

# Dispatches from the Field:

## Reflections of RCEF in Rural China 2008



Rural China Education Foundation

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Rural China Education Foundation:

The Rural China Education Foundation (RCEF) is a non-profit organization registered in the United States, working to improve education in rural China. Its mission is to promote education for people in rural China that empowers them to improve their own lives and communities.

[blog.ruralchina.org](http://blog.ruralchina.org)

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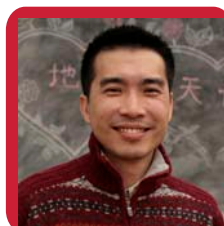
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## Foreword

It is my pleasure to write a few words on the occasion of the 4th anniversary of the Rural China Education Foundation. Although RCEF was officially incorporated on April 28, 2005, we started informally in October 2004 under the name “International Support Program for Rural Education in China”. Our role at the time was to be a partner to the Chinese organization Student Volunteers for Rural Support (大学生支农调研项目), with whom we co-organized our 2005 and 2006 Summer Volunteer Programs. At the time, RCEF consisted of only a few people who worked on it in their spare time.

I could not have predicted that just a few years later, we would have six full-time staff permanently on the ground working alongside rural teachers in an experimental school in China; that we would have completed four Summer Volunteer Programs, which laid the foundation for our current work; and that we would have gained respect and support from established foundations and philanthropists.

All of this has been made possible by many people, first and foremost the rural teachers and villagers who see a future in improving education, and the dedicated educators who are willing to work in China’s countryside for one or multiple years. Equally important were the talented volunteers who participated in our programs and performed numerous functions on our committees. We would not have succeeded without everyone who supported RCEF through advice, donations, and spreading the word.

This collection of blog posts from the past two years is a fitting tribute to their efforts. It highlights characteristic examples of our programs at Guan Ai School and best practices that give an idea of what RCEF stands for. You will also find reflections on our philosophy and our strategy for the coming years.

Discussions about what we do and why we do it are always ongoing, and we encourage you to take part in them, by reading and commenting on new stories that are posted on the RCEF Blog ([www.blog.ruralchina.org](http://www.blog.ruralchina.org)). Please also invite your friends and relations to visit the blog, as it is a unique channel to learn about innovations in rural China education directly from the people who are creating it.

I would take the opportunity to thank all blog contributors and the people who commented on the posts for their efforts to share their thoughts with us and I hope you will enjoy reading the blog posts just as much as I did.

Happy anniversary!

Wei Ji Ma  
Co-Founder and Chairman of the Board



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# Welcome to the RCEF Blog!

Wei Ji Ma | Posted on December, 7 2007

**Hi!** Glad you found your way here. This blog is meant to keep everyone in RCEF updated on our programs and committee work, and as a window into our world for anyone interested. We will post about anything from program progress to news features to personal reflections, and try to focus on the people behind the organization. Anybody can comment on blog items, and we encourage you to do so. If you have any suggestions for blog items, please let us know!



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## Meet the Parents

Diane Geng | Posted on February 17th, 2008

**A**t the end of each semester, the teachers and principals of Guan Ai School make home visits. That means going to every student's village to meet with their guardians and drop off exam scores. The top 10 students in each class also got bright certificates to honor their achievements.

We took off in two groups. Jiang Peng joked that we had a "Red Gang" and a "Blue gang", because of the color of our coats. Most of the parents welcomed us warmly but were not particularly interested in talking about anything except their children's academic performance. I was glad to hear the Guan Ai teachers bring up the school's new library and reading program in almost every visit. They described the impact it was having on their students and we encouraged the parents to give their children more opportunities to read books. However, this was usually met with indifference. A lot of the guardians we talked with were illiterate grandparents or parents who had only arrived home a day or two before our visit from their migrant jobs in the cities.

Only one family stood out to me as having grandparents who regularly read the newspaper and played chess with their fifth-grade grandson. No wonder he is the wuziqi (a Chinese board game) champion of Guan Ai! Besides test scores, the other major issue that got the parents' attention was living conditions. Guan Ai is a boarding school and almost all the students live there during the week. Guardians were very concerned about their diet, the nannies who took care of them at night, and their health.

The home visits underscored to me how important it is for us to do parent outreach and education in our work, but also how incredibly challenging it is. Even though we try to enrich the school environment and curriculum, we cannot affect children's overall development without the understanding and involvement of their parents. After all, the kids all just got a month off of school and as far as I could tell, sitting on the bed watching TV would be the principal activity for the next 20 or so days, with little variety or stimulation from their parents as role models. Mahjong and drinking games even kept some parents from coming out of smoky rooms to meet with us.

Principal Sun always reminds us that winning over parents is not an overnight endeavor. But at least the teachers at Guan Ai School take this seriously and there are a few guardians who hold more progressive views. Hopefully we can communicate more with them and see if they can influence others. In any case, I think the Guan Ai teachers win a prize for endurance. Whether it was tramping miles through the snow or holding multiple cups of tea in the bladder (every house offered tea!), they kept up good spirits and made sure every student was accounted for.



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## Teacher Sharing Meeting

Diane Geng | Posted on April 7th, 2008

In collaboration with the principals of Guan Ai School, RCEF started a Teachers' Sharing Platform this semester. The purpose is to encourage teachers to record their reflections on some part of their weekly teaching. They are given a general template to fill out which asks three questions: "What was the purpose of the lesson and how did you prepare?", "What happened in class?" and "What problems did you encounter and how would you change things in retrospect?" During the meetings, they share and discuss these with other teachers.

The first meeting took place on March 26 after classes were over at 7:30 PM. All of the teachers chose to participate in the platform but three were missing at this meeting. RCEF also invited two daike teachers (non-governmental teachers, who usually hold temporary posts) from Zhaizi Village elementary school, a nearby public school. A brief report of the meeting and some teachers' sharing follow.

The proceedings were a bit stiff at this first meeting. Teachers spoke, but no one except me and Jiang Peng asked questions during the formal sharing time. However, we did decide to change the format of the next meeting to have more discussion and to adjust the written template. We may ask the teachers to share their general conclusion or "take away" first and then the details of the lesson, followed by feedback. (I think we should also have snacks next time to make the atmosphere more relaxed and enjoyable). After the "formal" part of the meeting was over, teachers stayed around to chat about what was said and give advice. The two daike teachers from Zhaizi also said they wanted to come back often to learn from Guan Ai teachers. As recent graduates of Yuncheng Normal Academy, they are still struggling with the classroom management problems of new teachers and feel that they can't try out the "quality education" teaching methods because their students get too out of control.

Principal Sun, who teaches third grade Chinese (yuwen), took the lead. She brought up a textbook lesson about the first time selling things in a market. She asked the students how they would describe their vegetables if they had to sell them in the market. For example, she encouraged them to yell out and use evocative phrases like: "Tomatoes, tomatoes! Red and round!" She then invited 2 students up to pretend they were at the market. One was the seller and the other the buyer. They bargained over price. Some students were not tactical and kept lowering their price when the buyer countered. Principal Sun reminded them that the seller should try to sell at the highest possible price and that s/he needed to convince the buyer it was worth it. This entire process took about four class periods. For homework that weekend, Principal Sun told them to ask their parents to take them to the market. Their job would be to do the bargaining. On Monday though, only about seven students out of over thirty reported that they had actually done so. She said this is because many parents aren't willing to take their kids to the market and perhaps didn't understand

the meaning of the assignment. (From talking to some parents, I also know that they are reluctant to go shopping with their kids at the market because the kids always want them to buy things for them.) However, one student who did the lesson remarked that “this kind of homework can really exercise our abilities!”

