

# ICWA LETTERS

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**The Institute of Current World Affairs**  
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

CE-3 1998  
THE AMERICAS

*Chenon Egawa is a Fellow of the Institute studying the marketing of Native American products, crafts and produce in MesoAmerica.*

## A Matter of Identity

MAZATLAN, Mexico

February 1998

Mr. Peter B. Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

After months of anticipation, I had finally arrived. The plane touched down in Mazatlan, a well-known tourist resort on Mexico's Pacific Coast in the State of Sinaloa. I had come to attend a winter planting ceremony to be held on the night of the new moon, in the Tepehuan community of El Trebol, two and a-half hours south of Mazatlan. I had been invited to attend the ceremony by a Miskito Indian friend of mine in California. Another adventure — an opportunity to experience the world through another culture's reality, and through their reality, expand the parameters of my own.

A man from El Trebol came to the airport to pick me up, along with several others who were arriving the same day from across the Americas. It was late afternoon by the time we all headed south to El Trebol. En route, we made a brief stop in the town of Esquinapa to pick up two other participants who had arrived a day earlier from Cuzco, Peru. From Esquinapa, El Trebol is directly east, across the mountain range, the actual distance being about 50 kilometers as the crow flies. There is no road through the mountains, however, so we took a circuitous route along the foothills to arrive at El Trebol an hour and a half later. Despite the last stretch of bumpy, dirt road, it was a pleasant ride. The climate was mild and comfortable, almost semi-tropical. Andean flutes and drums were playing on the tape deck, creating a perfect musical atmosphere for the scenery that was breezing by our windows. The sun was setting in a clear sky over desert and barren mountains that formed beautiful, sharp, jagged peaks, one of which looked just like a profile of a man's face looking skyward.

Our truck finally emerged from the dark, dirt road, into the sparsely lit village of El Trebol, passing a rudimentary town square, the largest building being the church. The other houses were small adobe structures with traditional-style roofs made of huge palm fronds. Loud music came from one of the buildings, blaring through the main square by way of a jury-rigged PA system. "What's going on there?" I asked the driver. "That is *their* ceremony," he said. *Their*, being the Catholics in this case, the "nontraditional" people of the community. *Their* ceremony was the bottle, an answer to nothing.

Most of the Tepehuans at El Trebol are Catholic, and many of the traditional ways, including the language, have been virtually eradicated. A few elders still speak the language, but the youth speak only Spanish. Many people in the community still carry out traditional ceremonies, however, particularly for the planting and harvesting of maize. They could perhaps be considered *Syncretists*, combining Catholicism with traditional religious practices. In El Trebol, conflicts between the Syncretists and Catholics are played out in bitter family feuds, creating



an atmosphere of jealousy, envy and hatred within the village. The history of why things have devolved to this level needs to be understood; more often than not, it seems that judgments are made without seeking complete understanding, setting stereotypes of entire peoples firmly in place. Many factors play a part in what appears to be intense religious division. The roots of the conflict actually run much deeper, and nothing can be explained in simplistic terms.

Like many native communities, El Trebol has undergone a forced transition to Catholicism over the past 400 years. They have been subjected to missionary movements, that, in the name of God, sought and still seek to abolish native traditions — language, customs and religions. Despite intense efforts by Catholic and other Christian missionary movements to convert native cultures, I have yet to see a successful transition; many native peoples seem to be left hanging in a state of limbo — enough of their traditional ways having been excised so that they can no longer go back to them, yet the adjustment to a new language, a 'new' God and a new lifestyle having never been quite completed. The effect of this process on any people always seems destructive — first of the family unit, next of the community and lastly, the identity — the spirit. When these important and essential foundations that define a culture are removed and their worth negated, it is easy to understand why so many people are left with feelings of shame, worthlessness and despair — conditions that provide a perfect breeding ground for dysfunctional behavior.

We passed through the Catholic part of town without stopping, and continued on to the ceremonial grounds that lay just beyond, physically separated from the rest of the town by a fence that ran the length of the adjoining

properties all the way down to the river. We stayed within the boundaries of the ceremonial grounds for the duration of our visit.

It was late at night by the time we got settled in, the women sleeping in one hut, the men in another. It was not until the following day that I could see what the fenced off ceremonial grounds looked like. That morning I met Edmond, a non-native from Canada who had been working with the Tepehuans at El Trebol for 20 years.

