

# REPORT: SHANDAN BAILIE SCHOOL

Marjorie King, Ph.D. Director

Ida Pruitt Memorial Fund

July 4-10, 2006

## July 4: The Road to Shandan

I traveled to Shandan, in Gansu province, with Mr. Liu Guozhong, former teacher at the Shandan Bailie School and currently the executive secretary of the International Committee to Promote the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives in Beijing. Our plane left Shanghai at 10:40 a.m. Three hours later, we arrived in Lanzhou, the capital. The school driver met us at the airport. We immediately started the 5 hour trip northward through the long, narrow province to the town of Shandan, arriving about 7:00 p.m. The road was mostly 2-lane, with very little traffic. We drove through barren terrain, past dry gullies and eroded hills, where even scrub brush struggles to survive. Only rarely did we see another vehicle on the road.

On the outskirts of Lanzhou little saplings planted on irrigated, terraced hills flanked the road. Occasionally, the desolate terrain gave way to irrigated wheat fields attended by caretakers living in adobe houses. Cement retaining walls kept the highway free of the blowing sand. Two or three black and white cows and flocks of sheep grazed. A couple of blue trucks dotted the distant landscape.

A sprinkle of rain started to fall, lasting no more than ten minutes. It could not begin to quench the thirst of this parched land. It is hard to remember that Gansu province was one of the cradles of early Chinese civilization, harder still to imagine that at one time, this region lay under the ocean.

Farther north, rows of mature trees lined the road as windbreaks. Some had been planted as early as the 1930s, most since the 1980s reform period began. Villages of adobe homes and protective frames for seedlings broke up the monopoly of the landscape. Electric wires strung on high poles rose up in the distant hills, bearing witness to recent developmental efforts.

Without warning, patchwork fields of yellow canola grass and shades of light green barley and darker green wheat appeared, rippling in the breeze, then just as suddenly the scrubby grassland returned. I am told that Gansu suffers from bitter cold weather and occasional snow for four-five months a year. The growing season is thus limited to April-October. Wheat is harvested in late July-early August.

The two-lane road became a modern four-lane highway, then a divided expressway, complete with a runaway vehicle ramp. In the blink of an eye we passed a row of dingy storefronts and a gaily decorated Muslim restaurant. After another stretch of barren terrain, we came across larger communities of mixed structures—a few two-story, modern office buildings, schools, and grain storage units amidst the adobe houses.

After three and a half hours, we reached Wuwei, a pleasant city larger than Shandan. The light traffic and numerous bicycles reminded me of my first visit to Beijing and Shanghai in 1978. The internationally-connected Desert Research Center lies on the outskirts of Wuwei. The Center struggles against the relentless

desertification of Gansu province by the Tengali and Gobi Deserts. (A recent article in the New York Times features the nearby town of Minqin.)

We continued our journey northward through the Hexi corridor between the rounded He-li mountain range to the east and the craggy Qilian range to the west. The foothills were absolutely barren. As we entered Shandan County, occasional roadside stands sold wild mountain mushrooms. Ruins of the Great Wall ran alongside a stretch of the highway. On the outskirts of the small town of Shandan, wheat fields reappeared. The first signs of city life were ugly four-six story apartment buildings and outdoor pool tables. As in Wuwei, bicycles dominated the road. Our car turned into the driveway of the Shandan Hotel.

## July 5: Morning meeting with all the Scholarship

**Recipients** Twenty-five students attended. Six had already graduated. Each student stood up, in turn, and recited their specific information: how many family members, their hometown's name, their major, and their year of graduation. (The information is available in my notes upon request.) This meeting proved to be a very pro forma and unsatisfying way to learn about the students. The foreign teacher at the school engages in informal chats with the students. His insights have proven to be much more personal.

## July 5: Afternoon visit to students' families:

1. My first scholarship recipient, Wu Jing, and her family. They live in an adobe pingfang (one-story home of 2 rooms off a courtyard) behind mud walls and a rubbish dump. This meeting was like meeting a long-lost family member for the first time.