In a related activity to the textbook lesson about the first time selling things, Principal Sun wanted students to really have a “first time” experience doing something. She invited a student’s grandmother into the classroom to teach paper cutting. The grandmother had never taught a class before but her method of going around to groups of students to guide them in cutting a heart worked well. The students really enjoyed it. Then Principal Sun asked the students if they could cut anything else. One of the students turned his heart into a face with eyes and a mouth. Other students started to copy him and in one small group, students began making up a story about their cuttings. Principal Sun heard this and wrote their names up on the board as “authors”. When the other students in the class saw this, they also wanted to make up stories and quickly formed spontaneous small groups to do so. In the end, they shared their stories with the class and wrote some of them on the blackboard in the school yard for the rest of the school to read.

Ms. Wang, the 语文 (Chinese) teacher of the larger second grade class, described a textbook lesson called 《我不是最弱小的》 (“I Am Not the Smallest One”). It was about a little girl whose mother and brother gave her their coats during a rainstorm because she was the “smallest and weakest” one. However, the little girl then saw a flower wilting in the rain and she covered it with her coat, proving that even a seemingly small person could find things to help and protect. Before reading the lesson, Ms. Wang asked the class, “What does ‘the smallest one’ mean?” Students said that Meng Yuan, one of their classmates of tiny size and a quiet voice, was the “smallest, weakest one.” “Are you?” Ms. Wang asked Meng Yuan. Meng Yuan nodded. However, after the lesson, when asked again, Meng Yuan said, “No, there are still first graders smaller than me!” So the class agreed that they could help and protect first graders.

Ms. Geng, a first- and second-grade math teacher, described a lesson teaching the concept of centimeters to her first-graders. She said, “You’ve been friends with your desk all year. Do you know how long it is?” The first graders used their arms to show the teacher. “What else can you use?” she asked. Some students immediately used their hands or pencil cases or other school supplies to measure. When they came up with different answers, Ms. Geng asked why the answers were not the same. They learned that measuring needed uniform standards. So then she showed them a measuring stick and together they counted the number of centimeters in one decimeter. Some of the students then pointed out that the first joint in their fingers was about one centimeter long. In the end, she asked what kind of unit a centimeter was. They couldn’t remember whether it was length or weight. So she said, “Hello students! I am your friend Length Unit. Do you remember me now?” And so they all said, “Length unit!” She feels that they have firmly grasped the concept of a centimeter now.



## A Day in Western Hunan

Sara Lam | Posted on April 3rd, 2008

**RCEF** is supporting the Miao Support Net, an organization in western Hunan, to organize training for rural teachers. The organization is completely initiated and run by local teachers. Like the local population, the organizers almost all belong to the Miao ethnic group. I recently paid them a visit, and here are some of my thoughts.

Most inspirational...

Local teachers started the Miao Support Net to find financial aid for poor students in the area. The teachers themselves are in difficult financial situations, but put in their own time and money to do this purely out of concern for their students. The local education bureau gives no incentives or recognition for their work. It really fills me with hope for rural education to see a group of regular teachers take the initiative to build up their own organization. Now, they are shifting from only monetary support for poor students to teacher training. It's very exciting that teachers are taking charge of their own teaching and professional development!

Most fun...

I visited one school where the Miao Support Net works for a day. It was 2 hours from the county seat, way up in the remote mountains. I was surprised to find that everyone in the school loves to play basketball! Teachers, students, boys, girls... Naturally, one of the first things they did when I arrived at the school was organize a basketball match: married female teachers vs. single female teachers. Apparently the married teachers win every time, and this time was no exception, despite the six points I contributed. The game was very professional and competitive; those women really gave it their all. I was really happy to see that the teachers are showing through example that girls can be as competitive and athletic as boys.

Most challenging...

While I was at the school, I listened to a lot of the concerns of teachers and the principal. The principal mainly talked about how it is impossible for him to improve teaching at the school when the hardware conditions of the school are so bad that teachers are unwilling to stay. The teachers have it set in their minds that if they change their teaching methods, students will rebel and learn even less and they will be chastised by other teachers and school leaders. I really understand the difficult situation they are in, but I just tried to identify with them about the space and resources they do have for making changes, however small, and what they can do to improve just a little bit. At one point, the principal said to me, “我以前没想过, 不敢想。” (I never thought of it before, I actually did not dare to). In the course of our conversations, the principals and teachers did point out some things that are within their ability to do, but I could tell that they were still very resistant. Seeing these things makes me realize that we are still a very long way from actually taking action. This is perhaps the most difficult part of what RCEF wants to do: How do we help rural teachers believe that they can do something?

## Comments

*Diane Geng | Posted on April 3rd, 2008*

The principal raises an important issue. Can improving hardware conditions really help retain rural teachers and improve their teaching? Often, we feel that investing in hardware projects is superficial and takes resources and attention away from the deeper problems in teaching methods. But a prerequisite to improving teaching is to have a stable and skilled teaching team. To build that team for the long haul, we should also consider the value of creating a pleasant physical working and living environment for the teachers. Their intrinsic motivation and professional development support are most important, but we shouldn't underestimate how a nice working environment can actually make teachers happy to stay and advance their work.

At Fuxin Middle School, teachers said they rarely talked to each other this past winter partly because the staff room was freezing and they all had to rush back to the tiny coal heaters in their rooms after class. What difference might a heater, some comfy couches, and a stipend for electricity in the staff room have made to advance more communication between teachers and start discussions about their daily work?

Last semester at Guan Ai School, 5 female teachers shared bunk beds in a tiny dormitory/office about 3 meters wide and 6 meters long. They each had only their bed space and one drawer in a desk for teaching materials and personal belongings. Sometimes even their children sleep with them and students come in and out all the time. Guan Ai does not have extra room in the existing buildings to give teachers more living or working space so the school is looking for funding to construct new dorms and staff rooms. The teachers get along well and living together allows them to easily communicate about students and teaching. They don't complain much and the tidy room is quite homey with drawings and even a computer. But the conditions are obviously much more cramped than in their own rural homes, not to mention in the cities or most other schools. Thus I think as part of our bid to retain and help rural teachers we should not only encourage teachers to make improvements with their existing resources but also consider helping them find outside resources to use in creating a better working environment for themselves.

*Sara Lam | Posted on April 3rd, 2008*

I actually wholeheartedly sympathized with the principal when he talked about the need for improving school infrastructure. This might be the first time I've heard a principal talk about hardware improvement mainly from the perspective of improving the environment for teachers. More often, principals just want multimedia rooms, new buildings for show, or are pressured to build new structures to meet government regulations. It's because it was so refreshing to hear a principal so concerned about teacher satisfaction that I found it noteworthy.



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## Graduating with Tears and Appreciation

Diane Geng | Posted on July 10th, 2008



The air in the classroom was heavy with humidity and emotion as Guan Ai Elementary School's third class of sixth-graders graduated on July 2. Teachers cut watermelon and passed out candy as the 23 students giggled and chatted, their desks arranged in a horseshoe shape around the room. They had just finished their middle school entrance exams and feelings of relief and imminent freedom were palpable.

