

Qili Nima, four, has never suffered the disease but is growing up in isolation nonetheless. Below: a Ma Chan man. All members of the community have permission to return to their hometowns but few will risk rejection by society.



For the visiting school pupils, the first hurdle they faced was finding drivers prepared to make the 90-minute trip up the mountain then drop them near the village. Now, they must scrape years' worth of soot from villagers' walls before they can start painting. But the DIY is only a small part of why the students are here. Their major aim is to break down barriers and prove there's no reason to fear the former lepers.

Speaking at the end of a strenuous day, Codrington says: "Lepers in China really are the most outcast group in society and I think what we're doing in a broader educational sense is to overcome those stereotypes that people have."

"The last time a resident came to the village was about six years ago. No one has ever caught leprosy within the village. They've all been cured and they all have their exit certificates. They could leave if they wanted to. So we asked them the obvious question: 'Why don't you want to leave?' It was partly because of poverty – they've had no way of earning an income and therefore have no marketable skills in the outside world – but the big thing was the prejudice.

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

"I hope that we've been able to do something to overcome that. But obviously there is a long way to go because these people have virtually made themselves prisoners in the village because of the discrimination and stereotypes that people outside have.

"I think that's incredibly sad." ■



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- Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is an infectious ailment caused by *mycobacterium leprae*, which invades human nerves and causes a range of skin problems, including loss of feeling, paralysis of the hands and feet and disfigurement of the joints.
- It is easily diagnosed and treatable with multidrug antibiotic therapy (MDT).
- The World Health Organisation has made MDT freely available to all patients worldwide since 1995.
- At the start of this year, there were 219,826 existing cases, according to data from 115 countries. There were 296,499 new cases last year, down 27 per cent on 2004. The average annual decrease in the past four years has been about 20 per cent.
- Most countries have eliminated the disease, but it is still prevalent in some areas of Angola, Brazil, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nepal and Tanzania.
- Improving detection and fighting social taboos is important. In the past, patients were considered to be "unclean" or "cursed". This led them to hide their condition and avoid seeking treatment.

Sources: WHO and Wikipedia