

## Document 16.4: Description of a visit to a rural school in the 1980s by Ma Xiaodong

*As a result of the reforms that Deng Xiaoping put in place, rural per capita income doubled in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, conditions in China's villages were dramatically different than conditions in cities.*

As a reporter I got to travel to many parts of China. My experiences as a *zhiqing* both in Yunnan and Heilongjiang had familiarized me with rural poverty.<sup>1</sup> My job as a reporter further drew my attention to problems in this area. Once I visited a country school in a poor region in northern Shaanxi Province and the visit has left an indelible impression on me.

This was the only middle school in the region, and the majority of the students were children of local peasants. When I arrived in the school, classes were already over for the day and the kids had gone to a nearby town to play. I had passed through the town earlier in the day and had found nothing interesting there: all it had was a few shops, a post office, and some restaurants. But to the kids it was the most exciting place. While waiting for their return I peeped into their dorms. I saw mugs lining the windowsill, but I didn't find any toothbrushes. I asked why and was told that the students didn't brush their teeth because the region never had a sufficient supply of water. I then went to their canteen, where each student had a storage box for grains and salted vegetables. Once every two weeks they would go home to fetch a fresh supply of food.

It was already quite dark when the kids came back from town. I saw them running toward the school, laughing and talking loudly. Almost all of them were boys. Looking at their faces, I suddenly imagined that my son Niuniu was among them. Then I asked myself, how would you feel if your son ate salted vegetables every day and didn't get to brush his teeth? This thought made my heart ache and I didn't want to think about it any further.

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhiqing* were "sent-down" youth; during the Cultural Revolution, teenagers were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants

The kids quieted down when they saw me. They were shy in front of a stranger and they looked at me with curiosity. To make conversation, I asked to see where they slept and they took me into their dorm, which was a deep cave room. It was already dark and there was no electricity. Under the dim light I saw a long *kang* from one end of the cave to the other.<sup>2</sup> It must have been very crowded at night for the many boys. In the dorm, each boy kept a small box for cooked food. I asked them what food their parents had prepared for them. By now it was completely dark and I was unable to see anything. The kids competed with each other to invite me to feel their food. So I used my hand to touch. I didn't think I touched anything better than bread made of corn and millet.

Source: Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong. *Growing Up in The People's Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China's Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 145–146.

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<sup>2</sup> A *kang* is a brick platform bed.