

Canadian benefactors send Chinese girls to school

Twenty-six women graduate this year after receiving society funding

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Her eyes brimming with confidence, resplendent in a scarlet dress, Zhang Fang Fang steps before her audience. She opens her mouth and lets the first notes of a traditional Chinese folk song rise and drift across the Vancouver cathedral's pews, enveloping her audience.

The sweet soprano music seems almost separate from the young woman who is its source. The sound rises above the voices of the children's choir accompanying her, triumphant and pure, ending in a crescendo that fills the church.

Christ Church Cathedral on Burrard Street is a long way from Gansu province in China, where Zhang grew up. But her real journey started four years ago, when she was unable to afford university tuition and a Canadian woman stepped in to help.

Zhang, 22, performed at the Youth for Youth benefit concert May 6 while visiting Canada to thank her benefactors, who paid for nearly half of her university costs through the B.C. Society for Educating Girls of Rural China (EGRC.)

The society was established by Tien Ching after she attended a UNICEF event for the Go Girls! campaign.

A phrase from the event--educated women have educated children--resonated with Tien, who adopted it as the EGRC's motto. Zhang is studying voice at the University of Lanzhou and is one of 26 women graduating this year after receiving funding through the EGRC, established four years ago.

The EGRC has paid 40 to 50 per cent of education costs for 165 girls to date, giving approximately \$1,000 to each student.



CREDIT: photo-Dan Toulgoet

Zhang Fang Fang rehearses at Christ Church Cathedral.



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EGRC founder Tien Ching (left) watches Zhang Fang Fang rehearse at Christ Church Cathedral on Burrard Street.

Zhang travelled to Canada with two other students, Jia Liyan, 21, who is in her third year of International Studies at Sun Yat-Sen University and Li Hui, 22, who is also graduating this year after studying English at Qingdao University.

While the rate of students attending secondary school in China is approximately 75 per cent, the rate of those who go on to university plummets to 25 per cent, according to a 2006 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report.

Without the EGRC, these women would not have gone to university. The question many of them have to ask themselves, as Li did, is, "Should I go to school or support the family?"

The three women expressed their gratitude at the concert. "All I know now comes from the chance Madame Tien and the sponsors gave me," Jia says, carefully speaking in halting, slightly broken English. "Without it, I would not even have dreams now."

The women had passed their university entrance exams but were unable to come up with enough money to attend school.

Zhang was initially excited about her university acceptance. Then she found out a few days later that her father had been begging at every door in the village to pay for her schooling. No one could help him--they all had children of their own and farms to run.

The family sold their two pigs in August instead of at the traditional time, during Chinese New Year. They made less than \$200. The family had \$300 to \$400 saved. It was not enough to cover a year's tuition, which usually costs \$1,000.

Then Tien stepped in.

The other two women also struggled to reach the world of academia.

A year before Jia graduated high school, her brother became ill and needed surgery in the Gansu's capital, Lanzhou. The trip and medical costs ate up their savings, leaving little to pay for Jia's education.

"I was very worried [about school] thinking should I go or not," Jia says.

With money from the EGRC, what her parents could contribute and her part-time jobs, Jia was able to afford to go to university. She is very grateful for the experience: "My university life changed me a lot. I am positive and I have confidence."

Jia wants to be a journalist and write for the China Times Weekly.

Li, who was raised by her mother after her father was killed in an accident in 1998, was concerned there wouldn't be enough money to educate her and her two siblings. She said without funding from the EGRC, she might have had to give up school to support her brother and sister so they could get an education. All three of them are in school now.



CREDIT: photo-Dan Toulgoet
University students Jia Liyan (left) and Li Hui received EGRC funding.

The three women all come from farming families and they each have stories of struggling to make the sometimes stingy land provide for them. Life in Gansu province, in northwest China, is hard. The government is battling desertification in the region, trying to protect the rich land the farmers so desperately need, but blowing sand and grit are the reality for those who till the fields. "It's very hard to imagine, I think. People cannot understand," Li says.

Li has to return home during school breaks to help her mother sell produce at the market. She says everyone must work to help the family get by. "We have to do so otherwise we cannot survive."

Most of the women who receive money through the society have similar lives. Many of their parents are handicapped because of farming or construction accidents, and the hard work takes a toll on their health.

Tien knows what life is like in Gansu province because, after a childhood of ease and comfort, she also had to eke out an existence there as a young woman.

Her father, Tien Li, was a respected Second World War hero and her mother, Xiao Shu Hua, was a doctor. Tien attended the best schools and always dreamed of attending one of the top universities.

Life changed for her when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. Tien was sent to Gansu province to be re-educated by the peasants with the other children of urban intellectuals. "Everything turned upside down," Tien says. "The only way to determine [a person's] worth at the time was, 'what does your father do?'"

Her father spent much of her life in prison. He was arrested for criticizing the Communist party when she was six and was not released until she was 18.

According to Tien, her mother was also repeatedly tortured by members of the Red Guards. Tien was lucky--when she was sent to Gansu province she was assigned a laboratory job in a chemical factory and received a salary. Most people were sent to work in the fields for a few cents a day. Tien says it was a very hard life.

After eight years she returned to Beijing and in 1975, at the age of 25, she came to Canada with help from family friends in Vancouver. It was not until her own children were old enough to attend college that Tien began to feel the loss of her own chance at an education.

