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Leon on duty, children and HIV/AIDS

CHINA: You may recognise Leon Lai as Peking opera master "Mei Lan-fang" in the film 'Forever Enthralled' (2008), and the kung-fu beggar in 'Bodyguards and Assassins' (2009). But to the children who live in the shadow of HIV/AIDS in south-western China, the name Leon conjures up not a movie star but hope and love.

Leon, a popular Hong Kong actor-singer, as well as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), has just concluded a three-day trip to the remote Longling County in Yunnan Province, near the China-Myanmar border.

Leon, who has helped launch UNICEF's Local Action for Rural Children (Larc) programme in 2006, was in Longling to see how the children there have been benefiting from the project.

Longling is among the 20 impoverished areas around China that the Larc project aims to help to better health, education, water, sanitation and HIV/AIDS services.

Poverty aside, the spread of HIV/AIDS has become remarkably fast in Longling in recent years, mainly through unprotected sex and mother-to-child infection, according to UNICEF.

During his stay in Longling, Leon visited families with infected members, listened to their problems, and played with infected children. He also joined teenagers in activities promoting HIV/AIDS prevention.

"Awareness is what is needed", Leon said on Jan 29 at a press conference in Beijing, where he shared his first-hand experiences about the trip. He recalled watching a group of teenagers rehearse a stage play about HIV/AIDS prevention.

"When you talk about HIV/AIDS, almost inevitably, you touch upon the topic of sex. But the performers were 17 years old; they talked about safe sex in a serious manner. I think their teachers educated them right."

"Leon's visit is hoped to convey the message

that HIV/AIDS is not somebody else's problem; it is increasingly everyone's problem", said David McLoughlin, officer-in-charge and deputy representative of UNICEF China, "Let me express my gratitude to Leon Lai for his long-standing support for children in China".

Leon, with an enduring career spanning film, TV and music, is an advocate for charities as much as he is an entertainer. He was appointed UNICEF international goodwill ambassador in 1994, and has been actively involved

in raising awareness and funding for children in need.

Apart China, Leon's charitable footsteps can be traced in Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Brazil. UNICEF, which works to bring children worldwide with health care and education, began its co-operation with the Chinese government in 1979.

Besides Leon, the organisation has a number of Chinese celebrities on its roster, including Jackie Chan, Lang Lang and Gigi Leung. - asianfanatics.net