After a few moments, Mr. Qin called the graduation meeting to order and the students quieted down, suddenly solemn and shy. Ms. Yao, their homeroom and Chinese teacher, spoke first. Out of all the teachers, she has spent the most time with the sixth graders this year, honing their literacy skills and preparing them for the middle school entrance exams. With a huge smile and bright eyes, looking ten years younger, she said, "You often tell me I don't praise you enough. Well, today I'm going to praise all of you. You are all good students!" Next the sixth grade math teacher, Ms. Guo, congratulated them and gave some advice for middle school. "Don't dislike those teachers who are strict or hard on you," she said. "Remember that they are doing it for your own good. Always study hard."

Then one of the students spoke. She had the best grades in the class and is often a leader. Looking down at her hands, she started to speak about how life at school was filled with both sad and happy parts but that they were all to be cherished. After a few sentences, she started crying and could not finish. The rest of the class also started crying.

With his famous grin, Principal Yang got up and passed out second helpings of watermelon to each student. He wiped tears from some of their faces and tried to generate a livelier atmosphere. "Say what you think of me!" he told a lanky boy who is often the most outspoken of his classmates. Principal Yang is both feared and respected by Guan Ai students so an invitation to evaluate him could be very appealing! The boy stood awkwardly, eyes downcast. Finally he burst out passionately, "I really hate you sometimes!" There was a pause and then he said, "I know that you are that way in order to help us." And he broke down crying again.

As his plan for cheering everyone up didn't entirely work, Principal Yang turned to the girl who conducts during music class. "Pick a few songs to sing, how about that?" he suggested. She got up and led the class in a few tremulous songs. As they all sat down again and a serious air descended again, the most high-spirited—and sometimes silly—girl in the class asked if she could speak. "I really want to thank Ms. Yao and Ms. Guo. They worked so hard to teach us. Now, I just have one request. Can I give Ms. Yao and Ms. Guo hugs?" The two teachers seemed stunned. When the student walked over to them, they didn't seem to know what to do, so she reached out and held them each in turn. Later Ms. Sun remarked that even after teaching years and years of sixth grade

graduating classes, these two teachers would probably never forget this girl, who surprised everyone by shedding her usual silliness and initiating such a brave and mature gesture.

Ms. Sun also took the chance to ask the students for some feedback about Guan Ai School. “What do you feel are the differences between Guan Ai and other schools that you’ve been to?” she said. Some of the students had attended Guan Ai since it opened three years ago. The response was immediate and hands shot up from students who hadn’t spoken yet: “The teachers are strict.” “The discipline and management is good.” “There are good relationships between students.” “There’s a library here.” “We can meet lots of foreigners.” “The teachers care about us.” Bolstered by how the question had distracted the students from their sad moods, Ms. Sun asked another question, “What was your happiest memory here?” “Teacher Day.” “March 24 when the Americans came.” “Music class.” “Everyday is happy!”

Finally, Mr. Su pointed out that some parents had come to pick up their new graduates so we took a final group picture and dispersed. I accompanied some girls to their dormitory to load their blankets and clothes onto their parents’ motorbikes. “What do you plan to do tomorrow?” I asked. “Several of us are meeting in Hongdaoyuan Village and riding bikes! Will you be at school? We’ll come pick you up!” they said with excitement, all traces of the tears of the last hour gone.

And indeed, the next day several did come and they continue to hang out in the library when teachers were around. After the summer vacation, all the students will begin middle school, though not all at the same place. They will no longer take every class together, jump rope together during recess, and sleep together in the same dorm room each night. Some will go to schools in Yongji and others will go to the rural township middle schools in Puzhou and Hanyang. RCEF would like to find ways to track their development and evaluate the effect Guan Ai’s education might have had on them. If you have any ideas, please let us know. Though their official time at Guan Ai Elementary is over, it will always be a home that welcomes them back and follows their progress with pride.





## Libraries & Reading Meeting

Diane Geng | Posted on July 21st, 2008

RCEF has donated books for libraries in six rural schools and communities. On July 18, teachers from two of those sites, Henan Dayang and Shandong Guozhuang Elementary Schools, gathered at Guan Ai Elementary School for a sharing meeting. Another participant, Huang Yaxiong, used his own money to start a small lending collection for his middle school students in Hunan.

We discussed the operations status of each library, problems faced, and new ways to cultivate reading habits in students. The teachers agreed that reading extracurricular books is important for accumulating contextual or background knowledge of the world. Many rural students have never been out of their county but test questions in the “New Curriculum Reforms” era (新课改) increasingly require students to draw upon extracurricular knowledge.

Reading aloud is a method that teachers at Guozhuang and Guan Ai have tried. Mr. Du read a high school level novel to his students and was surprised by how enthusiastically they listened. He felt that it improved his relationship with the students, who used to fear him but now are comfortable enough to joke with him. At Guan Ai, Sara has read chapters of Tom Sawyer in the boys’ dorm before bedtime and Jiang Peng has tried audio “book critiques” (评书) of The Three Kingdoms over the loudspeaker during lunchtime, though he discovered you have to start in a more exciting, action-packed scene for kids to pay attention.

A common phenomenon all the teachers faced was students getting so immersed in an extracurricular book that they start to read them during class time. Some teachers felt this was okay as long as the students could still keep up with what was being taught, but others felt that since many of the books students pick have shallow content, it is imperative that they focus during class on the formal curriculum. Overall, teachers got many good ideas from each other and were able to tell RCEF what they wanted more support on in the future. Finally, we discussed new ideas for promoting reading in their schools.



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## Rural Teacher Professional Development Training

Diane Geng | Posted on April 3rd, 2008



The first RCEF teacher professional development training has just concluded! It was part of RCEF's Integrative Rural Education Program which works year round to support rural teachers in experimenting with new curriculum and teaching methods. 19 rural teachers from Guan Ai Elementary School (RCEF's main program site) and 5 RCEF staff and volunteers traveled from Shanxi Province to Anhui Province for 8 days of team building and educational discussions. We were joined in Anhui by Ron Sung, a new RCEF Teaching Coach, and about a dozen teachers from Desheng Pingmin School, the site of the workshop. The entire trip was 8 days long and included three days of field trips to broaden teachers' horizons. This was the first time most Guan Ai teachers had been away from their home districts, much less out of Shanxi Province.

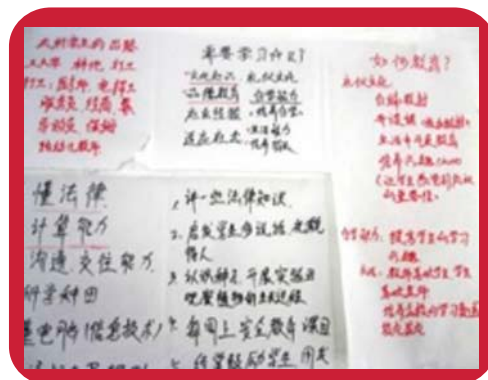
The training had several goals. One was to help the teachers and RCEF staff to get to know each other better, especially since new RCEF staff members are moving to Guan Ai and the school just hired 3 new teachers. Another goal was to discuss problems with rural education and common educational values that motivate and underlie our work. Experienced educators were also invited to share their expertise and inspire the teachers with new ideas and concrete examples of innovative, student-centered teaching. Finally, the training provided time for teachers to brainstorm improvements they would like to see at Guan Ai. They also made some initial plans for taking action on these issues in the coming semester. I will post more about the training in future blog posts.



