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and in Henan and Anhui provinces. To travels frequently in China and also abroad, on trips to meet donors. Sources of support range from the Chi Heng Foundation Canada, based in Toronto, which conducts fundraising in North America, to gifts of medicine from the William Jefferson Clinton Foundation.
Foundation, to donations from individuals and proceeds from special events and social enterprises that employ HIV-affected individuals. With a staff of 40, several hundred volunteers (including many former scholarship beneficiaries), and an annual budget of $1.8 million, Chi Heng offers tuition and school aid from primary grades through college, plus psychosocial support, art therapy, summer camps, and vocational training. To relies on a network of like-minded health and welfare workers, not on government officials, for student nominations, and requires candidates to document their parents’ condition to receive aid.

On his frequent visits, sponsored children greet their 44-year-old benefactor as To Laoshi (Teacher To), or To Shu Shu (Uncle To). “My children come from my work, and not from my family,” he recently told students from a village where a third of the adults are infected. He was not much older than those children when his own family migrated to the United States, seeking an American education for him and his sister, Wing. “Don’t give up,” he told the students. “If you study, we will spare no effort to support you. Knowledge is the way to change your destiny.”

In China, activists—especially those focused on AIDS—are feared as agents of social disorder. Despite To’s primarily educational mission, local officials in Henan briefly shut down his office there in 2005. “Secret police stormed in and took away our computer and documents,” he says. They also arrested his office manager after midnight and briefly detained her, but the team refused to quit. “In mainland China, all our offices are under surveillance,” To adds. “They even asked our officers: ‘Do you mind if we tap your phone?’ I told them to say: ‘Of course not. We have nothing to hide.’” Still, he and his foundation are frequently under surveillance. Chi Heng’s mission is especially sensitive because the unpunished negligence of the plasma economy is a chapter that many would like to forget.

When To first shifted his focus to the children, he drove from village to village—thousands of miles—to locate as many of them as possible. Help came from Henan physician, academic, and AIDS activist Gao Yaojie, who diagnosed early cases of AIDS in local farmers. She herself has faced harassment and house arrest, and that, To admits, triggers his own “nightmare”: the “fear of being caught, beaten up, and put in jail.”

He strives to show he isn’t a troublemaker. Private by nature, he seems to have avoided jail so far through discreet diplomacy and a fierce focus on the children—downplaying his role as advocate. When speaking publicly to students from village schools, he acknowledges Chinese officials by invoking a Maoist slogan: “I want to thank the leaders for giving us the opportunity to serve the people.” He also eschews demonstrations and fiery speeches. “If I take to the barricades, I could raise awareness and I’d be the darling of the foreign media,” he explains. “But I’d help fewer people.”

When traveling, he speaks softly and carries a big backpack—stuffed with rice and cooking oil for families, and scholarship checks for the students. To, who once frequented the Metropolitan Opera and dined...