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EAST ASIA

*Daniel Wright is an Institute Fellow studying the people and societies of inland China.*

## Reason to Hope

—China Youth Development Foundation—

*“This society of ours, every one of us, has the responsibility to ensure that each child receives at least the basics of learning. No child should be deprived the fundamental right of literacy.”*

— Xu Yongguang, founder, China Youth

GUIZHOU, China

September 1998

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter:

Day after day, week upon week, little Ming Yuanxue stood peering through the windowless opening into the dirt-floor classroom. With no desk, no stool, no pencil or paper, Ming Yuanxue's determined mind and scrawny legs provided all the hardware she needed to fix full attention on the teacher. Like the parents of millions of children across rural China, Ming Yuanxue's family could not afford to send her to school. But that didn't prevent her from standing longingly outside the classroom, absorbing all she could from the teacher as he stood in front of her seated friends. When test time came, the teacher, who had noticed her persistent presence and big-brown eyes, allowed Ming Yuanxue to take the exam. At the top of the test paper she turned in were written four words: *“Wo yao xuexi.”* — “I want to study.”

In the Spring of 1991, national newspapers, radio and television carried the above story as part of an effort by the China Youth Development Foundation to raise funds for Project Hope, its social-welfare program designed to promote the educational rights of poor children.<sup>1</sup>

Project Hope's founder Xu Yongguang's eyes sparkle as he recalls the success. The “advertisement” was the first time since 1949 that a fundraising letter

<sup>1</sup> Project Hope's mission statement reads: “China Youth Development Foundation initiated the Project Hope, a social welfare program, in October 1989 to raise much-needed funds for the improvement of educational conditions in China's poor areas and to promote youth development in China. Its goal is to safeguard the educational rights of children in poor areas. In line with government policy of raising educational funds from a variety of sources, Project Hope mobilizes Chinese and foreign materials and financial resources to help bring dropouts back to school, to improve educational facilities and to promote primary education in China's poverty-stricken areas.” You can visit its web site at <http://project-hope.cydf.cn/> China's Project Hope has no connection with the U.S. hospital-ship project of the same name.



China Youth Development Association

*"I want to study." Ming Yuanxue must look like this little girl who, because of Project Hope, has been given the opportunity to go to school.*

was publicized by China's carefully controlled state media.

By the end of 1997, less than ten years after its founding, the China Youth Development Foundation had raised U.S.\$150 million and Project Hope had provided almost two million children with the opportunity to go to school. Five thousand Hope Schools have also been built (with 500-volume libraries in each), 6,000 high-school and college scholarships have been awarded and teacher-training programs have been established across the country.<sup>2</sup> Not bad for a foundation that started with a U.S.\$10,000 seed-grant from the government!

General Secretary Xu is quick to point out, however, that he believes the most important contribution Project Hope has made is the heightened attention now given to the right every girl and boy has to receive basic education, including — especially —

children in China's forsaken poor areas.

So there is reason to hope. Especially if you ask the hundreds of thousands of children like little Ming Yuanxue who, because of Project Hope, now sit in classrooms instead of peering in from outside the window.

## HOPE VANQUISHED

But glimmers of optimism abruptly vanish when one meets children like seven-year-old Chen Chunfen, who lives deep in Guizhou's mountains. Though she's as bright as a button, her family cannot afford to send her to school.<sup>3</sup> Chen Chunfen and *two million* children like her drop out of school *each year* because of poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Such high numbers are particularly worrisome because primary education is a foundation of human and social development. It is clearly associated with openness to new ideas, higher work productivity, lower fertility rates, improved health, the movement of workers from agricultural to nonagricultural activities and importantly, self-esteem.

Not that basic education has been ignored by the government. In fact, it has been a top priority for policymakers, especially since the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Results have been dramatic. According to *China 2020*, a World Bank study, the illiteracy rate has declined steadily since 1990 when it was 22 percent. Gains are especially impressive among the young. Whereas illiteracy among men and women over 55 years old is 62 percent, only 16 percent of those who attended school since 1949 and just 5 percent among those 10-24 years old are reported illiterate.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the greatest improvements in primary education, however, have had little to do with targeted policies. General economic growth and standard-of-living increases have had the biggest positive impact on literacy and educational opportunities for China's children.

Impressive national-level gains in educational attainment conceal severe regional inequities. In fact, when one takes a closer look at China's poorest areas it becomes obvious that for millions of the least fortunate, school remains a remote abstraction.