"We started this project here six years ago with several of the Traditional Tepehuan families to make improvements to the ceremonial grounds. Before that, this area was covered with tall, thick, thorny bushes, so dense you could hardly cut your way through with a machete. All of this that you see has been done by a small number of people. It's a good example of how the vision, intent and hard work of a few that are really focused can be much more powerful and effective than sheer numbers that lack those same qualities," Edmond told me as we toured the grounds.

Together they had cleared about 10 acres and transformed it into a small paradise. The hard work was evident and impressive. One area they had been working on was the medicinal plant nursery, where numerous varieties of medicinal plants, herbs and saplings were flourishing. "Everything grows well here. It is amazing how accepting this soil is for so many medicinal plant varieties," Edmond told me. "We are able to produce enough medicines here for the needs of thousands of people." In addition to medicinal plants, they had planted *jamaica*<sup>1</sup>, papaya and citrus trees six years earlier, all of which were bearing loads of flowers and fruits. Afternoons, when the sun was really beating down, the kids would go and pluck

a giant, orange papaya from a tree, slice it and serve it up for everyone. The fertility and adaptability of the soil to produce so many plant varieties was attributed in great part to the strong prayers that had been laid down upon this land year after year by the Tepehuans.

I was curious about how and why Edmond had become so involved with the Tepehuans. As a non-Indian who has chosen to dedicate his life to learning about and working with native spiritual leaders, Edmond has acquired a controversial reputation among native peoples. I had heard both skepticism and praise for him. I would see later, that not only was he respectful of the Tepehuan ceremonial ways, but his intentions were good and his dedication to the work being done in the community at El Trebol had brought many positive results. I would also see that positive change — in this case, cultural revival — has to come from within the community. The well wishes and efforts of outsiders, however noble and just, can only support, not carry, these efforts.

He had come to Mexico for the first time when he was a young man of seventeen, living for several years in a Huichol Indian community very near El Trebol and apprenticing in the ways of the peyote or *hikuri*<sup>2</sup> religion with Lupe. Lupe, a Huichol grandmother now in her eighties, a *maracame*, or spiritual leader, has also traveled extensively for many years throughout native communities in the Americas doing spiritual work through healing circles and peyote ceremonies. Edmond and Lupe have both been working with the Tepehuans, opening the doors of El Trebol to visitors from other native communities throughout the Americas with the hope of facilitating opportunities for different tribes to come together, interact, and share ideas and experiences.

Lupe was expected to be at El Trebol for the ceremony, but was unable to attend at the last minute. It was unfortunate, because she is highly regarded as both a spiritual leader and a matriarch, and over the years she has been able to work successfully with the Tepehuan community, particularly the women. It was through her that issues such as physical abuse, alcoholism and loss of traditions were brought out into the open for the first time, to be discussed and dealt with in a constructive manner. She is the person who has facilitated discussions between Tepehuan women and visiting women from other native communities. Through talking circles she has led, women from many different tribes have been able to talk about how they are dealing with similar problems and issues in their

own communities. Everyone felt Lupe's absence; without her leadership there was minimal interaction between the locals and the visitors.

I explored the rest of the grounds on my own. The huts were built in traditional Tepehuan style, circular with cone-shaped roofs made of huge, interwoven palm fronds. Concrete foundations had been poured for the floors and there were adobe walls about five feet high. The palm roofs came down just over the top of the walls along the outer rim to keep out sun, wind and rain, while still letting in a breeze in hot weather. There was a special house for women's activities and gatherings, and several huts for visitors — mainly Huicholes and Tarahumaras, a cave-dwelling people who had come from the Copper Canyon to participate in this ceremony.

One of the nicest houses was built for *Yopo* ceremonies; it was similar to the others, but more in the style of the *Piaroa* people from the Venezuelan Amazon.<sup>3</sup> The shape was still circular, but the walls were only about 2-1/2 feet high and the palm roof was much higher than the others, close to 25 feet.

Over the last six years, two power generators had been brought in and hooked up to pumps that fed a series of water pipes that ran from the river to various locations throughout the community. Before that time, water had to be hauled by hand from the river a quarter of a mile away. Several large reservoirs had been constructed to hold the water, allowing all families to have access to water near their homes. Outhouses were built and a sewer system had been put in. Two outdoor kitchens were built, one over by the main house, where all meals were served during the encampment, and the other next to the ceremonial grounds. The kitchens had open sides and were covered with thatched roofs. Several stoves had been made from adobe, each a grill with a fire pit below, since all cooking is still done with fire.