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# Professional Training Day 1: Progressive Teachers

Diane Geng | Posted on August 14th, 2008



The next morning we took a bus to the Desheng Common Peoples' School (德胜平民学校), the site of the training. I'll write a blog post later specifically about the Common Peoples' School to give more information about this very interesting model. After a delicious lunch prepared by the school's cooks, the training officially began. During the introductions and name games, Guan Ai and RCEF participants had a huge advantage because we already knew each other. However, the 8-10 teachers from Desheng School put in great efforts and were wonderful hosts throughout the week.

Sara Lam, RCEF's Co-Executive Director, did a superb job designing and leading the training. She started off by setting the tone and purpose for our gathering. "We are all here because we're progressive educators (教育先行者)," she said. As workers at Guan Ai and Desheng Schools, we are all engaged in advancing rural education quality and striving to better meet rural students' needs. To show that we are not alone in upholding this kind of mindset and action, Sara described the inspiring efforts of rural teachers in Chiapas, Mexico. Those teachers recognized that the national education system ignored and even oppressed some of the needs of their rural indigenous minority students, thus making it hard for these students to learn well and prepare for success in society. Many of their problems were similar to those students face in rural China, including inappropriate textbooks and mainstream values that breed a disdain for rural lifestyles. In response, the Chiapas teachers wrote their own teaching materials, taught useful life skills, and lobbied successfully for education policy changes. Their achievements were largely teacher-initiated and they effected widespread improvements. To prove that this is not only a foreign phenomenon, Sara then described the Hunan Miao Support Network, an organization started and run entirely by a group of rural teachers on their own. This year, RCEF awarded them an Innovation Grant to fund a teacher training that they organized themselves for their own professional development.

After hearing these examples of educators taking action, we returned to the fundamentals of why we are engaged in this work in the first place. In small groups, we examined the basic needs of rural students and how well current education was serving those. Each group had a piece of poster paper split into three columns:

- 1) Possible paths for rural students after finishing 9 years of compulsory education;
- 2) Skills needed for each of those possible paths;
- 3) What we can do to foster those skills.

After brainstorming the skills needed in column 2, we underlined those which regular, current education is able to fulfill and put check marks next to those we felt Guan Ai school already fulfilled. The framework was useful for thinking through the needs systematically. Due to time pressures, not every

group was able to fully flesh out the discussion. Afterwards, each group reported on their analysis.

The next activity was designed to help teachers talk about their closely held but not often articulated educational values. RCEF staff and some Guan Ai teachers had brainstormed and created hypothetical scenarios around common dilemmas met in daily teaching. Each group then got one scenario with discussion questions. Here is one of them:

Mr. Pan teaches sixth grade math. His students are not unintelligent but they have weak foundations and as a result, only one fourth are able to keep up with the regular pace of the curriculum. The other students can't understand what's said in class and Mr. Pan sees that they are gradually losing interest in math. Mr. Pan believes that for these students (three fourths of the class), focusing on the basics is the most important. They are in danger of starting to dislike school and once they advance to middle school, may not be able to catch up. But if he did this, he would not be able to finish teaching all of the regular curriculum. This would pull down the entire class' average score and negatively affect the strong students. As a result, each year, Mr. Pan continues to teach at the regular pace to keep up with the curriculum.

- What subjective and objective factors influence Mr. Pan to take this line of action?
- What are the pros and cons for Mr. Pan?
- What are pros and cons for his students?
- How do you think Mr. Pan could better handle this situation?
- What kind of changes do you think could happen in the school or society to allow Mr. Pan to better educate his students?

Afterwards, each group reported on their thoughts and there was time for others to give their own opinions as well. Other scenario topics included: "Disobedient students," "What to do about students who may not be headed for university," "Teachers who lose motivation," and "Conflicts between the standard curriculum and student-centered methods."

We did not have mandatory activities in the evening and people spent the time watching the Olympics or viewing movies like *Freedom Writers*, a film about teaching very challenging students in the United States.



## Teacher Sun Reflects on the Summer Volunteer Program

Diane Geng | Posted on August 23rd, 2008



**Sun** Huimiao is one of the founders of Guan Ai Elementary School, RCEF's main program site. She has participated in two years of RCEF's Summer Volunteer Program (SVP). Below are some reflections she wrote after this year's program.

Today RCEF's Summer Volunteer Program has finally come to an end. Compared with last year, this year's summer program was much better organized which improved communications, allowing problems to be diagnosed and solved more promptly. Secondly, many more local teachers took part.

This year we were divided into three groups according to the three nearby villages: Zhaizi, Wangzhuang and Nanzheng. Each one has its own characteristics. As Xiaohu (one of the volunteers) said, the Zhaizi group is diligent; the Wangzhuang group committed and Nanzheng is creative. That's just how it was; the volunteers were so hard-working, neither flinching from pain nor tiredness. In order to teach the kids well, they would stay up late discussing lesson plans. When necessary they would alter their lesson plans and deal with complex situations appropriately. Their diligence and generosity deserved everyone's admiration. It really warmed my heart to see people working for rural education. Penghu (also one of the volunteers) told us about a student who everybody thought was retarded. Few would speak to him. But the patience with which Penghu treated the child made the other teachers all sit up and take notice. There are many other stories like this. During this program we saw some teachers who participated actively and felt the kindness and energy of the volunteers. Their different way of thinking, flexible teaching methods and outgoing personalities influenced the teachers and broadened their horizons. If some other teachers did not actively participate in the program it was because they were not familiar with RCEF and its goals. Also, they just finished the exams and were a bit worn out. One of the volunteers, Jiang Hui, can speak five languages so I wanted to pick her brains about language-learning and talked to her a lot. Only after trying to teach Chinese to a foreigner did I realize that teaching adults and teaching children are two entirely different things. Thus, I had many questions for Jiang Hui and she gave me a lot of advice.

The SVP has brought the children a lot of joy and also taught them extra-curricular skills. During summer vacation nobody organizes any activities for the students. There are extra tutorial-style lessons but the students don't like them. When the schools break up for the holiday, the children mainly watch television (a study in Nanzheng showed children watch more than four hours a day in the summer) and run about outside, but don't do any farm work. I thought the volunteers' 'Self-Awareness Class' was brilliant. Parents rarely encourage their children to do the things they want, and often scold or even hit them for doing things the adults don't like. Because of this, rural children have very little self-confidence. The self-awareness class can teach the children to recognize

their own good points; to become self-confident and learn to love themselves. The 'Health Class' was also useful for teaching students some basic healthcare knowledge. On July 30th at midday, a few children from Wangzhuang came to Guan Ai to see their teacher. I don't know what can be more satisfying than this.

On the 29th, each group had to exhibit their results; Diane Geng and Sara Lam were busy rushing about between the teams. Ever since coming from Guan Ai, Sara had had a cough, but still worked late every evening. The same day, Diane got heatstroke. When I saw her, Auntie Li had already given her ice water to drink, put a wet cloth on her head and made her lie down. But she still had her computer there and was typing away! I didn't know how to persuade her to rest and could only make her lie down in the outer building.

When the training was over, one after the other, the volunteers all left. In the last bus was Wei Tao, Jiang Hui, Sijia, Xiaohu, etc. We kept on shaking hands and saying goodbye time after time. It felt like we would never see one another again and it was very hard to part. When they got on the bus, my eyes were brimming with tears...

SVP has made the children happy and expanded the horizons of the teachers, but rural education needs more than this and I hope that the volunteers will come back and help on a more long-term basis. Thank you!



