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China boosts rural education

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Abstract (Summary)

Sun joined the fourth year of the Summer Service Learning Program that - with support from the Wang Foundation of Pebble Beach, Calif. - sends 150 of Tsinghua's brightest to rural China to share the skills they used to escape poverty. (This year, administrators stopped 60 Americans from coming, fearing they might spread the H1N1 virus.) That meant students in the 2009 summer English immersion classes were not forced to speak English full time; they could use their Chinese as a crutch with visiting Tsinghua students.

Full Text (967 words)

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Sun Liyuan surprised herself with her passion for teaching English as a volunteer in northwest China's impoverished Qinghai Province, not far from where she grew up as the daughter of a rural schoolmaster.

The Tsinghua University junior was initially ambivalent about the program that her school, one of the top universities in China, had set up to help educate farmers bypassed by China's 30-year economic boom.

But Ms. Sun soon postponed preparations for the Graduate Record Exam she'd planned to take in order to study in the United States. The chemical engineering major liked the idea of giving back.

Sun joined the fourth year of the Summer Service Learning Program that - with support from the Wang Foundation of Pebble Beach, Calif. - sends 150 of Tsinghua's brightest to rural China to share the skills they used to escape poverty.

For 10 days in July, Sun and four classmates went to Ledu, a town of 20,000 on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau. Most of the 1,400 students at Ledu Experimental High School board in cement-floored dormitories. Their families grow barley and herd goats in the nearby mountains.

Seeing the scruffy teens in blue-and-white track suits, Sun came face to face with her past - a place where incomes average \$475 a year and rote teaching crushes imagination. The experiment in Ledu, Sun hoped, would offer these students a chance to meet role models who'd stuck to their dreams.

"The most important thing is to raise their confidence," says Sun, wearing a Tsinghua "Yes We Can" T-shirt that nods to a popular US election campaign refrain. "If I can show them that I'm from a place like this, too, then they can know they could make a success."

Overcoming the English hurdle

Alongside Chinese and math, English is a major feature of China's college-A-entrance exam, the gao kao. By the time they finish at Ledu Experimental, students will have studied English for three to 10 years. But with a lack of strong rural primary schoolteachers, especially in English, the Ledu Experimental kids average only 50 out of a possible 150 points on that portion of the gao kao.

Preliminary data show that 3,014 students took the gao kao in

Ledu County in 2009 and 85 percent passed it. At Ledu Experimental, however, teachers said even the highest English scores were below 100, and only 20 percent of the youths would go to college, held back by the need for farmhands and a failure to understand what English-language skills could offer.

To open the Ledu kids' eyes, Tsinghua, for the past three years, has imported hundreds of American students from Wayne State University in Detroit; Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash.; and the University of California, San Diego. The students volunteered their native English-speaking skills for a glimpse of a wider world. (This year, administrators stopped 60 Americans from coming, fearing they might spread the H1N1 virus.)

That meant students in the 2009 summer English immersion classes were not forced to speak English full time; they could use their Chinese as a crutch with visiting Tsinghua students.

"If I study English, they say I can have a better future and broader culture," says teenager Ran Xiaoling without conviction - and in Chinese. She's from nearby Qingren village. Unlike students living on China's wealthy east coast, who often learn English from pirated movies and TV, Ran isn't even sure if the two foreign films she's seen were in English.

One of her teachers is Li Qinglian, a local resident who has never strayed far from home. She used to teach at the Ledu No. 1 High School, most of whose students go on to college each year. In 2008, one graduate even went to prestigious Tsinghua, in Beijing. But Ms. Li decided to switch to Ledu Experimental, hoping to help the poorest children and to earn a better salary herself.

"They arrive with such poor spoken English," Li says in her own halting English. "They learn English to take the gao kao. They take the gao kao to make more money."

Li admits she teaches to the test. Teaching some 100 students each term, she seldom offers individual attention. The Ledu teachers don't see eye to eye with the Tsinghua students who, they say, have forgotten how hard it can be in a rural classroom. Meanwhile, the Tsinghua volunteers are appalled at the local teachers' treatment of their students. One laughed at a student's poor English in front of visitors.

Struggling to reach potential

Xu Yuansheng, Ledu Experimental's headmaster, is former county education vice minister. Mr. Xu says the county is stretched thin by its four high schools and 40 mostly rural primary and middle schools. He won't reveal the budget of Ledu Experimental, but says tuition for annual room, board, and materials cost about \$117 per pupil. If all 1,400 children paid tuition in full, revenues would reach \$163,800.

Xu boasts of growing success based partly on what he characterizes as openmindedness among the region's various ethnic groups. "People here have always accepted different ideas about life and valued education," he says. But he allows that, these days, "most high school graduates who go to college leave and don't come back."

The Tsinghua volunteers are not convinced that the program is close to realizing its potential. To Sun, the local girl who did come back, Ledu Experimental is not living up to its name. "They are not willing to experiment," she says.

When some of her colleagues accuse her of bucking authority, staying up until 3 a.m. to rearrange the teaching plan, her passion shows through. "I just want to fulfill this campaign's purpose," she says, "not just talk about it."(c) Copyright 2009. The Christian Science Monitor

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