The women got up at 4:30 every morning to *tortiliar* (the process of making tortillas). They soaked the large, hard corn kernels, both red and white, in a mixture of water and lime (from limestone) to soften them. Then they fed handfuls of the pre-soaked corn into a hand-cranked grinder, grinding it down into a coarse, grainy mixture. In the next step, they ground it on the *mocajete*, or grinding stone, until it was worked into a fine, malleable dough, or *masa*. The *masa* were formed into small balls, and patted back and forth rapidly from one hand to another until they

<sup>1</sup> Jamaica is a flower that grows on a small, bush-like tree. The bright red flower is high in vitamin C, and is used to make tea.

<sup>2</sup> Hikuri is the Huichol name for peyote.

<sup>3</sup> Edmond has been studying with some of the *Piaroa* Shamans and healers of Venezuela for the past four years, and had built this medicine house in their honor when they came to El Trebol some years ago. The shamans had come to attend one of the winter ceremonies. During their stay they had conducted a *Piaroa* ceremony, or *Yopo* ceremony, for the Tepehuans, and before they returned to Venezuela, they passed on to Edmond a medicine bundle containing many of their instruments — *Yopo*, gourds, feathers, short, bow-shaped wooden benches and other ceremonial implements — in order that he could continue to hold the *Piaroa* ceremonies with the Tepehuans. Many of the Traditional Tepehuans, primarily the women, have been using this medicine ever since. Some of the Tepehuans have also been to Venezuela to visit the *Piaroa* people, and many will travel to Venezuela again in February to participate in *Piaroa* ceremonies.



*Tarahumaras weaving baskets*

were perfect circles. From there, they were placed on the *comal* to cook. The process was long and arduous, and the women prepared tortillas throughout the day, serving them at breakfast, lunch and dinner. They were the best tortillas I had ever tasted!

I was amazed at how efficient everything was. The level of participation and cooperation by everyone involved was impressive. I learned later that when the ceremonies end, the grounds lie barren and empty. The women, who apparently are paid to cook for these occasions, return home — beyond the fence. There were no gatherings at the women's house, nor any community activities from January to March, when the next planting ceremony would take place. It was disappointing to hear. Somehow, I wanted to believe that these people were doing better, despite the many obvious difficulties.

The planting and harvest ceremonies take place three times a year, and are always extremely important to the segment of the community that chooses to participate in them. The purpose of the ceremonies is to pray for the success of the maize crop, for the land to be blessed with an abundance of rain, and for the harvest to be fruitful. For decades, an elder came down to El Trebol from another Tepehuan community in the outlying mountainous region to run each ceremony. He alone knew the language, the specific prayers and the songs as they had been carried out in the old way. He would always play the bow — an ancient stringed instrument, a huge inverted arc five feet across, that sounded throughout the entire night of each ceremony. The bow player was also the singer, and the one who would set the tone for the ceremony — an important role that demanded complete focus. Despite problems in the community the ceremonies went on, but aside from

this elder, no one knew the intricacies of the ceremony, or the depth of the prayers that accompanied it. Less than six months ago, the old man was murdered while working in his fields. In addition to the great loss of this elder was the loss of all the knowledge that went with him. To this day nobody knows who murdered him, but there is much speculation that it was someone from the Catholic Tepehuans — perhaps an act of hatred or misunderstanding.

Without the old man to lead this ceremony, there was great concern about who was capable of carrying on the tradition. Santos was the only other man who knew how to sing and play the bow, and so more by default than desire he agreed to conduct the ceremony. He was reluctant, however, a half-hearted attitude that was dangerous for someone who was to play such a crucial role in the ceremony.

It takes a special kind of person to be a good leader, someone who can bring people together, someone who can bring out the best in others and someone who is willing to take on tremendous responsibility. This issue, the lack of strong leadership, kept coming up.

Important preparations had to be properly taken to ensure the success of any ceremony. There were already several strikes against this one, and more problems would arise as the ceremony drew nearer. It would require full cooperation and participation by everyone to see it through. A circular area of 75 square meters was completely cleared and groomed where the ceremony was to be held, and enough firewood was gathered to feed the huge, central fire that would be kept burning throughout the night. A simple altar was erected on the east side of the grounds, made from tall wooden poles supporting a raised platform where all of the pipes, medicine bundles and giveaway



