

Although all of Ma Chan's leprosy patients have been cured of the disease, many have been left with cruelly visible reminders.

"I WOULD LEAVE IF I COULD BUT I DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY AND I WOULD BE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST. NO, THIS IS MY HOME"

years he, as village chief, was the only person allowed to leave Ma Chan. Official policy towards leprosy patients changed in 2000, allowing them to be treated in their hometowns rather than cast out into separate communities. But by then Xun had met his wife, Qili Lamo, 39, who contracted the disease when she was 25, and Ma Chan had become his home.

"I couldn't leave here now," he says, flanked by village elders. "I am too emotionally attached to the village. It is one big family."

In Ma Chan on the day we arrive are 17 students from Ma On Shan's Li Po Chun United World College. The Hong Kong students are on a mission

to paint village houses as part of the school's "China week" programme, a scheme designed to provide adventure for the youngsters and help for the less fortunate. The multicultural group is accompanied by principal Stephen Codrington, who visited the village a year ago to help build a toilet block. In addition to offering practical help to the villagers, Codrington hopes the visit will help to erode the social taboos surrounding leprosy.

About 60 adults from six ethnic groups live in Ma Chan, down from 200 when it was first built, in 1959. Xun says some residents have died while others, lucky to have escaped serious disfigurement from leprosy,

were taken back by their families after the policy change. Although all the remaining villagers have been cleared to leave, poverty and the fear of ostracism keep them here.

"They are not prevented from leaving the village," says Xun, "but they will be rejected by other people, even their families." He adds that even local doctors refuse to tend to their injuries. "Doctors refuse to see them because they are so scared of leprosy," he says.

Not all the villagers are former leprosy patients. There are nine married couples in the village, with 10 children, eight of whom have been sent to private boarding schools in Kunming and nearby Lufeng in >>

