

Letters from Overseas

Gary MacDonald Writes from China

March 2009

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Dear Friends,

During the Lunar New Year holiday I was the guest of one of my students. Mali Village is one of many small communities hidden deep in the folds of mountain terrain. Patches of tired soil serve the continuing generations of subsistence farmers. There, the beauty of nature may well mask the reality of poverty and daily struggle familiar to its inhabitants.

On a morning when the temperature dipped to -17° , I awoke to meet children with ragged notebooks in one hand and small wooden stools in the other, as they gathered in my student's home. They had come for an English class given by my student. In an unheated room with rough planks balanced on stones to serve as desks and mud brick wall as chalkboard, the morning lesson began.

In such a place, this is a familiar scene each Lunar New Year and summer holiday. My student, like many others, returns home to be with family and friends. As well as a chance to be home again, this is an important time to earn money for next term's tuition. Life for those for whom income has never met demand does not allow much leisure time even on this, the most important holiday on the Chinese calendar.

In the constant struggle to finance his own education, my student does ask for a fee for his services as an English tutor to these children. Some of the children's families can pay the full fee but for others this is simply not possible. Sometimes payment comes in the form of a simple meal for my student in one of the children's homes. Perhaps someone's mother may give my student a pair of homemade trousers. Another might give a bag of vegetables gathered from the fields. However, money or no money, a child is never turned away.

The week before he begins his classes, my student will visit the homes in this village. He gives particular attention to those families he knows cannot afford his classes. Quietly and simply he extends the invitation to his English class. Those children too, he says, need encouragement and help.

During my time in that village, I was a witness to something quite beautiful. My student prepared his lessons well. The children were eager to learn. As with any

good teacher, my student knew and cared for his pupils well.

On the last day of class, the lessons came to an end but it seemed that no one wanted to leave. There was a sense of holding on, of knowing that all this is good. The children stood around, laughing and joking. No one seemed to notice the bitterly cold air.

Eventually worn notebooks and the small stools were gathered, some strapped to the back of bicycles which also served to carry two or three children at one time. Best wishes for the Lunar New Year were given and this band of children moved on down the road.

All this I saw that week in a village far from any place of academic organization or structural power. The chanting of a morning lesson echoing through the cold mountain air.

Among mountain villages and in the bare desert towns of this part of China, this is something that can be found many times over. College students home at holiday time. The gift of knowledge passed on to others.

The fees charged do help toward next term's tuition. And, if the college student is to continue his or her own education, they are necessary. However, in most cases, it is never enough. Returning to college, some students will go without meals and text books because there is never enough money.

Yet, they give their gift. Their students, those children, return to their own classrooms better equipped to learn in a renewed spirit of confidence.

In so many small villages, in tiny unheated rooms or even in the out-of-doors, a group of children come together. "Older Brother" or "Older Sister" home from college or university stands among them in the spirit of knowledge created anew.

Blessings,

Gary MacDonald

Gary MacDonald is a United Church of Canada global mission personnel associate serving with the Amity Foundation in China. The work of this global partner and the work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