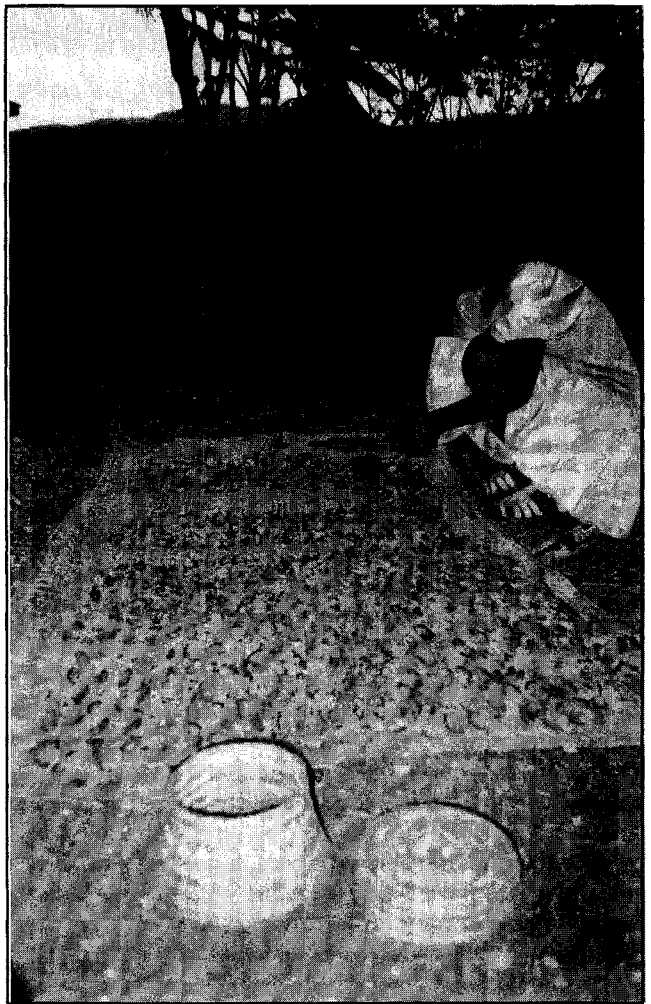
least their tolerance — of these ways in the future. In the evening, the ceremony went on as planned.

The central fire was lit in the late afternoon. The Tepehuans sat to the south and the visitors to the north. Together there were seven indigenous nations represented — Tepehuans, MicMacs, Cherokees, Lummi (my tribe), Mayans, Quechuas and Tarahumaras. The dried peyote and the peyote drink were placed before the altar. The sun dipped over the mountains in the West, so the warm glow of the fire was, the only light as we entered into the blackness of night. The bow sat in perfect balance upon its small stand. Santos perched upon the low bench before it, positioned between the fire and the altar, facing the east. As he began to play, the ancient harp-like sound of the bow broke the silence and he searched for the steady tune that would accompany his singing — a repetitive, hypnotic chant.

Just as the momentum began to build, the bowstrings snapped, an unfavorable sign that brought the entire ceremony to a standstill. Santos and several others worked to repair them, and a half-hour later the music began again. The medicine went around the circle, and people took as much or as little as they needed. Within an hour or two of ingesting the medicine the spirit of the peyote would work with each person, adding strength and power to the prayers that were being offered.

The people got up to dance, moving counterclockwise around the fire and the bow player; the men formed the inner circle, the women the outer circle. Everyone kept time with the bow and the singer, their footsteps upon the earth echoing the tone that had been set. As the veil of night got darker, the fire burned higher and brighter, seemingly responding to the energy of the dancers. Santos played four sets throughout the night; they lasted anywhere from two to three hours each. During the breaks, two of the Tarahumara men got up and warmed huge hand drums over the fire. When they started playing, all the other Tarahumara got up to dance, contributing to the prayers of the Tepehuans by sharing their own songs and dances. Those of us from North and South America shared our songs as well.

Before Santos started a new set, there was always a time of silence. He was well into the second set, with everyone was dancing around the fire, when the moon rose out of the east, through thin layers of clouds, casting its light upon the ceremony below. We continued as the moon made its slow journey across the sky, seeming to linger a bit longer when it had reached the point when it shone directly overhead. I was dancing with the others when an elderly Tepehuan woman dancing by me, swooped me up, locking her arm in mine, danced me around the fire for what seemed like an eternity. She was so happy to be dancing, and together we went round and round. The women's dance is a short-stepped shuffle — or light run — while the men's is more of a walk. When Santos' song finally came to a stop, she released my arm, giving



*Tepehuan girl placing cleaned, sliced peyote on mats to dry*

me a big smile and we each went back to our seats.