Figures from a World Bank project area in southwest China demonstrate the severity of education deficiencies in China's

<sup>2</sup> Project Hope's activities have involved 695 of China's poorest and most remote counties, covering 23 percent of the country.

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough introduction to the Chen family, see my August 1998 report (DBW-11).

<sup>4</sup> Add to that the fact that one of every four illiterate people in the world is Chinese and 200 million Chinese cannot read or write. See Kang Xiaoguang, *Chuangzao Xiwang* (Creating hope) (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 1997), 101.

<sup>5</sup> The central government reported 98.8 percent of all primary-school-age children enrolled in school in 1996. These annual enrollment surveys are typically conducted at the beginning of the school year and do not reflect actual rates of attendance or the nonattendance of dropouts during the school year.

<sup>6</sup> *China 2020* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1997), 48.



*My friend Chen Chunfen (center). She, and two million other children like her each year, cannot attend school because of poverty.*

impoverished regions.<sup>7</sup> The project area includes 35 mountainous and remote counties in Guizhou (13 counties) Guangxi (12) and Yunnan Province (10). Only 60 percent of 7-to-15-year-olds in the project area have ever enrolled in primary school; 65 percent of those are boys.<sup>8</sup>

Inferior education levels are not static. The backward state of education in China's poorest areas not only reflects, but actually reinforces the existing gulf between Chinese rural and urban society. The poorer the area, the more backward the education system; the poorer the education system, the more backward the area. And 'round and 'round.

At the center of this troubling reality is decentralized education financing. Most schools now have to depend on local governments for funding. For more prosperous areas, even wealthier rural communities, residents are able and willing to invest in quality education. Entrepreneurs have been known to donate large sums of money to support their local schools. For the better-off, the shift away from centralized funding has meant increased participation and improvements in the education of their children.

But the reverse is true in impoverished areas, and particularly acute in the resource-constrained upland territories of northwest and southwest China. In these regions, the lack of meaningful levels of agricultural growth and nonagricultural rural-enterprise

development retard improvements in education.

The current state of China's education bureaucracy has magnified the negative impact of decentralized financing. Over the next three years the Ministry of Education has to cut personnel by nearly 50 percent.<sup>9</sup> "The entire education system is in transition and lacks vision," a senior Ministry of Education official recently told me over dinner. The result is a shrinking and hesitant bureaucracy that has left education in a free fall, with localities forced to fend for themselves — for better or for worse.

In addition, epidemic corruption at grass-roots levels — whether diverting appropriated funds or misdirecting education fees collected from farmers — undermines efforts to improve education.

Anecdotes abound about missing funds. A school-teacher in one village complained to me that *one-third* of their school's expenditures last year went toward feeding local education officials visiting on "inspection."

"They travel from one village school to the next eating and drinking," the teacher said. "And we dare not feed them poorly; they have power over us." Meanwhile, that same village has children whose parents cannot afford to send them to school.

Do you want to feel encouraged about China's success

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, *Staff Appraisal Report (1995): China Southwest Poverty Reduction Project* (Report No.13968-CHA).

<sup>8</sup> Visits I have made to remote mountain villages in northern and southern Guizhou Province reflect similar levels.

<sup>9</sup> The Ministry of Education's downsizing is part of a nationwide effort to lighten government bureaucracy, instituted at this year's meeting of the National Peoples Congress.



China Youth Development Association

*“China has a large population, and many talented people. A few million more illiterates, or a few million less, will not make a huge impact on the country. But for an individual, whether or not he or she can read is a factor of powerful consequence; a few hundred yuan has the potential of changing a person’s life.”* — Xu Yongguang

in primary education and literacy? Look at national figures or compare most localities with their past. But if you want a strong dose of the reality that much remains undone, watch two million boys and girls file out the classroom door each year because their parents cannot afford to keep them in school.

## HOPE REVIVED

But that is not where the story ends. Closely following, and in fact an integral part of the evolution of Chinese society over the last 20 years, has been the increase of people who, when aware of need, have chosen to act both individually and corporately.

Xu Yongguang is one of those people.<sup>10</sup> In 1986, Xu, then Director of the Communist Youth League’s Personnel Department, spent two months in Guangxi Province. He was appalled by the frequency of school dropouts among the youth he observed. Ninety percent of the children did not attend school past third grade. If these areas were ever going to develop, he thought, education would have to lead the way, not limp along behind.

