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EAST ASIA

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## Sprouts in a Hard Place

### Principal Bi and the "P—" Word

GUIZHOU, China

October 1998

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter:

As I continue to explore China's interior, I often try to imagine the thoughts Charles Crane processed as he moved toward establishing the Institute almost 75 years ago. How fascinating it would have been to listen in on discussions between Charles Crane, his son John and Walter Rogers as the three of them traveled the globe — and dreamed of an Institute of Current World Affairs.<sup>1</sup>

A recurring theme in their conversations must have been the need for alternative ways to interpret a world turned on end by the First World War. They concluded that beyond government officers, academics and journalists, a place — in fact a need — remained for a cadre of internationalists free to travel, observe and report from the field. People given an unusual opportunity had the potential to provide unique insight into undercurrents that were reshaping societies worldwide.

Charles Crane's musings are of special interest to me because of his experience as U.S. Minister to China in 1921-22. As he traveled across a warlord-ridden Chinese landscape he must have spent much time pondering China's social and political ferment, post-Versailles Peace Conference.

Now, three-quarters of a century later, I, like Crane, keep my ear to the ground, attempting to discern far-reaching trends as I live amid China's present realities.

Through recent conversations with school principals in Guizhou, I caught

<sup>1</sup> Charles Crane, a Chicago philanthropist and international scholar, advised President Woodrow Wilson before, during and after the Versailles Peace Conference. He served as member of the Root Commission to the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution, with the King-Crane Commission to the Middle East in 1919, and as U.S. Minister to China in 1921-22.

Walter Rogers, a Chicago newspaperman and lawyer, joined the Crane Company in 1903, thus beginning his long association with Charles and John Crane. During World War I, President Wilson put Rogers in charge of a worldwide U.S. news service; he was also one of Wilson's advisers at Versailles. Rogers served as executive director of the Institute of Current World Affairs for 34 years, until his retirement in 1959.

a surprising glimpse of a noteworthy development: the emergence of private education.

But don't say the "p—" word too loudly; the politically correct expression is "schools established by social forces" (*shehui liliang banxue*).<sup>2</sup> Either way, the significance remains the same. China's education system, which for 40 years was directed, funded and managed solely by the government, has begun to make room for others — even in Guizhou, one of the country's poorest provinces.

## QIANNAN COMPUTER VO-TECH SCHOOL

One evening several months ago, while I was sitting at home watching a World Cup soccer match, a superimposed string of text crawled slowly across the bottom of the television screen: "Qiannan Computer Vocational-Technical School announces openings for new students in both its two-year degree program and short-term training courses. For more information contact Principal Bi Jiangan at...."

I usually do not pay attention to such distractions; but this one caught my eye. The next day I was to scheduled to meet Bi Jiangan, principal of one of Qiannan Prefecture's first private schools.

"How much does it cost to place your advertisement on television like that?" I asked Principal Bi when I saw him.

"Three-hundred yuan [\$35] a pop."

"That's a lot of money."

"Yes, but I have to use every means at to attract students. Whether or not my family and I, and our staff, eat depends on the number of students enrolled at our school.

Student tuition is our only source of revenue. We, after all, are a private school."

This year, Principal Bi convinced 50 more young people to invest in Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech's two-year program.<sup>3</sup> The school's 100 students, who are 15-16 years old and have come from all corners of this mountainous prefecture, represent each of the area's ethnic-minority groups. They have enrolled with the hope that computer skills learned through one of two majors (data processing and computer repair) will help them find a job.

The program serves the function of a vocational-technical junior college in the United States, only at the high-school level. For most of the students the school is the last stop of their formal education process.<sup>4</sup>

One afternoon I sat with eight students in an empty classroom and talked with them about their experiences. I was struck to discover that five of the eight students had never even seen a computer before arriving at Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech!

"I like computers," 16-year-old Xiao Qin beams, her smile as wide as she is tall. The first-semester student is from a village in one of the prefecture's poorest counties. There is not even one computer in her hometown of 10,000 people.

In addition to the two-year degree program, there are about 80 people enrolled in short-term training courses, ranging from several weeks to six months in length.

But computers? In one of the poorest regions of the country? In the vast rural regions of Guizhou, computers — even telephones, and for some, electricity — remain a distant reality, if even heard of.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, the province's 12 cities continue to experience the transformation of nationwide economic growth. That

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<sup>2</sup> According to the second article of *Shehui liliang banxue tiaoli* (Regulations for schools established by social forces) "schools established by social forces" are defined as "educational institutions established by businesses, social organizations, or individual citizens and financed by non-government sources." *Renmin ribao* (People's daily), 12 August 1997.