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## School Starts at Guan Ai!

Diane Geng | Posted on September 5th, 2008

The new semester has begun at Guan Ai Elementary, RCEF's main program site! About 180 students, many returning from last year, are enrolled in six grades. RCEF has hired 18 teachers to work at the school, expanding the teaching force by five. This gives all the teachers a lighter class load so they can spend more time preparing lessons and having meetings about teaching strategies. New initiatives this semester include:

**Curriculum Innovations:** Science, a subject traditionally neglected in rural primary schools, is going to receive special emphasis at Guan Ai. There are frequently scheduled Science periods for grades 3-6 and dedicated teachers. We're also starting extracurricular activities every afternoon. These were devised by teachers based on their hobbies and talents and students signed up voluntarily, ranking their top choices. The activities include Community Service, Soccer, Chess, Arts & Crafts, Story Telling, Cooking, Theater, Chinese Yo-Yo, English Corner, Poetry Recitation, Aerobics, and School Newspaper.

**School Management:** We work with the school to revamp systems like the daily schedule and the teacher salary and evaluation system.

**Professional Development:** Each subject has a "teacher research group" with regularly scheduled meetings. They will decide together how to plan lessons, evaluate students, and keep track of progress. There are also optional classes for teachers to help them improve their English and computer skills.

**Hardware Improvements:** The first grade classrooms have a new look with special hexagonal tables for group work and shelves with individual cubby holes for storing students' things. Teachers have new offices with desks and computers to use in lesson planning and meetings. We are also in the process of designing a new cafeteria and dormitory.

More details coming in further posts!



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## Afternoon Activity Groups

Diane Geng | Posted on September 5th, 2008

**Afternoons** are getting more exciting at Guan Ai School. Last semester, teachers brought up the idea of letting students spend part of their afternoon on extracurricular activities like arts and crafts or games. Since Guan Ai is a boarding school, it needs to keep students occupied for about 15 hours a day, but focusing just on textbook teaching or the regular curriculum is tedious for students and teachers. Thus, RCEF has helped the teachers set up a new afternoon schedule for extracurricular activities. The teachers came up with a total of 10 classes and students signed up for 2 each. Today was the first day. In Cooking class, third grade teacher Ms. Sun taught her students how to peel and cut potatoes into thin strips, a common ingredient in Chinese dishes. Potato is a wildly popular food among kids here (probably kids all over the world actually!) and the students seemed to really enjoy it. One fourth grader told me she really wanted to take this class because her parents often left her at home alone and she wanted to learn how to cook for herself. In the school library, Ms. Wang (first grade teacher) read aloud to an attentive group of first through third graders in her Storytelling Class. The Arts & Crafts group started a project cutting out feathers to make peacocks and RCEF Teaching Coaches Kiel Harell and Ron Sung led an English Corner and Chinese Yo-Yo class respectively. Tomorrow will be Aerobics, Community Service, Soccer, Theater, and School Newspaper!



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# The Challenges of the New Science Curriculum

Sara Lam | Posted on October 7th, 2008



*The government launched curriculum reforms several years ago. The curriculum reform promotes more student-centered teaching in which students are supposed to play a more active role in learning. Publishers have changed the way textbooks are written to facilitate this. There is less text that directly spells out the knowledge students are supposed to learn, and instead, there are more suggestions for discussions and activities that lead students to figure the knowledge out themselves. This presents big challenges to teachers who are not necessarily experts in the subject matter and have not been trained to use these new methods. Let me tell you about a science lesson we are teaching as an example.*

At our last science subject meeting, the 6th grade science teacher called out for help on a lesson that she felt was a disaster and needed to re-teach. We decided to plan the lesson as a group. All of the science teachers looked at the chapter in the textbook, which was about bridges. We were confused. It took about 15 minutes of intense thought, guessing and discussion to decide on a realistic objective that students could meet by doing the suggested experiments and reading the text: students will learn how to make arch bridges and suspension bridges stronger by adjusting the distance between the top of the arch or pillar and the road. None of us knew much about bridges, the textbook didn't make these concepts clear to us, and there is no corresponding teachers' guide. We were at a loss about how to approach it. Thankfully, Steve (a RCEF Teaching Coach) and his scientific mind came to our rescue. He explained the concepts to us and how the suggested experiments could illustrate it. We decided that we would have the students do the suspension bridge experiment. That would take up a whole period, so we revised our objectives to focus only on suspension bridges. It had taken the whole team of teachers (which included several teaching college graduates, one ex-doctor and one Harvard graduate student) most of the meeting time just to figure out what the heck this lesson was about.

The next day, Steve, two science teachers and I got together to try out the experiment and plan the lesson. This process took nearly two hours.

The research question is: Do taller pillars need to bear more or less pressure than shorter pillars on suspension bridges? Two chairs are used to represent the suspension pillars and an object is dangled from a string between the chairs to represent the weight of the road and cars (see picture). We had to run through the experiment a few times. As we ran through the experiment, we found that some parts would obviously cause chaos or confusion when students ran it themselves. The textbook gave no detailed instructions, so we had to think of ways of setting up the experiment and giving instructions that would prevent this from happening. For example, the book doesn't even remind students and teachers that all other variables (such as the distance of our hands from the chairs) need to remain constant.

Finally, we had to think of how to translate the experiment into more concrete terms so that it can apply to bridges in real life. This is more difficult than you would think. The purpose of the experiment is to figure out whether the pillars should be built taller or shorter, but instead of heightening and shortening the chairs which represent pillars, the experiment asks us to raise or lower the object representing the road. Students would naturally come to the conclusion that the road should be built lower, and not that the pillars need to be built higher. After several attempts, we finally came up with a process for enabling students to come to the correct conclusion. We proceeded to work out the nitty gritty logistics of the lesson (how to group students, how to introduce the lesson, how to divide materials etc.)

This lesson was hard enough for us, and we had the advantage of very collaborative colleagues, the support of a university math major and a firm belief in letting kids experiment. No wonder most teachers just give up and have the kids memorize the puny text boxes. This leaves their students worse off than before because the text boxes don't even fully flesh out concepts like the old textbooks did. I'm delighted to see that the Ministry of Education wants to move away from memorizing and teaching from the textbook, word for word. But as they move away from long tracts of text that directly feed knowledge to students, teachers need to be trained and given resources to understand what they are teaching and how to teach it. This is a need that we are now working to fulfill. After working through how to teach this lesson, and many others like it, we will create detailed and practice-based resources for other rural teachers.



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## 3rd Grade Science Class

Ron Sung | Posted on October 11th, 2008

**Teacher** Pei and I have focused on providing the 3rd grade students with a very hands-on science curriculum.

The funny thing about the science textbooks in China is that each chapter is filled with pictures and drawings of kids doing science experiments, but never clear instructions on how the teacher should allow his/her students to also do the science experiments. The textbook also details the results of the experiments, thereby giving students the answers so they never need to conduct experiments themselves—this is stupid.

Two projects from 3rd grade I want to highlight are:

1. Students investigating plants around their school

The goal was to have students use their five senses to investigate trees found around the school campus. The students were extremely excited (and a bit difficult to control) when Mr. Pei announced to the class that they'd be heading outside the classroom to conduct nature observations. Mr. Pei gave each student a sheet of computer paper to fold into four sections. In each section, they would describe and draw the tree's bark, leaves, fruit, and overall structure. The pictures show students using crayons to rub tree bark on their paper.