“Three colleagues who had had similar experiences and I decided that we were going to start something on our own,” Xu says, “something new, something that was neither traditional ‘thought

education’ [*sixiang jiaoyu*] nor the latest fashion. My instinct was to organize some kind of activity that would raise money to help children who had dropped out of school. At the time, though, I never imagined it would develop into what Project Hope is today.”

His motivation? “My father died when I was young; life for our family was difficult. My brother, sister and I were able to go to school only because others helped us financially. If we had not received assistance from society [*shehui jiuzhu*] it is hard to imagine where my brother, sister and I would be today.”

In January 1989, with a seed-grant from the Communist Youth League and approvals from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Ministry of Civil Affairs and the People’s Bank of China, China Youth Development Foundation was established.

That year the foundation sent staff to Hebei, Henan and Hubei Provinces to investigate potential project sites.

During one officer’s visit to Hebei Province he fortuitously met a county-government official who told him of a nearby village school that had 13 students, 12 of whom had dropped out because of poverty. The government official recalled a brief letter he had received from one of the students: “Director Che, did your family harvest enough rice to eat this year? We’ve had another bad crop. I’ve had to leave school. I have no choice but to carry a sack on my bag and beg for food ....” These 13



China Youth Development Association

*Xu Yongguang, founder of the China Youth Development Foundation, says that he might be among China’s castaway youth had others not helped him go to school when he was a boy.*

<sup>10</sup> My observations are based on meetings with Xu himself and Kang Xiaoguang, a brilliant scholar at the China Academy of Sciences and author of *Chuangzao Xiwang* (Creating Hope), a thorough examination of the history of the China Youth Development Foundation and China’s third sector.

*One-on-one giving allows donors to feel like they are adding a member to their family, like this little boy who has just returned from collecting firewood.*



China Youth Development Association

students became the first girls and boys to benefit from Project Hope's assistance.

Two million students later, General Secretary Xu admits that they have learned as they've gone along. He laughs, for example, when he talks about how far they've come since an early fundraising letter that tried to attract donations by offering free tour services for donors who came to Beijing. "We underestimated the desire people have to give just for the sake of giving," Xu says.

Or imagine the scene of the entire foundation staff sitting around the office hand-copying addresses and stuffing envelopes with fundraising letters compared to the one-swipe breakthrough when a similar letter was printed by a dozen national newspapers.

Probably the most important development for the organization, however, was in 1992 when Project Hope began to offer to match donors (individuals, companies and schools) with recipients. Rather than just sending their gift to a common fund as had been the practice, donors could feel like they were adding a member to their family. City schools could adopt counterparts in the countryside and companies could choose preferred sites to sponsor the construction of a Hope School. Giving that year increased by over 500 percent.

Equally significant as the increased level of giving was the improved accountability it placed in the organization. China Academy of Science's Kang Xiaoguang, whose book *Chuangzao Xiwang* (Creating Hope) is a study of the China Youth Development Foundation, writes: "The one-on-one giving arrangement brought about guarantees in oversight. Supervision of Project Hope was no longer just internal, it began to come from the outside as well: from society, from individual givers and recipi-

ents whose interests directly affected their concern about how each cent of the donation was used."<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the foundation's reputation has strengthened, support has broadened and new programs have mushroomed to create maximum and lasting impact on education in China's most poor regions.

The result, quite frankly, has been amazing.

As Project Hope supported growing numbers of children to re-enroll in school, the foundation began to realize that school buildings were important too. Result: 5,000 Hope Schools have been built since 1990.<sup>12</sup> But if students are in school, in decent buildings, but there are no books, how much can they learn? In 1994, China Youth Development Foundation invited some of the country's best-known writers and publishing houses to form an advisory committee. The committee selected 500 books to form a set library for each school. The foundation had 10,000 of these mini-libraries printed.

What about teachers? In 1995, teacher-training centers were established across the country. Typically during summer vacation, teachers and principals are chosen to gather for three weeks of intensive training and encouragement.

While most of the foundation's programs have progressed along expanding circles of need, Project Hope has also responded during times of crisis — like this summer's floods, the worst in decades. Project Hope donated 1,500 classroom-sized tents so that students could resume school in September. A Project Hope official told me that in many flood-stricken areas, especially in north-east China (where the ground freezes in the winter), newly-built schools will not open until September 1999.

Xu Yongguang's most recent initiative is a highly ambitious plan to place multimedia equipment and educational video CDs in each Hope School, with the number estimated to reach 8,000 units by the end of 1999. Xu has established a company, spun off from the foundation, that will sell "the world's 1,000 best educational programs" for profit. The proceeds will go to support the placement of equipment and movies in the Hope Schools.