Wu Jing's family was in dire straits when she was chosen to be the recipient of my scholarship in 2004. Her disabled father had attempted suicide several times out of desperation. Her mother supported Wu Jing and her younger brother as a vegetable seller....the least remunerative type of small business enterprise.

Wu Jing was able to stay in high school because of our scholarship. After graduation, she found a position in a local company which pays several times higher salary than she could earn without a high school degree.

(Wu Jing and her brother visited me in my hotel room several times during my week's stay in Shandan. We met her employers and returned to her family home together. We still maintain e-mail contact.)

2. Zhang Yan with her father, aunt, and younger brother. The whole family was quite reticent to talk. They are a very poor farm family who are obviously worn out by life, but I could not obtain specific details about their story.

3. Ma Liyuan and her mother. The father was blinded and lost some memory due to a motorcycle accident 6 years ago. (He was a bit inebriated and returning home from the restaurant he managed.) He is slowly regaining his memory. (He was not at home during our visit.) Ma Liyuan is an English major who started studying at the Bailie School last

year. Last winter, Mrs. Ma went to the Principal to take her daughter out of school. The family desperately needed the low income (approx. 300 yuan/mo. Or \$38 USD) her daughter would bring in as a restaurant worker because of the mom's own health problems. ...a heart operation and now fusion of her 4th-5<sup>th</sup> vertebrae . Amidst tears, she showed me the scars from her heart surgery.

While the mother was in his office last winter, Principal Chen decided that the \$300 US D(1200 yuan) that I sent last Christmas in memory of my own mother should be divided between eight worthy students, among them Ma Liyuan. She received our 300 Yuan...(\$75) plus 25 yuan(\$4) a month from the school to cover expenses for the 5 month semester...This required more sacrifice on the part of the family...thus denied her 300/month income. But looking toward the future hope of her increased income after graduation they decided to make the sacrifice.

Liyuan's mother works in a flour mill for 350-400 yuan/month and her father receives a disability payment from the government. (They showed us his disability certificate.) They joined the government's trial cooperative medical insurance plan last year which pays 40% medical expenses.

Mrs. Ma also tends the family's small wheat field. During the planting and harvesting season, her daughters help and they hire a tractor and driver to harvest their crop. The wheat crop brings in about 200 yuan//mu. (Barley gets more.)

Mrs. Ma clearly has a very difficult life since her husband's accident. The family was formerly a prosperous one of restaurant managers, whom the principal knew They spent all their savings...100,000 yuan...on father's care.. During our visit she started crying uncontrollably and bowed deeply in gratitude toward me. I was unable to hold the tears back, myself.

I wasn't able to visit any other student homes. However, I was told that these were not the most desperate cases. Each student has his or her own story...The malnourished ones, the orphans... In total, of the 1200 vocational school students, Principal Chen estimates that 15% or 180 students qualify for the scholarship.

## July 6: Morning: Teachers' Meeting:

A wonderful free exchange in Chinese in which they spoke about their students.

Mr. Wang, Agriculture Teacher since 1987:

Ms. Wen Zhong-qin (Guozhong's wife), Horticulture since 1989

Veterinary teacher since 1988

Ms. Chen, English teacher since 2002 ([sbsangel@163.com](mailto:sbsangel@163.com))

Math teacher, since 1995

Computer Teacher :

Art/English Teacher:

Art Teacher: Gao Yunqin ([sbsyq@126.com](mailto:sbsyq@126.com) )

I asked the following questions:

**“What is your understanding of student excellence?”**

Mr. Wang: Excellent students study hard, obey the laws and rules, attend to other students, have good relationships with teachers and other students. Poor students study hard, too, although not quite so hard when money is scarce. (Not all students of any social class study hard.)

Ms. Wen (Entering Class of 2005): She agrees with other teachers. Many of her students are from poor mountain regions outside of Shandan. The poor students work harder to do better work. All aspire to teach English.