Each part of the night had its own sounds, its own motion, its own energy. Just before dawn there was complete silence, and as the sun approached the eastern horizon the colors began to come back to the land, the people and the sky, putting a rich glow into everything it touched. The final round was in progress and would continue so that we could greet the dawn of the new day. Some of the children had fallen asleep during the night, but everyone that was still awake was up dancing. As the sun began to show itself, the dancers reversed their direction, moving clockwise, approaching the altar, and backing off again, repeating these steps four times — gathering together all of the prayers and energy that had been put forth in the night. When the sun was fully up over the eastern sky the ceremony was complete; the cycle continued.

Sincerely,



*Peyote buttons before they were cleaned*

items were kept in order to be blessed. Many tribes throughout Mexico had historically used pipes as sacred instruments of prayer, but the Tepehuans are the last indigenous people of Mexico to continue this tradition.

Another important element was the preparation of the medicine, or peyote. One week earlier several Tepehuans had traveled to the desert where the peyote, a cactus plant, still grows in abundance. The peyote buttons, as they are called, ranged in size — some being no bigger than a dime and others up to 3" -4" in diameter. To scientists the plant is a hallucinogen, but to the many tribes throughout Mexico and North America that use peyote in ceremonies, it is a powerful medicine, and highly respected as such. It is a plant that has its own spirit, and a great ability to heal people on all levels — emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually. Peyote, it is said, was put here for use by many tribes, as evidenced by the varied and beautiful accounts of how it came to the people, "introducing" itself to them and explaining how it should be used and cared for.

At El Trebol we first cleaned the peyote, removing the small white fibers, or hairs, from the top of the plant and taking off the "bark," the outer cover surrounding the base and root of the plant that hardens after the cactus has been cut from the earth. For three days, the group of visiting women and I, and several of the Tepehuan children, worked with the medicine in a quiet, peaceful area of the grounds — cleaning it, slicing it and placing it on mats to dry in the sun. The day of the ceremony, the Tepehuan women prepared the medicine in another way, grinding the fresh plant on the *mocajete*, working it into a frothy, green beverage. Both preparations were served that night.

In addition to the preparations I have mentioned, each ceremony includes a deer hunt. A deer is always hunted, killed and brought to the altar as an offering. The deer, along with the corn and the peyote, represent the life-

blood of the people; through the offering of a deer, they ensure the health and well being of their community. Three mornings in a row, our hunters went out. Twice they returned with armadillos, but they never did get a deer. The ceremony had to go on without the sacred animal, which was taken as a negative sign — one that signified much hardship in the year to come.

As the day of the ceremony neared, tensions continued to build. The Catholic Tepehuans had threatened not to let the ceremony come to pass. They had already cut off the power generators so that the water could not be pumped up to the camp. Men were hanging around the perimeters of the grounds at night, threatening people and trying to pick fights with the Tepehuans who were involved in ceremonial preparations.

By the day the ceremony was to begin, threats had escalated to the point where we actually feared that there could be a violent confrontation during the night if the situation was not remedied. Every community in the state has a guaranteed right to water (a right that has not been given in many other states throughout Mexico), so it is illegal for a community's water supply to be cut off. In addition, the state guarantees the right to religious freedom; a threat of violence in an effort to stymie the ceremony was therefore also illegal. Edmond, and a couple of the Tepehuan men who had established decent relationships with local authorities over the years, drove into town for a meeting with the Governor to ensure that there would not be any more trouble. As a result, the Governor agreed to send the police to El Trebol in the early evening when the ceremony was to begin — an odd remedy for a volatile political situation, given the reputation of the Mexican police force. Still their visit would serve a dual purpose: to scare off the people threatening violence, and to allow the police to witness a bit of the ceremony for themselves in the hope that it would somehow improve their understanding or at



*Tarahumara women  
dancing at the ceremony*

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# Institute of Current World Affairs

FOUR WEST WHEELLOCK STREET  
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03755

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

## Institute Fellows and their Activities

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Christopher P. Ball.** An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Shelly Renae Browning.** A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Chenoa Egawa.** An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among meso-American Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

**Paige Evans.** A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has

served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

**Randi Movich.** The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

**Daniel B. Wright.** A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duiyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andraea, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

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Executive Director - Peter Bird Martin  
Program Administrator - Gary L. Hansen  
Publications Manager - Ellen Kozak

Phone: (603) 643-5548 Fax: (603) 643-9599  
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

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