

## Features

# The prisoners of ignorance

Yunnan lepers can't leave their village even though they've been cured. A group of HK students visited to help, accompanied by Steve Cray

**IT WAS A SOMBRE** group of Hong Kong students who met up for breakfast at 7.15am in a hotel up in the mountains in western China recently.

They were tired from a gruelling trip on the overnight bus from Kunming to Lijiang the previous day and frustrated that the carefully laid plans for their annual China week seemed to be going horribly wrong.

The 17 students from Li Po Chun United World College, Ma On Shan, and their principal Stephen Codrington, had spent the previous afternoon and evening carrying out a damage limitation exercise.

It was also cold, especially for those acclimatised to Hong Kong weather. And it was about to get a lot colder. For the group was about set off further up the east Himalayas to about 3,000 metres to spend a couple of days in a lepers' village.

What Dr Codrington and his students didn't know as they ate their breakfast that morning at the Yi Xiang Hotel, Qiaotou, was that things were about to get a lot worse.

It had all started so well. Plans for the international college's China week were always made well in advance and Dr Codrington and the only second-year student in the group, Chris Sykes, 18, from Canada, had been to the lepers' village, Ma Chan, the year before, where they helped construct a toilet block.

The plan was to lead the group of 16 freshers on a new campaign to whitewash the inside of the villagers' houses and get to work on the details of an already advanced plan to provide a teacher for the village children.

The college's Global Culture Action Team, headed by Chris, had spent the best part of a year exploring the practicalities of sourcing and funding someone to overcome the phobia about leprosy.

Central to the students' plans were their go-betweeners, Australian Margo Carter and her Nepali husband Sean who had worked with Dr Codrington the previous year. Ms Carter runs the Gorged Leaping Tiger Café in Qiaotou, about two hours' drive from Lijiang, and was to provide accommodation, arrange transport, source DIY supplies, prepare food and liaise with the village over the painting.

And that is where the problems started.

When the group arrived in Qiaotou earlier this month, they found Ms Carter and her husband had shut up shop and disappeared. There had been an accident in or near the cafe and the victim had to be taken to hospital in Lijiang. All attempts to contact the couple had failed, which meant no accommodation, transport, food, paint, tools or village liaison.

That afternoon had been a mad scramble to rearrange the tight budget to cover hotel and food bills, buy paint and other supplies and, most difficult of all, find drivers at short notice who were prepared to go anywhere near, let alone into, the lepers' village.

Three taxi van drivers agreed to do the job, except that they hadn't been told where they were going.

So the students' first job after breakfast on Wednesday was to explain they were headed for a lepers' village. Two of the drivers wanted to pull out but were persuaded to make the trip by a combination of



VILLAGE PEOPLE: A group of 17 students from Li Po Chun United World College and their principal visit Ma Chan lepers' village as part of their China week activities. Photos: Steve Cray

extra cash and an agreement they could drop the group 100 metres from the village.

Two hours later, the students arrived – to some disconcerting news.

Although the villagers had been told the group was arriving, they weren't sure when and said their pressing need was for roof repairs and not a cosmetic paint job. And to make matters worse, the year-long plan for a teacher was about to collapse. The children had been rescued by Project Grace in Kunming and the Catholic charity Caritas in Macau and sent off to private boarding schools in Kunming and Lufeng. There had been a communication breakdown.

Nothing immediate could be done about the roof but the villagers were eventually persuaded that they did need their walls painted after all.

The students soon found that it

was a lot harder than they bargained for though, with layers of soot on the walls accumulated over years from wood burning stoves without ventilation. It took hours of scraping to get the black dust off only to discover that the residue reacted with the paint, turning it pink. In addition, there were no face masks and the students found themselves having to brave plumes of soot and dust. It soon became clear that this was a two-day job and a planned hike through the beautiful scenery of Leaping Tiger Gorge would have to be delayed.

In addition, the group discovered that the toilet block built the previous year had been plucked into a spring that worked only in the rainy season, leaving it high and dry the rest of the year.

It was at this point, though, that things started to pick up. Once the

## SLIDESHOW

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villagers saw their homes brightening up they began to show their appreciation and were even mucking in by the end of the day.

It was a tired group of students who made it down the mountain that night for a debrief over dinner.

Peter Akkies, 17, from the Netherlands, was upbeat about the fact

that improvisation had saved the day but had found the DIY challenging. "The painting was pretty tough at first because we had to mix all the paint which proved to be problematic, it was either too liquid or not liquid enough," he said.

Diego Terrero, 18, from Venezuela, was troubled by some of the crippling effects of leprosy. Even though the villagers had been cured, they were left with permanent injuries. "I saw an old lady without a leg and found that quite shocking," he said.

Angad Pheheja, 16, from India, was less than impressed with hygiene in the village.

"I saw buckets of food that looked quite stale and there was meat that looked like it was there for decades," he said.

Hongkongers Brian Lo Ka-chung and Felix Lau Ka-hei, both 17, were impressed that the taxi drivers had

## SUFFERING IN CONFINEMENT

● Ma Chan was built in 1959 to accommodate leprosy patients in line with government policy at the time that all those suffering from the disease should be confined. Once there all except the village chief were forbidden from leaving the village.