**“Do you notice any difference in behavior or academic ability between poor students and others?” “Do students group themselves by economic class or in any way segregate the poor students?”** Poor students are not treated badly though everyone knows who is poor. Math teacher: His class of students has 7 scholarship students. All are excellent and not treated badly.

**“Do graduates keep in touch with you or the school?” How are they using their education?”**

One Mr. Wang, the agriculture teacher’s graduates now works as a technician on a pig farm...earning more money because of her education, although she is still feeding the pigs!

Mr. Wang currently has no agriculture students because all families want their kids to leave the farm. All the teachers agreed that this is because of “face.” (Farming is not as dignified as, say, English teaching. Not many young people like the country life.)

All his graduates are now teaching English, some in Shenzhen. They stay in contact with him, saying there is plenty of opportunity and demand for more English teachers. They will live in Shenzhen 4-5 years, then return to their hometowns, bringing more technical expertise to benefit Gansu province. These teachers estimate 70%-80% return. Guozhong says perhaps no more than 40%-50%. Some send money home, but the high living expenses prevents much savings.

**The discussion also included the following information:**

- Chen Gang, one of 3 male scholars, is orphaned, now living with grandparents. He is malnourished and will do manual labor or English tutoring during summer vacation to pay for his school expenses. (In my later meeting with the 3 –person committee, we agreed to allow worthy male students receive the scholarship.)
- All the teachers watch over their students, counseling them on subjects such as nutrition. Several other students have shown signs of malnutrition.
- Each teacher at the school supports four students! (No amount given.)
- Several of the majors at Bailie School have joint courses of study with other schools or universities, such as the Tianjin Technical Communication School. They are not eligible for the scholarship. The reasoning behind this is that

their families can surely afford Bailie School fees if they are planning to send their children to Tianjin or other distant school. However, in a few students' cases, this appears not to be the case.

- The new class of students (2006) has more poor students than earlier classes, including 7-8 orphans. Perhaps the increase in poor students is because they feel they have a better opportunity to study and therefore apply to the Bailie school in greater numbers. (As a vocational school, the Bailie School's tuition is lower than other schools' tuition.) There is an average of 2 scholars from each class, although in later conversations I learned that this is an average. Some classes have more than others.

## July 6 Afternoon Meeting: 3-Person Management Committee

Headmaster Chen Xinlu  
Director of Students Li Shuxing  
Director of Education Zhang

We reviewed each clause of the Agreement (English) and the Chinese language "Scholarship Management and Use." (管理和使用办法. \_ Revised drafts of both documents is enclosed with this report. Among the clarifications are the following:

1. Way of choosing student scholars: Each class of students as a whole reviews all documents and chooses the recipients. The 3-person management committee reviews and approves the student candidates. Some classes have more recipients than others. It is not a clear-cut 2 scholars/ class as some thought. Students from mountain districts have received more consideration due to their economic straits and will continue to do so. Boys will be allowed to apply and may receive the scholarship, but girls will continue to be given more consideration.
2. Ida Pruitt teaching materials will be prepared. Photos of Ida Pruitt and other long-time friends of China in whose memory donations have been made will be included in the newly refurbished museum at Leyte (Rewi's home at the school.)
3. The Chinese government pays only for 9 years of compulsory education. Even scholarship students must pay for their high school tuition, which is 1600 yuan per year. (There are extra fees for computer studies.) Our scholarship fund helps students' living expenses but does not address the problem of paying tuition or compensating the families for the wages that they are foregoing in order to allow their daughters to attend school.
4. We will change the scheduled deadlines for choosing new students to a January selection for the beginning of the March term.

5. We would like to increase the donations from 120 yuan a month to 150 yuan a month if possible. (The committee unanimously decided to use the additional money to support five more students rather than to increase the amount of money given to each student as I hoped.)

## July 7 Meeting with School Administration

Mr. Chen - Principal

Mr. Wang – Vice-Principal

Mr. Peng – Director of School Office (Speaks English-studied in New Zealand)

Mr. Zhu- Vice Secretary of the Communist Party Commission

Mr. Wu – Vice Director of the School Office (Attended NW Normal Univ.

