

Local woman helps educate Chinese girls

Society raises money for students living in rural China

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Ching Tien had always assumed she'd attend university in China. But her adolescent dreams were shattered when the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. Tien, then 16, and her mother, a doctor, were forced to move from Beijing to a rural village in Gansu province in northwest China, where Tien worked in a factory for the next eight years.

At 25, Tien immigrated to Vancouver, with the intention of furthering her education. She married, bore two children, worked to maintain a small business, and later raised her children as a single mother. Through it all, she felt bitter about still being unable to realize her academic aspirations.

When her eldest child went to university in 2000, Tien's bitterness ebbed. She was finally in a position to take post-secondary courses, but she decided it no longer mattered.

She decided it would be more meaningful to help young women from Gansu.

"I remember how desperate and how I feel so hopeless in those years [in Gansu]," she said. "I'm sure they are in the similar situation, maybe different reasons."

Through the B.C. Society for Educating Girls in Rural China, Tien is helping 165 impoverished young women attain a post-secondary education. Tien returned to Gansu for the first time in more than two decades in 2005 to assess the situation. She saw an elementary school so dilapidated the children were escorted outside when it rained in case the crumbling structure collapsed.

Back in Vancouver, Tien, owner of Omega Gallery and Custom Framing on Dunbar Street, registered her society and immediately started fundraising. She organized an art auction and a concert and in the first year raised \$27,000. The society subsequently paid the tuition for 300 rural girls to attend elementary school and helped 27 women who'd been accepted to university pay their way. "Some of them couldn't even afford a train ticket to make it to the university or even buy a pair of shoes," Tien said.



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Ching Tien will host a charity art auction in support of the B.C. Society for Educating Girls in Rural China.

Now that China covers the tuition for village girls in elementary school, the B.C. Society for Educating Girls in Rural China exclusively aids women accepted to university. Tien tells local governments how many women she can help, then meets each one before they set off to school. She listens to their stories and offers money according to their needs. Some are orphans. Many have parents who are ill or disabled, with families drowning in debt from related medical expenses.

Tien would like to give each woman 70 per cent of what she needs for tuition and living expenses, but currently manages to cover about 40 per cent of their costs. "I also want to see they make an effort, too," she said.

Tien provides the women with both financial and personal support, via email and annual visits. Many of the women are visiting a city for their first time when they attend university. "There are discriminations, there are very loneliness, feeling isolated," Tien said.

She counsels them to settle in, make friends, get to know their teachers and not stress about their grades.

Some of the 165 students have ranked at the top of their class, a few have received major scholarships and awards, and the majority do volunteer work. When one woman's mother got a part-time job, she offered the money the society had given her to another student whom she knew was in greater need.

Tien says she has to convince the women not to use the money they receive from the society to help their siblings or parents. She says she tells them, "Once you have a degree, you are able to change the situation, so right now I want you to concentrate on yourself."

The first 27 women sponsored by the society will graduate this spring. "Women have the most important influence on their children and I think on their husbands, too," Tien said. "If women are empowered with education and knowledge, [things] will be very different for the next generation."

Tien aims to support a total of 180 students. She's holding a charity art auction at her gallery Dec. 7, with donated works by such notable artists as Susan A. Point, Tony Onley and Joe Average. Thirty works will be auctioned off between 2 and 4 p.m. at 4290 Dunbar St.

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