2. Students creating a cartoon about snails.

As hard as we tried, Mr. Pei and the students couldn't find a live snail around the school for an experiment, which he blamed on the seasonal cold weather. Nonetheless, after reading about snails and watching YouTube videos of them crawling around and eating leaves, Mr. Pei and I designed a project for students to each create a cartoon of a snail. Students would first spend some time drafting a story, then grab some markers and start drawing their cartoon story. The pictures show students working on their story rough draft, selecting markers, and neatly creating their final product.



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## Exercise and Build Up Your Hometown

Jiang Peng | Posted on October 12th, 2008



**Ever** since I agreed to assist with physical education class teaching duties, apart from attempting various kinds of new activities, I feel more and more that I ought to use the skills I have learned over the years and pass them on to the children. At the same time, I want to mold a positive physical training atmosphere on campus.

In terms of skills, apart from the football class that has already started, the most suitable activity for children to do is skip rope. Back in the day, my own skipping rope ability could not be said to be low. In competitions, no matter if the event was long rope or individual rope, I always got a good ranking. For this I have to thank my old primary school which had a strong rope skipping culture. You could say that talent came forth in large numbers and I, as one who loved to play, immersed myself in the tradition. Now, from the way I understand the situation, if we used just half the energy that my old school had to launch a skipping rope event here, we would really be something in our small city. Of course these things are not that easy and we must move forward step by step.

For beginners, skipping the long rope has two main obstacles. One is the fear of the rope; the other is mastering the rhythm of the rope. The first problem is especially hard to overcome and the younger the child, the clearer this is. Thus, the teacher needs to give directions. The method I use is to mark a cross at the place in the middle of the rope and make the children sprint straight to that spot. I repeatedly warn them that “the more they aren’t willing to enter, and the more they stay at the side, the more likely they will get hit by the rope”. Afterward, when I see children with difficulty I just give them a push in the back at the moment when they can comfortably enter, thus helping them to overcome their psychological block.

Honestly speaking, at the beginning it really was very difficult. The main problem for many rural children is that, comparatively, they lack body coordination. Thus it required a lot of effort to guide them in every step, and everyday classes would require me to use up my voice. By now, every class from third grade to sixth has taken part in two to three lessons and progress isn’t bad. A large portion of students are already grasping the basics. I also hope to raise this sporting activity to the point where it is a big event for the whole school. In fact, I want to make it become a school tradition.

In addition, several of the fifth graders have surprised me very much. A few days ago, they suddenly ran up and grabbed me. They said that they wanted to learn long distance running and asked me to coach them. Luckily, when I was young, I also trained at long distance running, and seeing the positive attitude of this group of youngsters helped me recall the times when I myself trained madly every day. Ten years have passed in a flash and many scenes

flashed before my eyes. I couldn't help but sigh. These children have already kept up their training for one week. They asked me, "If we persist every day do you think we can be athletes?" and I replied, "Of course!" I'll probably have to set up a long distance running team. Mao Zedong said, "Exercise and protect the Motherland."

I say, "Exercise and in the future build up your own hometown."



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# A Day in the Life of Guan Ai School

Diane Geng | Posted on October 21st, 2008



**Ever** wonder what life is like everyday at a rural boarding school in China? Well, below is the daily schedule at Guan Ai Primary School. When the days start getting darker earlier, the schedule is adjusted slightly so that students wake up a bit later and get ready for bed a bit earlier. The schedule is obviously very full. However, Guan Ai has operated by this schedule length for the last three years and incredibly, the children brim over with energy from morning to night. As a boarding school, Guan Ai is responsible for the students twenty-four hours a day. Kids have nowhere else to go but stay in the school. Thus, they have evening study halls whereas at non-boarding schools, students often go home after 4 or 5 PM. Each grade has math and Chinese every day. In addition, they have English, Science, and Social Studies, and Physical Education about twice a week. Art and music are taught once a week each. Guan Ai only takes every other weekend off because parents say they are busy (or gone) and prefer their children to be taken care of as much as possible at school.

06:20		Wake Up
06:30	06:50	Wash Up
06:50	07:10	Morning Exercises
07:10	07:40	Morning Study Hall (Usually for reviewing and reciting lessons from their textbooks. Oral recitation is a very common learning technique in China.)
07:50	08:30	First Period
08:40	09:20	Second Period
09:20	10:00	Breakfast and Recess
10:10	10:30	Practicing Chinese Characters
10:40	11:20	Third Period
11:30	12:10	Fourth Period
12:20	01:00	Fifth Period
13:10	13:40	Sustained Silent Reading (free reading extracurricular books from the library or checking out books from the school library)
13:50	14:40	Lunch and Recess
14:50	15:30	Sixth Period
15:40	16:20	Study Hall 1
16:30	17:30	Extracurricular Classes (12 electives and each student voluntarily signs up for two, which are taught on alternate days. The electives are: Cooking, Poetry Recitation, Drama, Arts & Crafts, Chess, English Corner, Soccer, Chinese Yo-yo, Aerobics, Community Service, Story Time, and School Newspaper.)
17:30	17:50	Chores (Each grade sweeps out their own classroom and has a part of the school yard they are responsible for keeping clean. Grades rotate throughout the week to wheel out the school trash wagon and dump it in a nearby landfill. There are no public waste services in most rural villages.)

17:50	18:10	Recess
18:20	19:00	Dinner and Recess
19:10	20:00	Study Hall 2 (Once a week, movies are shown during this period. We strive for a combination of educational and entertaining programming. See Sara's previous post calling for suggestions.)
20:20		Rest



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## Trip to Dulangkou

Sun Huimiao | Posted on October 29th, 2008

I always heard that the Dulangkou classes were very effective. Visiting the school on 16th October was impressive. I could hear the buses with visitors at the school entrance. It was already past 8 AM when I walked through the school gate, but there was a big difference: this campus was not as quiet as most during class; you could hear the chatter of voices from afar. The principal invited us to his office, but we entered the class room after refusing his kind invitation.

I always thought that our classes were rather innovative, but never imagined their classes would leave me flabbergasted. In the first period we listened to a third-grade Chinese class and saw students speaking out freely, without raising their hands. Their posture was natural and confident. Sometimes they were reading out loud, sometimes reciting or expressing themselves in an emotional way, not a moment in a formal attitude. Students who were listening were either squatting on the floor, standing at the side or sitting on the table, but all were listening attentively. Around us were some visiting teachers standing and watching. Some of their faces were full of mystery and envy, but more showed doubt. This resulted in many teachers who wanted to ask questions to students on the spot, but they were kindly refused.

They were used to using the term ‘watching a class’ instead of ‘listening to a class’, because they often were sent away by students while in class. After the third-grade class, I was wondering: “Will the first-grade be the same? If the first graders were only a little bit worse than third graders and reach this level, this really would be quite impressive, considering that they just arrived at this school nearly two months ago. This would also prove that their teaching methods are very effective.” After listening to three classes straight, I felt that their classrooms were really like heaven for them. A student wrote the following on the blackboard: “In my class room, I’m in charge, I learn and I’m happy.” “An open classroom changed my personality”, etc. Everywhere you go, you could feel the students’ presence. Some profound thoughts of students were also displayed in a glass frame outside the class room.