This is no different than the American Heritage Dictionary's definition of private schools: "A secondary or elementary school run and supported by private individuals or a corporation rather than by a government or public agency."

<sup>3</sup> Students choose this type of school through one of two channels: through a standardized test that is given prior to graduation from middle school, or personally through the school's advertisements or hearing about the school by word of mouth. More than half of the students at Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech enrolled because someone they knew recommended the school. The tuition (U.S.\$150 per year) is competitive with that of public schools.

<sup>4</sup> Students progress through China's education system as follows: After nine years of compulsory education (six years in primary school, three years in middle school), students, if they continue to study, proceed to high school (which puts them on a college-prep track) or one of two kinds of two-year-long vocational/technical schools: (1) a *zhongzhuan* that trains local government cadres (bureaucrats, teachers, medical workers, etc.), or (2) a *jishu xuexiao* to prepare workers with specific skills, like computer technicians. If the student enters high school but then does not test successfully for college, he/she may test into yet another type of two-year vocational school (*dazhuan*), also designed to train government cadres.

Because fewer than five percent of Chinese middle-school graduates move on to higher education, there is a tremendous need to train middle-school graduates in skills that enable them to be productive members of the country's work force. Private schools like Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech help meet this need.

<sup>5</sup> According to a recent conversation with a provincial-government official, 87 percent of the people in Guizhou Province live in rural areas; 30 percent of the province does not yet have access to electricity; and only 2.2 of every 100 persons have a telephone.

*The chatter of students tapping on computer keyboards fills the room as Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech's students practice their typing skills. Many of these students had never seen a computer before arriving at the school.*



includes the recent appearance of computers.

Four years ago, for example, phones in our prefecture-capital city of Duyun were unusual; computers were almost nonexistent. Now, phones — even cellular phones and beepers — are common throughout the city. And, as of two months ago, I can even access the Internet through a local provider. Business and government documents used to be handwritten; now it has become common practice to have them typed at local word-processing shops.

Though an urban-only phenomenon, it seems inevitable that the need for computer-literate people will increase in Guizhou. Even so, three-fourths of Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech's students will travel to China's more prosperous coast to look for work when they graduate.

The school operates at full capacity. But Principal Bi's

goal is to double the number of students. "We're flexible," says Bi. "It's one of our strengths as a private school. We could simply hire more teachers and rent more space from our landlords. They certainly have plenty of room to spare."

Indeed, when one enters the compound of the Zhenhua Group (formerly known as "083"), the large courtyard and surrounding office buildings are strangely quiet. Not long ago, however, the company was among the largest 500 state-owned enterprises in China. The Zhenhua Group, which belongs to the Ministry of Electronics, oversaw more than two-dozen strategic factories that were relocated to China's interior during the Third-Front Construction period of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> From its regional headquarters in Duyun, "083" oversaw the colossal operation. Now the company is greatly weakened. Less than five factories continue to operate at more



*Like a hermit crab occupying another's shell, Qiannan Computer Vocational and Technical School rents space from the former giant Zhenhua Group, a now-weakened, state-owned enterprise. Offices and classrooms are on the third floor; student dorms are on the fourth floor.*

<sup>6</sup>For a more thorough introduction to the Third Front Construction period, see my June 1998 report (DBW-9).

*The Author and Marilyn Beach, Program Associate with the National Committee on US-China Relations, pictured with Qiannan Computer Vocational and Technical School's student body and teaching staff. The students themselves provide the best advertisement for the value of "schools established by social forces."*



than half-capacity; the rest are simply a memory.

### PRINCIPAL BI

Principal Bi's personal history is tied closely to Zhenhua's past. In the 1960s, as a boy, Bi was brought from Beijing to Guizhou by his parents when they were relocated to one of Zhenhua's secluded factories.

Thirty-four-year-old Bi has happy childhood memories. "I grew up playing in the mountains that surrounded our factory. There's not a hill I didn't climb."

Because of their remote locations, each factory had self-contained living quarters (*shenghuo qu*) where thousands of families attempted to recreate their lives. Such communities included clinics, theaters, cafeterias — and schools. All were organized by departments within the factory.

After graduating from the factory's vo-tech school (he studied computer design), Bi remained for a few years, first working and then teaching at the factory-school. That's when he learned his first lesson in school management. Call it a model of how not to do things. He observed the rigid, top-down control and poor quality of the factory-school's administration, and remembered it.

His second lesson came several years later as a young adult, when during the economic-boom years of the early 1990s, he headed to Guangdong Province to join in the "gold rush." After a few years, he decided to return to Duyun. He had learned much and made good money, but a sense of responsibility called him back. The lesson in Guangdong: Guizhou is backward; education is critical if the province is to progress. "Plus," Bi says, "I like Qiannan Prefecture. It's my home."

