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## **Urban China and Rural China: A comparison through living with indigenous people.**

*By Peter McCrory*

After an amazing year in China, I have met and spent time with many and diverse people, from Tibetan monks to Mongolian horse herders, however in this essay I would like to focus on my time spent with two families, one wealthy and urban and the other poorer and rural.

After about a month in China, I and my fellow Project Trust volunteers gathered in Lanzhou for a week long language immersion course at a local high school. During our stay, we were to live with a student and their family. I was partnered with Kenny, who was sixteen. The high school was one of the most prestigious in western China, so most of the students came from wealthy families. Kenny's father owned a business selling electronic goods while his mother ran a small tobacconist and wine selling business. He lived in a comfortable apartment and had all the latest technology at his disposal.

The other family I want to talk about are the family of Myles, an English teacher at our school and our closest friend in the town we taught in. Myles' family were from a small village about an hours drive from Ningxian, the town we lived and taught in. They were much poorer, Myles, a teacher, was the highest earner and he earned only £240 per month. His relatives either worked on the family's small farm or had left as migrant workers to work as labourers. We were invited by Myles to spend a long weekend with him and his family at their farm.

The first topic I would like to discuss is education. As I mentioned previously, Kenny attended one of the most prestigious schools in western China. The standard of equipment and educational facilities were equal to any western school, and better than some. He also benefitted from a number of foreign teachers and attended extra curricular activities such as the Model UN. He intends to go to America to study at university. His workload was extraordinary, he spent most nights studying from the time he arrived home until he went to bed, only stopping to eat.

Myles however, attended the school he and I taught at. Like most of the school's current students, Myles boarded at the school, only seeing his family at weekends or holidays. Our school was considered the best in the county, but nonetheless paled in comparison to Kenny's in terms of both facilities and standard of education. The school had cramped classrooms, particularly in its older building where the sixty students in each class barely had room to breath, never mind study. Extra-curricular activities were non-existent, bar the English Corner myself and my fellow volunteer held on a Sunday afternoon. However standards were improving, Myles told us how he would bring a supply of bread from his house at the start of each week and eat nothing but bread and water, but now the school has built a canteen that provides pupils with low cost food, and the schools newer building had much more spacious classrooms. Myles did very well in his university entrance exams and intended to study at a prestigious Shanghai university, but was unable to pay the tuition fees so had to go to a cheaper alternative in Lanzhou. Although Myles' family did not receive as good an education, I learned that they were still highly intelligent. I had had a conversation with Myles' brother, who dropped out of school at 15, about Shakespeare, and he'd even read many Russian novels such as *War and Peace*.

One strong similarity between the two schools was the extremely large workload placed on the pupils. My schools wake up call was at quarter to six in the morning and school finished at 5 at night followed by mandatory study sessions after dinner until nine pm. Students in Senior 3, the year they take their university entrance exams, were given one afternoon off a week. The huge competition for university places in China means students work themselves to the quick in order to get a high enough grade. Also the Chinese education system encourages rote learning over more creative thinking or working things out for yourself, again increasing workload as students attempt to learn answers to questions without necessarily understanding them fully.

The next topic is leisure and how free time is spent. Kenny and his family were much more 'western' in their spending of free time; evenings were often spent watching TV and talking with each other, and Kenny had a hand-held games console which he enjoyed playing. However, free time was at a premium as both parents spent long hours at work, particularly his father, while Kenny had mountains of school work to concentrate on.

Myles' family however had a much less technology-centric view of free time. While they had a television, it was less important and mainly only used for kids shows to amuse Myles' nephew and niece. It did, however come in handy for myself and project partner to watch the UEFA Champions League final! Myles' and his family spent many hours playing cards and mah-jong and loved teaching us how to play, and on the final day we went on a fishing trip to the local lake. Myles' family also had much more free time at times when there was no harvest, but during harvest would be working from dawn till dusk in the fields, meaning their free time was spread less evenly.

One comparison I can draw is that both families loved to spend their free time singing! Both Myles and Kenny enjoyed going to KTVs (Karaoke bars) and singing the latest Chinese hits, as well as old favourites. Chinese people love karaoke and there is a KTV on every corner. Our small town of 10,000 people had no less than seven! Of course I would always join in the fun and stumble through some western songs, and occasionally even try a Chinese song, always with little success.

The final topic I wish to cover is the concept of family and what it meant to each of the people I stayed with. Both families were remarkably similar in this, as both had strong connections with their extended family and strong familial bonds. I met Kenny's uncle several times and went for hotpot with his extended family, who seemed very close. Myles' extended family lived all in the same complex of houses and spent all day together while I was staying with them. This is a major part of Chinese society, I think aptly shown by the fact that Chinese people do not refer to their uncle's children as 'cousins', merely as brothers or sisters. Both families were also reasonably unaffected by China's one child policy, although for different reasons. Kenny was his parent's second child, they could do this as they could afford to pay the fine associated. Myles' family certainly could not have afforded the fine, but the policy is relaxed in more rural areas as more hands are needed to help with the harvest.

In conclusion, both families were living in entirely different circumstances. I felt this most keenly in the dichotomy of opportunities open to them. Kenny would in all likelihood study in America and gain a well paid job, while Myles was left to be an underpaid teacher despite his obvious potential. However, both families had strong bonds with extended family placed a very high importance on family. I loved spending time with both families and I felt it really opened my eyes to reality of daily life in a Chinese family.



Henry, Mr. Li, Myles  
Mrs.Wang Mrs. Shang Myself