Vice Principal Zha-not present

Mr. Chen reviewed the school's current situation: The school has grown from 400 during the first year of its revival – 1987—to 2400: 1200 vocational students, 500+ college preparatory students, 700+ middle school students. All can find work after graduation. (M.K.: The hotel desk clerk, a graduate of the school, disagrees. She says many students are unemployed.)

Up to this point, over 30 students have received some portion of the IPMP funds. Of the 1200 vocational students at the Bailie School, 15 % or 180 potentially qualify for the funds.

The Chinese government has given the school 2.2 million yuan this year. The Rewi Alley Fund donated 900,000 and the school raised 600,000. However, the school still has difficulties and hopes to receive more international support, as China's demands for educated workers increases. Many parents are willing to have their kids educated, so the school needs to invest in facilities and practical training, as well as new, government-financed dormitories and training facilities..

The school is working toward becoming a national key secondary school. Currently, it has provisional status. (Update-Fall, 2006—School was granted status of key secondary school. This means more resources to improve the school, but no direct aid to the families poor students aspiring to attend the school.)

Visitors to the school: 16 groups totaling 180 people.

**July 7: Student records office.** It is clear that the documentation process is very systematic and careful. Copies of sample document are available upon request. The list of students' names has space for student signature each semester certifying receipt of 600 yuan. Maximum scholarship time is 4 semesters.

Student files include:

- Signed and stamped certification of each student's poor economic status by student's elected village committee.

- Application from each student includes name, sex, class origin, course of study, and description of family. Farmers describe the number of mu owned and farmed. (Copy of application form available upon request.)
- Each student's payment of school tuition is noted. (Each student has to pay tuition to the school. 2500 yuan for Bailie vocational school, divided by 8 = US\$ 312.50. 1000 yuan for middle school. Divided by 8 = US\$ 125. Compare these figures with 3000 yuan for tuition at a regular high school. Divided by 8 = US \$ 375).
- Head teacher signs student's application, certifying that the student is one of the poorest in his or her class.
- Political status (All students seemed to be members of the Communist Youth League. In the future it would be interesting to try to find out if any students are not members and if this prejudices the committee against the student.)
- Educational department's comments about daily behavior.

## July 7: School Canteen

The school has six small canteens in all, which serve 3 meals a day to dormitory residents and lunch to commuters. School food is not taxed so the price of meals is less than at private restaurants in Shandan. Our meal cost 6 yuan for meat/vegetable dishes and 4 yuan for an egg/tomato dish. Students pay 2.5 yuan for a big bowl of noodles/meat/vegetables.

I questioned how students can live on the 120 yuan we give them monthly. (30 x 2.5 = 75 yuan just for lunch. I was assured that students can budget their money and live off of 60-80 yuan per month. The remaining 40-60 yuan of the scholarship is spent on books, cloths, and other misc. expenses.

The Board of the Ida Pruitt Memorial Scholarship Project will write a report to the 3-person committee in which the following points will be made:

1. Remind them of the following goals of the project:
  - Rural development
  - Secondary education, not pre-collegiate
  - Our support of computer and English majors assumes that these students will find jobs to help their families and communities after graduation. Ask the board how many of our scholars will continue their college studies after graduation?)

2. Clarify the use of the extra money that they would like us to raise. (From 120 yuan/month to 150 yuan/month.) Is this an extra 30 yuan per student, as I understood, or is this to help five more students, as Liu Guozhong understood?

## UNRELATED SIDE-TRIPS

**July 8 Trip to Zhangye**, a medium sized city about 1 hour's drive north from the small town of Shandan. My impression was one of cleanliness, light traffic, a variety of stores. We even saw an art museum and a class of students studying traditional Chinese instruments.