● Chief Xun Nuo, 34, said there were originally about 200 people in Ma Chan but there were now 60 from six ethnic groups. Some left after gaining discharge certificates, others had died. The remaining villagers were trapped by poverty and the threat of ostracism.

● There were nine families in the village with 10 children, eight of whom had been sent to private boarding schools in Kunming and Lufeng.

● The local government provided painkillers and 300 to 400 catty of rice to each villager every year. There were also occasional donations of tea, eggs and meat. Villagers grew root crops in summer and ate dried food in winter and chicken and pork 10 times a year. Their staple diet was eggs, vegetables and rice.

● Since 2000 it had been government policy for people with leprosy to be treated in their own villages which meant Ma Chan will not be receiving any more patients, Mr Xun said. The last person to join was 26-year-old Ding Ju, who contracted the disease six years ago.

Steve Cray

fixing up walked into the room and her face lit up. She got a big smile on her face and just put her thumb up in the air and started saying *hao, hao* [good, good] and all of us got so excited and our spirits totally turned around."

Chris Sykes was philosophical that the plan for a teacher had come to nothing. "In a sense it is disappointing that this project we've been working on isn't really one that's needed or a necessity. But in another way, it should be something that we're happy about, because what we were trying to do has already been accomplished and well beyond anything we could have ever imagined. The children have been sent to a private school in Kunming which is way better than a teacher being sent to the village," he said.

But it was Dr Codrington who summed up the real lesson of the day. "We've all learned a lot of useful lessons about improvisation and about the need to adapt and rise to the challenges," he said. "I really hope that one of the lessons you learn from this China week, that you carry through the rest of your lives, is the skill of being able to adapt and improvise."

And the real achievement had nothing to do with DIY, but rather with changing attitudes.

"Lepers in China are the most outcast group in society and I think what we're doing in a broader educational sense is to overcome the stereotypes that people have," he said. "They've all been cured and all have exit certificates. They could leave if they wanted to. So we asked them the obvious question: Why don't you want them to leave? It was partly because of poverty but the big thing was the prejudice."

"Because of their physical disfigurement they know they'll be outcasts in society and that even includes their own families. So that's the real thing that traps them there – the ignorance of people."



HELPING HANDS: Leprosy sufferers are left with clearly visible disfigurements; the students from Li Po Chun United World College paint the insides of Ma Chan houses with the help of villagers.



## Q&A

**At parents' evening I was told by the class teacher that my Primary Four son is often disruptive and badly behaved in class. We have been told this in previous years but it seems to be getting worse. I have tried talking to him but he just dismisses it. He is also rude to our helper even though we have tried to instil good manners. We both work late and I am very worried. Please help.**

Teacher Julie McGuire responds:

There are many possible reasons why a child behaves badly in school. You need to try to find out the reason for your son's behaviour so you are able to help him. Perhaps he is finding the schoolwork difficult and therefore behaving inappropriately to mask his feelings of inadequacy. Or he may be finding the work lacks challenge and is boring.

Perhaps he is having social problems and is feeling lonely or excluded. Bad behaviour is often linked to attention seeking or low self-esteem. This could be a cry for help, a way of him showing you that he is unhappy with you working late.

If the above reasons are not valid there is a possibility that he has Attention Deficit Disorder. Children with this disorder can find it difficult to function within the boundaries of a controlled classroom situation. In this case his behaviour would have to be properly assessed by a child psychologist.

Diet can also be a factor for some children in levels of concentration and ability to focus. Try to reduce your son's intake of food colourings, additives and sugar.

Whatever the reason for your son's behaviour you do need to act immediately in order to stop the downward spiral of negative feedback he will be getting from adults and possibly his peers. Begin by talking to him again to see if you can gain

some clues about why he is behaving badly. Make sure he realises that you want to help him rather than reprimand him. It's important that as parents, you talk to him together and show a united front.

Set up a meeting with your son's teacher, preferably with your son in attendance to show him that everybody is serious about helping him. Set targets together for agreed behaviour in the classroom and playground. This can be especially useful for giving positive praise and small rewards when your son has had a good day or achieved one of his targets.

It is always difficult when parents work long hours but find time in your busy schedule to give your son support with homework and to read his books with him. At weekends try to spend time as a family and do things you know that he likes to do. It is also important for sons to spend quality time with their dad who can be a very positive role model.

When you are unable to be at home, arrange play dates for your son and enrol him in activities that he enjoys so he is not bored. Give him opportunities to play outside or be involved in sports. Boys particularly benefit from physical activity to let off steam and this could help his concentration in school. Use consistent behaviour strategies at home so your son knows the boundaries.

Try to focus on positive behaviour when possible but it is important that there is an immediate consequence to negative behaviour. Withdrawal of privileges such as television or computer time can be an effective punishment. It is vital that your helper knows what is acceptable and unacceptable and your son knows that you support her. He will have the best chance of improving his behaviour if the adults work as a team. Create opportunities to give him positive praise and above all give him time and attention when you can.

Questions can be sent to the education section of the South China Morning Post at 16/F Somerset House, Taikoo Place, 979 King's Road, Quarry Bay. E-mail: [education@scmp.com](mailto:education@scmp.com) or fax on 2811 1048