"I've spoken to the people at Disney and Time Warner," Xu says. "Do you know anyone else I should speak with?"

The China Youth Development Foundation has been savvy with public relations as well. Three Project Hope students, sponsored by the Coca-Cola Company, carried the Olympic torch for a stretch in the lead-up to the 1996

<sup>11</sup> Kang, *op. cit.*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> A 1998 survey of 120 schools showed that when a Hope School is built the student population increased by an average 22 percent and the number of teachers by 16 percent.

games in Atlanta.<sup>13</sup> A professional soccer match is held annually in Shanghai to raise money for China's poor children. And polished television shows featuring charitable auctions light up the phone banks with calls from donors.

The China Youth Development Foundation is not without challenges. Xu Yongguang says his organization's greatest limitations are threefold: policies that require too many strings between the foundation and its host-government ministry; burdensome bank regulations; and the persistent perception that philanthropies are run by ineffective people who could not find other work.

Beyond that, I imagine that an organization that has grown so quickly and that operates in an environment so fraught with corruption would face many hazards. But

Xu insists, under his leadership the organization will remain clean. "Our name is out there in society," he says. "If we become corrupt or stumble, it could set back the progress of China's entire philanthropic sector several decades."

Despite the challenges, Project Hope is making headway to close the country's severe urban-rural and east-west cleavages. Donor and recipient statistics tell the story. Whereas over 70 percent of donations come from middle- and large-size cities and over 60 percent of donors reside in China's developed eastern region, 75 percent of student recipients and 85 percent of Hope Schools are located in central and western China.

Moreover, the value of Project Hope's donors base is



*'Before' and 'after.' The school building on top was one of the most dangerous buildings in this county in northern Guizhou — one child remains disabled after falling from the second floor. The school on the bottom, funded in part by Project Hope, not only provides a safer structure, but the new environment will attract more students and more teachers and provide better-quality education.*

<sup>13</sup> Significant corporate giving has also come from Philips, AT&T and Motorola.

not limited to a one-way flow of resources. Giving benefits people on both sides of the gift.

A China Central Television employee wrote Project Hope:

“What Project Hope is doing is of immeasurable value. We want to make a contribution. My thought is that we would guarantee a young girl’s tuition until she graduates from elementary school. My daughter is in second grade. Please choose a girl who had to drop out of school but who is a serious student and who made good grades before she had to leave. After she’s re-enrolled, please ask her to write to us. My daughter will be the one who is asked to keep in touch with her. These two girls, who live in very different surroundings, can become pen pals for years to come. I think they’ll be able to help each other in a lot of ways.”<sup>14</sup>

Not all who have donated to the China Youth Development Foundation get as personally involved as this man and his family, but many do. The result has been the creation of bonds that stretch between urban and rural areas, and between developed and underdeveloped regions of the country. This is a revolutionary change for what had been for decades a society carefully partitioned along the lines of class and region.

The China Youth Development Foundation has taken the lead in creating a new type of organism in China.

Unlike, non-government organizations in most countries, Chinese NGO’s are required to formally associate with a host-government ministry. For better or for worse, there exists a more interdependent relationship between government and non-government in China — an arrangement that does not easily transfer to a western model of state and society relations.

In fact, Xu Yongguang and academic Kang Xiaoguang do not even use the term non-government organization. They prefer “third sector” when characterizing the China Youth Development Foundation.<sup>15</sup> Though a western term as well, “third sector” describes a broader arena that is neither totally government (first sector) nor business (second sector).

School dropouts, the unemployed, the newly-urban poor, the sick and the elderly will remain a challenge for the government. As China continues to reform and as the state seeks to govern more efficiently, a policy environment that provides for the healthy growth of the third sector would do much to promote the general welfare of the country’s people.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, no country lacks people who need reason to hope.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Dan' with a stylized flourish above it.

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<sup>14</sup> Kang, *op. cit.*, 135.

<sup>15</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the third sector in China and suggested policy prescriptions to promote the healthy development of this sector, see Kang, *op. cit.*, 603-677.

<sup>16</sup> With the goal of promoting a mature third sector in China, the China Youth Development Foundation is funding a comprehensive research project that examines the growth, function and future of the third sector in China. A ten-volume series — the results of the study — will be published the end of 1999.



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## 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]**

**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 mesoAmerican 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]**

**Whitney Mason.** A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**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]**

**Jean Benoît Nadeau.** A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Susan Sterner.** A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Tyrone Turner.** A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**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 Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andrae, 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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