Rather than dwelling on it she recognized how lucky she had been, being able to create an abundant life in Canada. She owned an art gallery that allowed her to feed and clothe her children as well as to provide them with ski trips and piano lessons.

In 2005, she decided to help girls in the Gansu province, where she had lost her chance to go to school. She didn't realize how fulfilling this decision would also be for her. "Everything I've done in my life was to survive," Tien says. "Having the girls is beyond that, it is my dream."

While the EGRC is a registered non-profit group and has a board of directors, Tien does 90 per cent of the fundraising work. Most of her connections with donors and supporters are made through her business, Omega Gallery and Custom Framing, at Dunbar Street and West 27th Avenue.

In the past, she has organized charity art auctions, dim sum luncheons and concerts, including the Youth for Youth benefit concert.

In the first year, Tien raised \$30,000. In 2008, the EGRC raised more than \$80,000. "It's not quite enough for what I want for them," Tien says.

Eventually Tien hopes to cover 70 per cent of each student's expenses. She spends almost all the money she receives on the young women each year.

"Every year is like a new year for me, there's only a few thousand left," Tien says. "It is a little stressful, [but] it doesn't matter how much I raise they are so grateful for anything."

Beyond the money, Tien prides herself on establishing relationships with all the girls. She receives letters of thanks from them and tries to respond to all their emails. She says it's important to pay special attention to the first-year students, who may have trouble adjusting. "They've never been to a city, never even taken a bath. They have no computer skills," Tien says. "It is very tough."

The students from the country stand out. Most of them have jobs on campus, often serving fellow students at the cafeteria.

According to Tien, the girls overcome the discrimination from other students by staying positive and hardworking.

She tells the story of one girl whose city roommates didn't understand why she couldn't afford to go out with them. One roommate in particular was quite cruel to her.

At Chinese New Year, this particular roommate was going home but had too much luggage. She didn't know how she would get it to the train station. The girl from the country offered to help. Her roommate was so surprised and grateful, after the way she'd acted, that they became friends.

Tien tells the girls they are lucky to be different. "I tell them, you girls have something those kids from the city will never have. Drive," Tien says. "They have to work hard. They have this kind of gift."

While Zhang, Li and Jia say it was easy for them to adapt to life at school, Jia points out it isn't like that for all the girls. "Chinese culture is very conservative, so they don't know how to express themselves," Jia says. "[Some of the girls] have problems psychologically. Many talked to me about it."

Chinese culture can also work against the girls. Universities publicly display the names of students who receive bursaries and other students sometimes make fun of them.

According to Tien, charity is a foreign concept in Chinese society, where helping family and friends is the priority. There is a strong culture of giving, just not to strangers.

This has also made it harder for Tien to fundraise within the Chinese-Canadian community but she says that is changing. "They see me working so hard," she says, laughing. "They feel sorry for me."

While the recession has not yet affected the society's ability to raise money, Tien is cautious about the future. "I don't have high expectations," Tien says. "When things are worse you have to try harder to make things happen."

Her intention is to keep running the society for five to six more years. She hopes

to pass the torch to someone else and perhaps do some travelling. However, she says she would still stay involved with the EGRC.

Tien's real hope is that the Chinese government will some day fund post-secondary education, particularly for girls in rural areas, and make organizations like the EGRC unnecessary. "I'm looking forward to that day but these women only have this one chance," Tien says.

But Roger Boshier doubts the Chinese government will make the education of women a priority any time soon.

Boshier, who spoke about the EGRC and its role in China at a fundraising luncheon and the recent benefit concert, has spent many years in China and taught at three universities there. "It's still a patriarchy," Boshier says. "Discrimination against women is so deeply embedded in Chinese culture."

However, Boshier does see some reasons for optimism within the immense bureaucracy. "Some of the people in the top levels of government are intelligent and well educated, and they're doing their best to end discrepancies between rural and city people," Boshier says.

Boshier says it is especially important that Chinese women be educated. "The only vehicle for them to resist [discrimination] is school," Boshier says.

Education doesn't just enable rural women to change their own lives; it gives a new perspective to their families and villages.

"They become something of a role model," Boshier says. "Many of them will never return to their village but even so they still have an impact on those around them."

Boshier became "an enthusiastic supporter" of the EGRC after finding a pamphlet in Tien's gallery a couple of years ago.

Since then he has donated \$250 annually to the society. At the benefit concert earlier this month he announced he would be doubling his donation this year because he is so impressed by Tien's efforts.

"Her model is perfect," Boshier says. "Because the big concern when you send money to China is, where does it go?"

Because Tien visits China yearly to transfer the money directly to the girls' bank accounts, there is no concern that school or government officials will take a cut.

"The model depends on Tien's integrity and competence, of which she has bucket loads," Boshier says.

He says the society not only helps students, it lets Canadians know they can make a difference on a worldwide scale. "When Canadians come along and offer help in a gracious spirit, it improves the image of Canada in China," Boshier says.

According to him, Tien is a perfect example of what the international image of Canada could be.

"What Tien is doing is an absolute act of generosity."

But for Tien herself, it is her students that represent this graciousness. "They have this great integrity and manners," Tien says. "The girls just keep inspiring me."