

Tong-Mei (not her real name) is a 17-year-old member of the Miao minority, born in Diqi village, Fengxiang county, Guizhou province. This interview was conducted in June 1999, when she was studying in Form Two of secondary school.



Hong Kong Zigen Fund

Voice

"My family is living under difficult conditions, and our situation is tough compared to others. I started school aged seven, and my parents stopped sending me to school after Primary Five. My mum fell and hurt her arm, and couldn't work. She said if I went to school, there would be nobody to do the farm work. Later, my teacher came to my home and persuaded them to send me back to school.

"We have three acres of land. We keep two piglets, and apart from farming, we have no other income. Sometimes we don't have enough food, and we borrow it. When we've no money to pay the school fees, we borrow that too. My dad's getting old, and I have to take care of everything when I'm home. I always have tears in my eyes at bedtime.

"My parents are illiterate and have no idea of the benefits of schooling. My mum supports my studies, but my dad thinks I should go back and help them.

"When I go home at weekends, I often see my parents quarrelling, and my mind is not at peace even after returning to school. My results are getting worse. I don't want to go home on weekends, because what I experience there is too upsetting. Yet if I'm not at home, there's simply too much farm work for them to finish.

"At home, they know nothing about my reading or other work. Take my dad - he has never studied and his thinking is quite limited. When I want to read, he's unhappy, and he gets very tired after having worked all day, and loses his temper.

"After graduation, I would like to attend medical school, so that I can heal and serve the community on my return. We at Fengxiang are very poor, and if I'm capable enough I can improve the place and build a better homeland.

Background to the interview

Ku Hok-bun, Hong Kong Zigen Fund

Hong Kong Zigen Fund has been working in Guizhou for nearly 10 years. Our work includes sponsoring studies, building schools, organising hygiene training workshops and developing small-scale infrastructure. We hope that by sponsoring girls to attend school we can address the problem of gender inequality, and through education we can reduce rural poverty in China.

However, during this time we have become increasingly aware of the limitation of Zigen's work in Guizhou. By talking to students, parents, teachers, and villagers we discovered that the study sponsorship schemes had not achieved the original objectives:

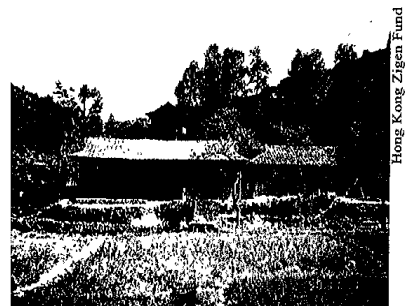
First, even if the sponsored girls could complete their junior secondary school, they still had limited prospects. When they returned home upon graduation, they repeated the path of their mothers - waiting for marriage, and after marriage it would be maternity - there was no choice for their own path.

Second, although the girls received formal education, they could scarcely apply what they had learnt in school to improve their livelihood. On the contrary, they would like to seek employment away from the rural area because of their education, and they ended up as exploited workers, which was defeating our intentions.

In addition, there were numerous difficulties working with local officials. For instance, if our projects could not match the aims and objectives of the local government, they would not support us. Besides, although we could reflect the problems and opinions of the local community to the government departments, their verbal promises often evaporated after we left the area.

We started to ask: What are the real needs of the local community? How can a "volunteer" from a "modern city" understand our friends in rural areas, their daily lives, values and difficulties? How can we help our friends in rural areas to utilise our resources to solve their problems?

Therefore, Zigen started the oral testimonies in June 1999. We hoped that, through establishing more direct contacts and sharing, we could gain a greater understanding of the lives and needs of our friends in Fenxiang.



Women's development centre in
Fenxiang, China