### **July 9 Morning: Visit to Security Door and Screen Window Coop**

This coop was started by laid-off workers. It has 2 leaders, including a woman manager, and 8 staff members, including one woman. All invested money in the tools and other equipment necessary to produce these doors and window screens. The monthly income of each member/worker is 700-900 yuan depending on sales and each member's technical expertise. The yearly profit is largely reinvested. Future plans include hiring and training unskilled youth.

Two other cooperatives currently exist in Shandan. I visited the Flax coop 2 years ago. The Canadian Cooperative Association funded and supervised the training of new cooperative leaders to establish additional coops in Shandan.

Liu Guozhong and I discussed ways to encourage Bailie School students to form cooperatives or join current cooperatives instead of leaving Shandan for Shanghai and Shenzhen. We even raised the idea of sending students to Shanghai cooperatives for 1-2 years, with the understanding that they will return to Gansu to work afterwards.

Michael Crook and I discussed reserving a portion of the scholarship fund for students who worked in eastern cities and who now would consider returning to Gansu. We would call it a "Resettlement Fund." Its purpose would be to support the return of educated youth to their home communities.

## THE JOURNEY BACK TO BEIJING

**July 9 Afternoon: 2:30** Liu Guozhong and I boarded the train from Shandan straight to Beijing after Principal Chen, and two New Zealand teachers saw us off at the station. (A nice custom!) The same dry, uninhabited landscape seemed to stretch before us interminably.

By 6:30 as the sun was setting, we reached the border of Ningxia province. Suddenly, reddish dunes of sand seemed to rise up like gentle waves in the desert. Off in the distance, I caught a glimpse of a lone, 2-hump camel! Soon, our train left the dunes behind. Fields of mixed corn and wheat occasionally broke up the monotony of the scorched earth.

## July 10:

By the next morning the train had reached Inner Mongolia. Mature trees lined the train tracks. Lovely fresh green cropland of corn and sunflowers decorated the landscape...delighting our tired, dry eyes. The fertile soil nurtured miles of fruit trees. Sturdy red brick homes and white six-story apartment buildings replaced Gansu provinces adobe. At 8:30, we reached Hohhot. A young American woman traveling with a British companion got off to attend the annual horse races. This year marks the 600 anniversary of Genghis Khan!

Within an hour outside of Hohhot, nearby hills had been terraced for agricultural fields. Within another hour, the hills became a beautiful shade of green on which horses grazed. The train tracks followed a water-filled creek and mature trees. Chinese angels, floating on the air with scarves instead of wings, had been painted on nearby reinforcement wall.

By early afternoon, the adobe and red brick homes had been replaced with substantial grey brick with upturned black tile roofs. The fields now grew rows of vegetables and fruit trees. Young pine trees now lined the road. Overhead, the sky was always blue with white fluffy clouds.

Lively Chinese folk music entertained the train's passengers, who engaged in animated conversations with their fellow passengers. Over the 30-hour trip, the topics of conversation ranged from the price of education to college entrance examinations and English language summer camps. I was included naturally in the conversation. The former strangers-turned friends shared snacks of watermelon seeds, fruit, and bread. The train supplied hot water for tea. A handsome, elderly Tibetan couple observed the scene in silence.

In one village, the cross on a Christian Church peeped over the hill beside the train tracks.

On the border of Hebei province (where Beijing is situated), urbanization started with a sprinkling of factories amidst the houses and trees. Sheep grazed beside huge piles of coal that was fed into furnaces to supply electric power. I was reminded of the frequent, horrific accidents in Chinese coal mines.

Two hours outside Beijing the train passed through tunnels carved out of the granite mountainside. Fields below the mountain were carefully terraced and built up with small white stones.

One hour outside Beijing we passed a fast-running river and verdant hills.

Crossing the border from Hebei province into the Beijing administrative district, we saw small towns with factories....Slowly, more industrialization, more congested buildings, more vehicles crowded together. The train pulled into Beijing station after 7:30 p.m., almost 30 hours after leaving Shandan. Our journey throughout rural North and Northwest China had ended.