Between the classes, I overheard a student from Hainan saying: “Back at home, the teacher would not allow me to speak during class, but here I can express myself freely.” Hearing this child’s words, I could feel the teachers’ grief. We need to say “don’t talk” at least once a day, but this restricts their right to express themselves. Everyday, we feel bothered by the overactiveness of children, but why don’t we use this overactive quality? Here at the Dulangkou school, they are making use of these two characteristics.

There are black boards at all four sides of the class room: if students wish to write something, they just run up to the black board. This allows every student the opportunity to express themselves. To speak out when you wish and to compete expressing yourself allows the students to taste the

fun of competition. But mentioning this, some people might think: “Won’t this create conflicts between them?” But I only see cooperation and support, because they are competing within a small group. Good students will assist students who have learning difficulties, which also results in learning in stages. Recently, I am pondering about how to reach this integrated natural state of learning. I try to look for the answer in each class room. I want to find a teacher to talk about this, but they seem to be very busy. I didn’t have any choice but to bother Principal Zhang who helped me to arrange a meeting with the director of the first grade Chinese language class. After talking to him, I finally understood that the essence of Chinese language teaching is to evoke passion and create the right mindset.

At noon and after finishing a sumptuous lunch, I was lucky to attend a meeting organized by the principal. They said it was a meeting, but it was more like a complete turnaround in thinking. Principal Cui Qisheng talked about the school’s philosophy which was really useful for my own thoughts. In just over one day, I learned too much, but there were more things I didn’t learn. In the end, all I could do was to leave while pondering silently and slowly, thinking about my future plans.





## Where are the Rural Students?

Diane Geng | Posted on November 17th, 2008

**Several** weeks ago, a few RCEF staff went to visit rural schools about an hour's drive from our headquarter site, Guan Ai School. The facilities were impressive: buildings in stable condition, spacious walkways, lots of room for running around. Coming from Guan Ai, which is bursting at the seams, we felt a bit envious! But something was missing. Many cavernous classrooms were empty or had just a handful of children all huddled up at the front. Campuses that could handle nearly a thousand students were only at 10% capacity. Where were all the students?

The explanation from the principals (who seemed rather numbed) was that over the past few years, their once bustling student bodies have siphoned off in large numbers to urban schools. Student migration is a reality of public education in rural China today. Even though tuition is free at public schools, many rural people have lost confidence in the quality of public rural education. Local people know the principals and teachers in the area. They know their backgrounds and whether or not they are responsible and dedicated. Educators with the best reputations have transferred to city schools where social status, payment and resources are better. From there, their students, starting with the most academically strong, usually follow and the result has been a mass exodus. However, rural families shouldn't have to look to cities for quality education. It's a waste to let good rural schools lie empty and unused and there are rural educators who want to improve. Thus, RCEF is committed to helping rural schools reform so they can attract and serve well the 80% of Chinese school-aged children who are from rural areas.

Guan Ai School is a good example of this. It used to be the village public school but was closed down after dwindling to about 20 students. That's when local villagers Mr. Yang and Ms. Sun came in, reviving the school under their management. They attracted around 200 students by delivering on their promise of hardworking teachers and love and care for all children. Now, with the support of RCEF, Guan Ai is pursuing more explicit reforms of curriculum and teaching. This will help it become a great rural education option for local people and pave the way for practical reform in neighboring schools. We hope you will support RCEF and Guan Ai in this exciting endeavor!

## \* Comments

*Marco Flagg | Posted on November 19th, 2008*

It seems that the empty schools are strong examples of not only the physical evidence of rural migration to cities, but also shows some of the reasons behind such decisions. There is no question that parents want what's best for their children. So if they don't feel that their kids are getting the

opportunity they need they should be able to make the choice. I just wonder if it's based on fact or on a kind of prejudice.

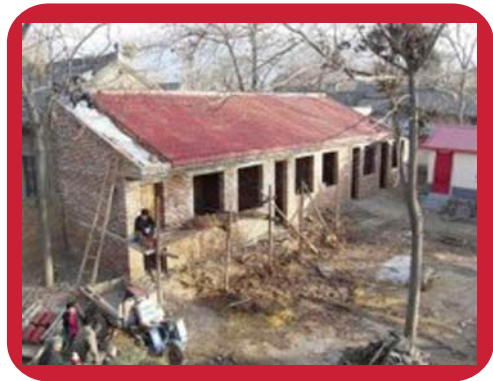
More money and resources are found in the cities so they attract the talent and knowledge from smaller areas. But the fact that enough students are transferring to the city that schools are being forced to close is quite amazing. Are the rural schools that bad or is it that parents think that they are? In any case, I'm sure such a phenomenon can cause harm to the rural communities' future possibilities. What will become of such a place if the new generation is educated outside of the place that they live? How does it affect how they value their hometown, what they are taught, and their decision to stay or leave?

RCEF, Guan Ai and other schools/organizations that are working to improve education in rural places seem to be first witnesses to some of the more harmful effects that migration may have on the communities they work in. Yet they are also on the frontlines of helping to preserve the communities that are increasingly being left behind. Rural schools have had and continue to have hardships but it doesn't necessarily mean they should be abandoned. Because as important as education is to a community, if schools go, then they take the next generation of students with them.



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## New Construction at Guan Ai Primary School

Kiel Harell | Posted on December 8th, 2008

**Last** year, construction at Guan Ai Primary School began with the building of two new wood buildings donated by Canada Wood, a non-profit organization. The two buildings are being used as offices for the teachers and RCEF staff members so they have space to design lesson plans, attend trainings, and reflect on their teaching. This year will be one of further construction and renovation as we work to make Guan Ai the safe, comfortable and welcoming environment the students and teachers deserve.

This year's construction plans are off to a great start. Last week, a local building crew completed the construction of a new kitchen. This is an incredibly important building for our school as the students eat three-square meals on campus every day of the week. In addition to being better looking and sturdier than the previous one, the new kitchen boasts several important features. Most importantly, it is twice the size of the old kitchen. This makes life easier for our cooking staff that prepares food for over two hundred people at every meal. The new kitchen also has running water inside and five separate water taps outside. The outside taps make it easier for students to wash their own dishes after each meal. Finally, the new kitchen has a covered cellar for storing the fresh vegetables that are prepared each meal.

As soon as the building crew was done with the new kitchen, they moved onto the cafeteria. The old cafeteria was only large enough for the first, second and third grade students to use during meal times, leaving the older students to eat outside or in their classrooms. In addition to being too small for our student body, it was also dilapidated with crumbling walls and a leaking ceiling. Along with the old kitchen, the cafeteria has been torn down. Presently, the building crew is working a new building that will stand in its place. The new building will house the principals' office and living quarters, a new library and a storage area. A new cafeteria will be built in a different location on campus later this year.



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## A Science Experiment that Changed My Thinking

Sun Huimiao | Posted on December 9th, 2008

I brought lots of glass bottles to the science experiment class because I thought that plastics bottles would be easier for the students to knock over. Ron Sung watched the class and offered some suggestions for improvement. He asked me, "How do you feel the class went?" I said, "Not too bad, though perhaps a little long." Then he asked, "Why do you think it is that it went too long?" I replied, "I think the experiment needed that much time." The advice he gave me was this: "It doesn't have to take so long, and you can use plastic bottles. You didn't lay down any ground rules at the start of the class which meant that it became a bit unruly." His advice made me realize that several things I thought before were wrong. I think when students are doing experiments they're bound to get excited and it's no cause for concern. Even if a few students knock over bottles during the experiment I wouldn't say anything. Ron said, "If you want to keep order during the experiment, in addition to laying down rules at the beginning you also have to punish the students who break them." I learnt from what he said that I was wrong before to think that experiments were fun and that it didn't matter too much if they got a bit out of hand. Science is a serious subject and it requires a serious approach. I think that Ron Sung has a strict as well as fun approach to science.

