

Yangshan County (阳山县), 14-18 September 2011

This was the first time I participated in a charitable activity in mainland China as a volunteer helper – it was an experience that was truly unforgettable. We visited many towns and villages in Yangshan County (七拱、太平、岭背、阳山市、黎埠、青莲) where we performed our selection procedure – travelling to these places opened my eyes to the stark differences in the development and living conditions of sprawling modern metropolises, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, and the countryside. I was overwhelmed by the poverty in the rural villages we visited during our expedition to select suitable candidates for cataract operations in October, but was moved by the local people's resilience and stoicism in spite of their tough living conditions. One man, for example, wore a shirt riddled with holes and had a pair of glasses with the rim on one side completely missing, yet he never stopped smiling, treating every member of our team with warmth and kindness. There was another person who was a mother in her forties. Despite having very poor eyesight (such that she could barely see anything in front of her) and having cataracts in both eyes, she nonetheless handled all the household work by herself, not only looking after the children, but also doing the cooking and cleaning. The vast majority of people whom we helped were genuinely grateful for what we were doing.



Preliminary eye examinations in Libu (黎埠)



Medical team group photo

I was impressed by the professionalism of everyone in the volunteer team and the medical team from Xinhui People's Hospital. Because I was the youngest, they were always very friendly towards me (constantly treating me to sweets and snacks!) and, given their experience, were able to help me along and give me good advice all the time. They also proved to be incredibly efficient and able in dealing with difficult situations that, from time to time, arose, such as when patients would refuse to leave or co-operate or when there was far too much overcrowding in the clinic.



Local children in the library

Whilst the main objective of the trip was to conduct eye tests, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit some of Green Action's other charitable projects in Dongshan (东山), where we were based. Our group was shown the replanting work done by the organisation in the surrounding countryside around the village. Looking at pictures of what the place looked like just ten years ago made me appreciate the amazing work done by the charity (and which it continues to do), inspired by its founder, Dr Chia, in order to alleviate the serious issue of water

shortages. Green Action's work to improve the wellbeing of local residents also included involvement with local children, providing extra-curricular activities during the weekend and offering financial support to those who would otherwise not have the means to access primary and secondary education. We were introduced to some children whose homes were a considerable distance from Dongshan and for whom receiving primary school education in Dongshan would not have been possible without the help of Green Action, which has provided funding and lodging for them next to the school. We were also shown the library and adjoining classrooms where children participated in activities which were fun and, at the same time, of educational value, such as learning to read and write in Chinese and English and taking part in music classes. What was particularly striking for me were all the smiles the children had on their faces – not only was this a testament to the positive impact of Green Action's work, led by Mrs Chia, but also it revealed their genuine gratefulness and happiness. It was incredibly encouraging to meet two teenagers in Qingyuan (清远) who were excelling in the final stages of their secondary school education – this was again evidence of the direct change which Green Action has effected in the lives of many people.

I left Dongshan deeply touched by the friendliness and determination of the local people, as well as with a strong realisation of how fortunate I was. I was moved having witnessed first-hand the real difference to people's lives brought about by a strong commitment to our shared humanity, as demonstrated by Dr and Mrs Chia's work through Green Action, but, in addition, I have come away learning to treasure the basic necessities which I would otherwise have taken for granted, such as education, clean water, healthcare and food.



Replanting project

Dexter Leung