



## Learning the need to learn : a doctor couple's educational journey in rural China

*Interview of Dr Ip-Shing Tsui and Dr Wendy Kit-Che Mak with student reporters*

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In a society where people are driven increasingly by wants rather than needs, we refreshingly visited a doctor couple who live their lives differently. Dr Ip-Shing Tsui's very first request upon greeting us was, "Try not to make the article about us – make it about the project". This was Dr Tsui and his wife, Dr Kit-Che Mak's first-ever interview, having previously turned down all requests. Unlike other charities, it was somewhat difficult to find a donation link at Jianxing Charitable Foundation (健行杏社)'s website ([jianxing.org](http://jianxing.org)). While other charities possess their own offices and backroom staff, Jianxing prides itself in its smaller compact structure. When asked about the modesty surrounding their project, Dr Mak asked rhetorically, with a smile, "Why should we ask for more than what we *need*?" Dr Tsui chimed in, "Whatever we do, we do what is needed of us".

Dr Tsui, an endocrinologist, and Dr Mak, a gynaecologist, met during their years in medical school. After graduating from the University of Hong Kong in 1978, both moved on to high posts in their respective fields. Not content with their lives in private practice, in 1999 they opted to involve themselves in improving education in rural

China. Dr Mak said, "We felt at the time that education in rural China is a field that could be improved. As it was still a field that was unexplored by many charities, we decided to take on the task ourselves". When asked about why they had decided not to utilise their medical expertise instead, Dr Tsui said, "Not every child needs a medical doctor, but every child *needs* an education".

The evolution of Jianxing throughout the years had not been planned from the very start. As Dr Tsui puts it elegantly, "We do not preset goals well in advance, but we reach our destinations in the end". The story of their journey is built on the recognition of what is needed and the subsequent discovery of what they can give. With that vision in mind, they set out to tackle the different obstacles to education in rural China—sometimes one school at a time, and in others, one student at a time.

Since 1999, Jianxing have helped build or renovate more than 60 schools in Guizhou, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan. Although building schools might seem glamorous enough on the charity's resumé, the couple realised that the students needed books to help supplement their

education. Eyeing the need, Jianxing started setting up libraries for the students all over Guizhou province.

On one particular visit to one of their schools, the couple dropped in to see the school library. The books that they felt were the key to the children’s future were locked behind a cage, ironically out of the children’s reach. Not satisfied with the status quo, they realised that simply donating books was not enough – they had to find a way to make schools better utilise these resources. In 2005, Jianxing commissioned local university students to find more effective methods of promoting reading in rural schools. Since then, they have been working hand in hand with the Gansu provincial government to promote a reading culture among the students.

Always having an eye on innovative changes, Jianxing also launched two other major projects—student subsistence schemes and English phonics teaching. The student subsistence schemes were launched when the couple discovered that there were still secondary or university students from rural areas who were struggling to meet living needs. They were not necessarily those going on to top state universities, but invariably they were in dire need of financial aid. The English phonics teaching programme was started when the couple thought that rural schools were using outdated methods to teach English and the students were not adequately prepared compared to their urban counterparts. They sat together with teachers and language experts and developed a set of multimedia teaching materials to boost and cultivate students’ ability and confidence in spoken English. This created a benign environment for more and more speaking and learning.

The vision and work of Dr Tsui and Dr Mak were not based on change for changes’ sake. Rather it was an educational journey for them where they discovered student needs and their ability to meet them. The way Dr Tsui puts it, “It’s a two way educational process—those that want help have to realise their needs first; only then can we ask ourselves whether we can help”.



(Facing page)  
Locked knowledge

(Top)  
Dr Tsui (third from right) and Dr Mak (second from right) visiting the family of one of their sponsored students

(Middle)  
Original site of ZhaoYuan Primary School, Guizhou

(Bottom)  
ZhaoYuan Primary School, Guizhou