For the next experiment, I used plastic bottles and set some rules, and the results were much better. This time, one group broke the rules three times in a row and eventually I stopped their experiment. There were also some students who wrote their reports using overly simple language and did not fill them out carefully enough.



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## What About Rural China?

Marco Flagg | Posted on December 9th, 2008

In the next twenty years China will:

- Add 350 million people to its urban centers
- Build an estimated 50,000 skyscrapers and other massive public works projects
- Hit peak coal production

Pretty amazing huh?

A collection of some of the brightest minds and leaders in urban development, green technologies and business came together at the recent JUCCCE China Energy Forum in Beijing. They discussed how to use green technology to address the challenges that the country will face in the next twenty years as a result of an explosion in urban growth and limited traditional energy resources like fossil fuels. It was akin to hearing a forecast about the very future of China. From the use of several awe inspiring statistics, it was clear that cities would be the focus of the economic and developmental policy that will guide the country's future. Clearly, urbanization seems to be an unavoidable path for China and countries throughout the world. But with all this talk about cities, are rural areas getting left out?

According to "Preparing for China's Urban Billion," a report published by the McKinsey Global Institute, rural residents will continue migrating to cities at an increasingly higher rate:

"We expect that rapid urban development coupled with surplus populations in the countryside will together act to boost the mobile population to about an additional 240 million people in the next 20 years." (McKinsey Global Institute, 17)

With this news there are two questions to ask: What will happen to the migrant population when they enter these mega-cities, and what will happen to the small towns and villages that they leave behind? I feel that the majority of policy makers and NGOs will look to address the former question, but only the Rural China Education Foundation and a handful of other organizations will want to tackle the latter one. Yet, both questions are equally important.

Because RCEF's goal is to promote rural education and rural development, it must work hard to fight the popular notion that urbanization is the only way forward in China, lest we find more and more talented students and resources leaving the smaller cities (McKinsey Global Institute, 30). This continued brain drain will severely limit the rural population's future. One must question such policy when rural areas are still relied upon to raise food to feed China's massive population. Who will have the knowledge or interest to farm if the goal of most rural people is to head to the city? David Turnbull, an experienced architect who has created unique projects all over the world, from Sudan to New Orleans, echoed concerns about the neglect of rural issues at the conference in a

conversation with me and Diane Geng. With all the talk about urbanization Mr. Turnbull felt that a comparable panel on “ruralization” was needed. He saw a vital link between urban and rural areas that is essential for the survival of both stating, “A city can’t survive without a clearly organized productive rural landscape.”

If migration from smaller villages continues unabated, the abandoned “ghost villages” could have an incredibly damaging effect on the national economy. He gave an example of this happening in England during the Industrial Revolution. When the farmers left their homes to work in the cities, what was once productive agricultural land gradually lost its usefulness and become little more than a vision of picturesque countryside. This is okay in a small country like the UK, but in a large agricultural country like China that must feed more than a billion citizens, such effects could be disastrous.

Mr. Turnbull praised the work that RCEF was doing to help revive rural communities in China, saying that, “The success of your school [Guan Ai] is more important to me than the development of a casino in Macau.” He felt strongly that credible models of rural education and villages would help motivate the next generation of rural Chinese to develop their hometowns. He also shared a few of his own ideas for the design of Guan Ai’s facilities and curriculum with us, one of which was to consider creating a large multi-use space that the students could use for a variety of activities.



## Guan Ai Launches Parent Training Program!

Jiang Peng | Posted on December 26th, 2008



**Teachers** at Guan Ai School strongly believe that parents and home education play extremely important roles in the education of their children. However, in the countryside many parents are not conscious of this. On our visits to students' homes, we almost always hear problems about communication between parents, their children and their views on education. Here are some examples:

Upon entering fourth grade, one mother complained that her daughter had stopped talking to her. Upon arriving home, the girl would just drop her bag and go straight to watch the television. Some parents go away to work for two years and when they return, they discover that their son or daughter has changed and does not open up or speak to them much. The parents don't know what their children are thinking and have no idea how to communicate with them. It leaves them feeling very worried and helpless to change things.

There is another child who has problems with his studies. His father has placed all responsibility and hope for his improvement on the school saying that he does not understand education. In light of these issues, we feel that the school has a responsibility to improve the way parents are involved in their children's education. That's why we decided to organize Parent Training Meetings. Inviting parents to be the first participants was not that hard. We chose parents who have been most supportive and trusting of the school so far. We don't see these parents just as trainees but also as potential members of a parents' committee that will participate in the school's strategic decision making. Each teacher nominated around 20 parents. We have great expectations for them and hope that they will become a part of the Guan Ai family.

Six teachers planned the meeting. Each of them did a wonderful job and shared with the parents the school's thinking, direction and goals. Afterwards, they recounted their own methods of teaching children. Through their hard work, they created a warm atmosphere at the meeting and I believe every parent at the event felt it was very worthwhile. This was also reflected in the questionnaire at the end.

The meeting was divided up into 3 main parts. First, each teacher introduced to the parents the school's philosophy, teaching methods, and classroom activities. Afterwards, some teachers gave parents a report on family education and shared their own thoughts as well. Following this, small groups of teachers and students held a discussion about communicating with their children. At the end, each group reported back what they talked about. Overall it can be said the three parts achieved their objectives and most importantly enabled the parents who were at the meeting to understand the main points of the school's philosophy and the importance of family education. At the same time, it also gave them some useful suggestions and experience.

After the meeting was over, many of the parents stayed behind for quite a long time talking. Some of the parents at the meeting even suggested that we hold more such events. This is only a start but we hope that we can sustain the value of these meetings and that they will become a highlight of the school.



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## New Year's Celebration at Guan Ai

Diane Geng | Posted on December 31st, 2008



Guan Ai's annual New Year's (Yuan Dan) Celebration took place yesterday on a chilly but clear day. After breakfast, motorbikes started piling up outside the school gate as students' guardians arrived. Some of them had just returned from working in cities and hadn't seen their kids in weeks or months. Each class set up tables outside to show off students' work from the semester. Excited children answered questions about their drawings, posters, handwriting samples, and even science experiments. In addition to a Parents' Meeting held earlier this month, this "Open House" style was meant to help guardians better understand Guan Ai's educational philosophy and methods.

One of the liveliest activities was a "Marketplace Experiment" in which students "sold" friendship bracelets that they had made themselves. Guardians got special "Guan Ai Money" to make purchases in this "internal economy" where students exercised marketing, production, and sales skills. A lot of bargaining was going on as students displayed their different colors and designs and competed to make the most profit while recouping the cost of their thread. (This activity was the brainchild of RCEF Teaching Coach Ron Sung. He will describe it in more detail in a future post.)

After browsing the tables, everyone migrated to the back field for student performances of things they'd learned in their extracurricular classes this semester. Groups of students told stories, sang Chinese and English songs, and demonstrated jump rope and Chinese yo-yo tricks. The last event was a parent-child team competition. Twelve pairs of parents and children (more than expected!) volunteered to participate in a balloon stomping competition. It's a bit hard to describe so we'll be uploading a video of the whole day to RCEF's YouTube Channel soon!



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