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Working in the humanitarian field is a dream that has driven me to come this far in medical school. Over the past three years, my interest in public health fieldwork grew as I volunteered in local and overseas projects, but I see a need in China and I believe serving in my own country would be the ultimate way to achieve sustainability and continuity. This pioneering trip to Tengcun and Daping in Guangxi with Project Mingde offered invaluable insight into how this can be done.

The three-day trip was not long, but I am glad to be with a great team which made the best out of the trip to assess and evaluate the two villages. It was only possible with good preparation thus we conducted pre-trip assessment in order to better utilize our time on-site. Not surprisingly, the internet offered limited information of the rural areas, so instead we learned about the villages over video conferencing with Mr Mong Ke Lu, the chairman of a local NGO who has worked for Project Mingde almost since day one. I was impressed by the well-established relationship that Project Mingde has with the community in Guangxi. It is crucial for effective and efficient operations of Project Mingde's work, from planning to execution and maintenance, for it is the locals who know the best about their needs, who are motivated to do something for their home, who make humanitarian and developmental work sustainable.

With a general picture of the villages in mind, I was excited to meet in-person the villagers and see their neighborhood. As we collected information for the project, I learned not only about their needs, but also their culture and values. In an interview with a university student who just came home from the city during the Golden Week, he reminded me that the "problems" we as urban dwellers see might be the norm for the villagers. Why do we think their hygiene condition is below par? The WHO guidelines? Do we intervene if their water samples fail our laboratory tests but villagers do not have associated diarrhea? These questions demonstrate the importance of putting oneself in others' shoes because people are versatile and different, and we have to appreciate and celebrate the differences between their rural life and our urban life.

One of the main objectives of the trip was to pave the way for the long-term development of the healthcare team, and I particularly enjoyed it as we put our heads together to plan. We listened to the opinions and concerns from the government and the people, and delivered our ideas to them for feedback. The brainstorming process was also a great exercise to incorporate and find a balance between the interests of the stakeholders – the needs of the locals, the development of Project Mingde, the learning experience of students – to reach a sustainable model.

Having volunteered in similar public health projects in other countries, I am delighted to see the merits of working in my motherland. We share similar culture, values and language with the villagers. Even when it was difficult for the ethnic minorities to express themselves in Mandarin, they made the effort to try which was encouraging and heartwarming. Their generous hospitality also made me feel at home when we interviewed them.

Being a relatively new team in Project Mingde, we are inexperienced but fortunate to have the guidance from our engineering counterpart. Our work would not have been possible without Prof Them leading us in establishing the foundation work for the healthcare team and the professional advice from Dr Lau. I relish working in this multidisciplinary environment and the experience was a reassurance for me to pursue humanitarian work in the future.