So Bi moved back to Duyun in 1993 and established a private computer company with some friends. They believed

there was a market that had potential to grow. Along with their business, the group of entrepreneurs developed computer-training courses. In May 1996, the classes were registered as a fully-accredited "school established by social forces," the only one of its kind listed with Qiannan Prefecture's Labor Bureau. Earlier this year, Principal Bi separated from the company and now operates on his own.

Principal Bi seems to be at the right place at the right time. In Duyun, even in the midst of an economy slowed by domestic difficulties and the effects of regional financial crisis, the growth of computers does not appear to be lagging. Still, Principal Bi knows he'll need to make full use of his advantages as a private school if he's going to continue to compete.

Principal Bi believes the school's greatest strength is that it must survive on its merits. The school's reputation, its success in helping steer students toward jobs and teachers who put their heart into their work are its best hopes for survival.

The students I spoke with sense this quality. When I asked them what they like best about the school, they said they appreciated how hard the teachers worked and truly cared for them. As a result, the students say they are motivated to study harder.

Quality also radiated from several teachers I met with one day when Principal Bi was out of town. Their enthusiasm was especially striking because they had all had careers in state-owned enterprises before switching to Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech.

"Principal Bi's management style gives us flexibility and responsibility," one teacher told me. "He gives much, but he expects much as well."

Bi rewards his teachers based on performance, not

according to seniority, was true in all the teachers' former jobs. They receive a salary, but their compensation is based on a semi-annual review. At first, Principal Bi said it was difficult for a couple of the older teachers who were used to being paid according to seniority. Now they realize it is the best approach, despite the lack of guarantees.

"Do you ever wish you were back in the security of the iron rice bowl, enjoying the cradle-to-grave benefits of the state-owned enterprise system?" I ask the teachers.

"What we give up in security," one teacher replies, "we gain in the enjoyment of our work. Plus, the factories we used to work in are either sinking or have already sunk."

In order to demonstrate that he is not a distant leader, Bi's desk sits as one of eight desks in the main office. The result is a cohesive staff that agrees that their destinies are tied together in the school's success.

Like private schools in general, Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech's strengths make an important contribution to society around it. Think about it. People used to a bureaucratic grip hear how the school's autonomous management provides freedom to innovate and exercise personal responsibility. Those used to low productivity listen to stories of a school that is sustained by hard work and lean budgets. The school's teachers speak with former factory colleagues about the fulfilling risks of making it without government assistance.

Even the students are sold. Before they enrolled, some of those I spoke with were hesitant about the newness of "schools established by social forces." Not now. That's 100 seeds, which upon graduation will scatter into society's soil. And these types of seeds (the Guizhou variety) are particularly uncommon and valuable.

While it is clear from the students and teaching staff that Qiannan Computer Vo-Tech has a good thing going, Principal Bi confides that at times they struggle just to keep their heads above water. Other than their advantages as a private school, the odds, in fact, do seem to be stacked against them.

For example, there is growing competition from state-owned schools that, now facing their own challenges brought on by decentralized funding, see value in buying a few computers and advertising that they have a "computer studies" program. There's also the endless financial strain of trying to keep up with the latest computer software and hardware upgrades. And Bi himself says that he sometimes feels isolated, as if he was the only one pursuing innovative education. He feels like he is doing the right thing with his homegrown management style; but he is not certain. He is not connected with others who are pursuing similar goals in Guizhou and other parts of the country.

Though he is not fully aware of it, Principal Bi is not alone



*Principal Bi and the author. Bi's own life-story illustrates the country's movement away from a state-dominated economy toward a structure that is flexible and built on "social forces."*

in his struggles. Over the last few months I have spoken with a handful of private educators in Duyun and Guiyang. When asked their greatest challenges, the reply was consistent: the effort to keep up with financially and unequal treatment from local government. With the exception of Principal Bi, who says his number-one challenge is financial, the others' primary complaint is discrimination. Their difficulties point to the realities of a country in the midst of change, existing somewhere between state-planned and market-driven, between controlled and encouraged, between big government and big society.

Amid this passage from then to now, formerly unchallenged interest groups (*liyi jituan*) watch authority slip through their hands as their departments are reduced and "social forces" emerge and gain strength. The common result, especially when those with threatened interests exist within government ministries charged with regulating these "social forces," is uneven treatment.

