

Education Brings Hope to Guizhou, China

Written by Qiu Ru-lian

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Teachers in the mountains of Guizhou Province, China, care for their students as if they were their own children. They teach, guide, and sometimes even feed their students. They kindle dreams in them, and they serve as springboards to catapult them to higher goals.

Since 1997, their noble efforts have been bolstered by Tzu Chi volunteers. The volunteers have been helping needy students or families there—via scholarships, aid with living expenses, or family relocation out of the mountains—to dare to dream and work hard to break out of the ominous cycle of poverty that binds generation after generation in the region.

In southern China, Guizhou Province sits roughly 1,100 meters (3,600 feet) above sea level. It is more than 90 percent mountainous, and its aridity makes farming extremely unproductive. Consequently, of the 39 million inhabitants in the province, at least five million (13 percent) live in poverty so deep that destitute children don't even dare to dream. Feng Guolin (冯古林), a middle school student in Luodian wrote, "I was born and raised in the mountains, but I don't ever let out a yell of joy. In the face of poverty, I don't dare to dream because dreams only intensify the pain of my longing."

Despite repeat efforts by the government to carve arable terraces out of unforgiving hills and improve the productivity of the land in Guizhou, it is extremely hard to support a family by farming in the highland. Many younger people go out of town to work, leaving their children behind with their parents—grandparents raising grandchildren. Some children get to see their parents only once a year.

That a child is in school one semester does not mean that he or she will be in the next. A student may be forced to drop out of school in order to work. Some children even become the primary income earners in their families. Immediate monetary infusion from child labor is hard for families to resist; however, the cost of this practice—sacrificing an education—is too dear for anyone to bear.

Many drop-outs grow up illiterate and without marketable skills, and it is difficult for them to really help their families climb out of poverty. As a local slogan goes, "An illiterate who goes out of town to work will return home penniless." Thus, the circle of poverty in Guizhou is about to suck in yet another generation of victims, unless timely help is available to free the youth from this vicious circle. Some local education workers have been working hard to offer that intervention. Tzu Chi's participation may make their work a little easier and more effective.



Mountains—a hindrance

About 200 families live in or around a mountain basin in Zhuliu Village, Nangao Township. In the old days, the rough terrain here was a gift for tribal people defending themselves from the attacks of other tribes, but today it is a nightmare for farmers and commuting students alike. It

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also presents a monumental challenge for educators trying to impart knowledge and disseminate information.

In the mountainous areas of Guizhou, elementary schools are few and far between; only larger towns have them. Schoolchildren living deep in the mountains set out before dawn to walk to school, carrying their books and supplies in bamboo baskets slung on their backs. Local folks like to say, "It takes but an instant to see your destination, but a good half day of walking to reach it." It takes too much time for the students to get to school and back. After school lets out, they carry candles to light their way home, where they keep warm by the stove and do their homework by candlelight.

Although it's quite a hassle walking that long distance to attend school, the children tough it out, urged on by their parents' emphasis on the significance of schooling. After all, they are fortunate enough to remain in school; many of their friends have had to drop out to help tend their family farms or livestock.

Wen Guangcheng (文光成) used to be such a willing and determined child who walked, rain or shine, those mountain roads to and from school in the darkness of early mornings and late evenings. He still remembers the days when he walked the muddy roads in the rain and when he had to skip meals and starve in order to save for school supplies. He graduated and became the first Zhuliu student to ever earn admission to a teachers college in nearby Duyun.

The first school

Despite its attractive scenery, the remoteness of the Zhuliu Village had dissuaded teachers from going there to teach. Wen Guangcheng decided to return to the village to teach after he graduated from the teachers college. After all, Zhuliu was his home and he wanted to do his best to help the children there. He knew what they were up against and how precious it was to see a child, any child, in school, and how important it was for teachers to keep the children from dropping out.

Actually, when he went back, there was no school in the village. He got permission to use a small room in an abandoned barn that the village owned. He made that small room into a classroom, a school. He started recruiting students and teaching those who came.

He enrolled students in grades one through three only. Three grades with some 20 students and one teacher all crammed in that small room. Students of the same grade would sit in the same row. Guangcheng would teach one row at a time, and those in the other rows would do the exercises in their books.

The school only had classes every other week so that Guangcheng could get in-service training at larger schools. Fresh out of school, Guangcheng had much to learn. "I had never been a teacher, so I had to learn as I taught." He smiled as he described this learn-as-you-go privilege bestowed only on teachers at remote schools.

He was 20 years old when he started teaching there in 1952.

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He made a point of knowing his students and their family situations, like what the parents did for a living or which family just had a newborn. When a school-age child didn't register for school, he would explain to the parents the importance of schooling. When a family couldn't afford to send their child to school, he helped make the payments.

He once noticed that the enrollment of girls was disproportionately low. Though there have been a multitude of reasons for the gender disparity, such as the long-standing Chinese tradition that favored males over females, Guangcheng suspected that family finances also played a part. Therefore, he allowed females to attend the school free of charge, and he urged parents to send their daughters to school. His campaign was right on the mark and resulted in the enrollment of many more girls. The expanded enrollment added much to his workload, but he didn't mind. The most important thing to him was to help more children go to school.