## SOURCES OF GROWTH AND FRAGILITY

Blame it all on growth and reform. Private education in China did not leap forward until 1992 when Deng Xiaoping made his landmark visit to southern China. The public nod of approval he gave to market-based economics reinvigorated growth and policy reform, both of which had been slack since the summer of 1989.

Since Deng's "southern tour," the number of private

schools has exploded nationwide, totaling 50,000 at the end of 1997.<sup>7</sup> Most of these private schools have appeared in cities and coastal areas, demonstrating that the takeoff is tied closely to economic growth. According to Professor Jing Lin, China-education specialist at McGill University, "Private education is an inevitable outcome of the development of a market-oriented economy, causing new needs for diverse types of schools to rise from a greatly transformed society."<sup>8</sup>

Take Wenzhou County in coastal Zhejiang Province, for example. The wealthy county represents the antithesis of state-command economics. Only 14 percent of Zhejiang's economy is state-run; in Wenzhou County the number would be even lower. Following suit, 84 percent of kindergarten children and 10 percent of senior high school students attend private schools.<sup>9</sup>

Compare Guizhou Province at the other end of the spectrum, where the state-owned sector, though weak, continues to produce 67 percent of industrial output. Private education is rare, with the exception of provincial-capital Guiyang, which as an island of relative wealth has six private middle schools, more than 20 private primary schools and several dozen private kindergartens.<sup>10</sup> The rest of Guizhou's cities, if they are anything like Duyun, each have a handful of private schools.

Still, the appearance of the sprouts of private education in the hard ground of interior provinces like Guizhou is remarkable.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly true when one considers that Guizhou, if measured by per-capita gross domestic product (an indication of productivity), is the most backward province in China.

The growth of private education, though fueled by

market-oriented sectors of the economy, has been facilitated by an evolution in government policy. In only five years Beijing has come a very long way.

A 1993 State Council report announcing China's educational plans for the 1990's passed over "schools established by social forces."<sup>12</sup> Among the document's 50 articles, only one mentioned private schools, a reference tucked away in a paragraph discussing education for the disabled.

That is a far cry from government support headlined in "Regulations for Schools Established by Social Forces," which went into effect 1 October 1997. The central government's position was expressed in 16 Chinese characters: "actively encourage, firmly support, correctly lead, strongly supervise."<sup>13</sup>

A September 1998 article in the government-mouthpiece *People's Daily* went even further: "Schools established by social forces ... are an inevitable result of economic construction and social reform. It demonstrates that 40 years of government-run education, as a single-system model, is not appropriate for the realities of our country's educational needs."<sup>14</sup> Coming from the *People's Daily*, that is a strong statement.

All this should mean that private educators across the country are "actively encouraged and firmly supported." Right? After all, it is Beijing speaking.

Not necessarily. The ancient saying, "the heavens are high and the emperor is far away" holds particularly true here in Guizhou Province. Local-level officials can parrot the 16-character statement of support, but foot-drag-

<sup>7</sup> *Renmin ribao* (People's daily), 7 September 1997. According to Ministry of Education statistics, by the end of 1997 China had 157 private schools of higher education with degree programs (1,095 non-degree programs), 1,125 private vocational/technical secondary schools, 1,702 private middle and secondary schools, 1,806 private primary schools, 24,643 private kindergartens, and 20,000 private schools that fit in other categories.

<sup>8</sup> "Private Schools in China," *Chinese Education and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January-February 1997), 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Private schools in Guiyang are not just for rich kids, though some do cater to the better-off. A private educator in Guiyang told me that more than half of the 20 private primary schools in the provincial capital are filled with children of China's "floating population." "Floating population" refers to all people — children, elderly, working age, urban and rural — who have left their place of official household registration (*hukou*), either temporarily or permanently, to reside in another part of the country. Much of the "floating population" in Guiyang are people from other parts of the province who have traveled to the provincial capital to look for work.

<sup>11</sup> Private education remains primarily an urban phenomenon in China's interior, although there is tremendous need and potential for rural areas. Friends I know in Guizhou's countryside are aware that central-government policy permits them to establish private schools, or revive traditional education methods (*sishu*) where an educated villager teaches a group of students. Because of problems brought on by decentralized education financing these methods would also provide education more cheaply than current government-run elementary schools. Local-level policy, however, requires passing through so many hoops (each involving a fee) that it effectively prohibits villagers from setting up their own schools.

<sup>12</sup> "Outline for China's Education Reform and Development" was issued by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council on 13 February 1993. *Zhongguo Jiaoyu bao* (China education news), 27 February 1997.

<sup>13</sup> 积极引导、大力支持、正确领导、加强管理

<sup>14</sup> *Renmin ribao* (People's daily), 7 September 1998.



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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 Andraee, 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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