Other obstacles

In addition to gender bias and pervasive poverty, people running a school at a place like Zhuliu face yet another challenge. As if it weren't hard enough to attract qualified teachers to Zhuliu, the few prospective interested teachers also had to know, of all things, the languages or dialects commonly used by the minority peoples in and around Zhuliu (primarily the Miao minority group, largely related to the Hmong people of Southeast Asia). Those languages were the mother tongues—and the only languages—of many local children when they first started school. This requisite for the teachers had disqualified almost all prospective teachers. For that reason, Guangcheng remained the sole teacher at Zhuliu for a long, long time—a quarter of a century!

Under his watch, the school enrollment slowly grew as children from Zhuliu and surrounding villages came for lessons. And still he remained the only teacher. The increased workload meant that his time was fully occupied by lesson preparation, teaching, correcting homework, and home visits to help resolve problems facing some students. He knew that he wouldn't be able to keep up with the rising enrollment and still do all his students justice. He was worried.

He thought of Wen Kairong (文凯荣), who had attended and graduated from the school not long after Guangcheng had started it. The school had only grades one to three then, so Kairong left the school after he had finished the third grade to help on his family farm. He often needed to take their family's cows out to graze. Therefore, he had much time to himself, time that he put to good use: He often borrowed books from Guangcheng to read while the cows were grazing. He also asked the teacher for help with questions that he found in the books. Even though Kairong never attended another school to further his formal education beyond the third grade, he did continue to learn on his own after he left school.

In 1976, his 24th year of teaching solo, Guangcheng invited Kairong to join him as a teacher trainee. This launched Kairong's teaching career. He worked as an assistant to his teacher and learned to teach and interact with students.

The school was transformed when Kairong came on board. With an additional teacher, the school started to add services: It added a kindergarten class, and each grade now had its own

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classroom in the same barn. They even added a teachers' office. It began to look more and more like a real school.

Loving principals

The teacher-student duo taught together for 15 years until 1991, when Guangcheng retired after 39 years and Kairong took over as principal. Kairong went to Guancheng's house almost every day after school to seek advice on matters that he had encountered during the day. The older principal was most generous in sharing with his protégé his wisdom, which helped shape how Kairong now works as principal.

Actually, the older Wen had had much influence on the younger Wen long before they began working together; that influence started when Kairong was a student at the school 30 some years before. Kairong said that he would always remember the old principal's kindness for allowing him to attend school even though he couldn't pay the tuition. The old principal had walked the long and sometimes treacherous mountain roads to call on the families of current or prospective students, and he had lived frugally and saved from his meager salary so he could help put needy students through school—exemplary acts that helped mold the values of the young Kairong.

Since Kairong took over as principal, he has been much like his mentor in his care and service for the community. Because there is no cafeteria in the school, there is a two-hour lunch break so students can go home to eat. But two hours isn't enough for students who live far away. Kairong invites them to his home. Though he can offer them only simple meals, the students can taste his love. The torch of a loving principal at Zhuliu Elementary School has been passed on.

Improved livelihood

Lei Zhihua (雷志华) was one of the students Kairong taught at Zhuliu Elementary School. After graduation, Lei didn't have enough money to continue his schooling, so he worked odd jobs in nearby Danzhai, the county seat. He had to work long, hard days, but he was making a mere five renminbi (75 U.S. cents) a day. His low wages for such hard labor only made him more determined to get an education. He studied hard and passed the entrance exam to a teachers college. After graduation, Lei returned to Zhuliu and joined his old teacher at his hometown elementary school. Kairong was most proud of Lei's accomplishment and his return.

Lei said that education had given him and his two brothers more job choices and better jobs. With better pay, the three brothers were able to build a new family house in February 2009. Education has helped improve life for the Leis, and so they pay particular attention to education for others. Lei said, "I want to teach the children well so they can fend for themselves when they go to the outside world."



The new school

Zhuliu Elementary School started in an old, deserted barn owned by the village, and over the

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decades it remained there in the same building, though gradually using more of the space in the barn. The school structure was extremely old, the interior was poorly lighted, and the porous wall let in a sub-freezing draft. Though the students and the teachers, who were hardy and accustomed to making do with what they had, did not complain, this barn was hardly conducive to learning.

Tzu Chi volunteers began helping the poor in Guizhou Province in 1997. They reached Zhuliu in 2006, saw the students and teachers working diligently in the dilapidated barn, and vowed to help. They raised funds and helped build a new school for Zhuliu. The new school was inaugurated in June 2008.

Guangcheng, the old principal, said, "I am truly moved by the completion of the new school. I am happy to have lived to see this historical event." Students and their families were also delighted to see the new school completed.

Zhuliu Elementary School is now complete with students from kindergarten through sixth grade. There are 52 students in kindergarten and grades one through three. The students in grades four through six are now temporarily using classrooms in another elementary school. A second building is being added to the Zhuliu school for more classrooms and, if school finances permit, a dormitory for children who live far from school. There are three teachers now: Kairong, Lei Zhihua, and Mr. Xiong, whom the government assigned from out of town.

Things are looking up as the new school gears up. A new generation of children are being given a chance to learn and connect with the outside world, and they are receiving the hope of breaking loose from the vicious cycle of poverty that plagued the generations before them.

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