

Love across Pacific -- "Vancouver mom" sponsors 165 underprivileged Chinese university girls

by Xinhua writers Zhao Qing, Yang Shilong

OTTAWA, June 30 (Xinhua) -- From the outside looks of "Omega Gallery and Custom Framing," located at Dunbar Street and West 27th Avenue, a quiet area in the western suburbs of Vancouver, one cannot see anything particular.

But behind this small art business is an extraordinary project that has helped many underprivileged rural Chinese girls fulfill their university dreams, and has given hopes to their impoverished families.

"EDUCATED WOMEN HAVE EDUCATED CHILDREN"

With funds raised mostly through her business connections under the charity "BC Society for Educating Girls of Rural China" (EGRC), Omega Gallery's owner, Tian Qing, has managed to sponsor 165 young women from remote villages of northwest China's Gansu Province to study in universities in over 20 Chinese cities. Twenty-six of them will graduate in 2009, and 50 more will receive their degrees in 2010.

Born and raised in the Chinese capital Beijing, Tian had a childhood of ease and comfort, dreaming of attending one of China's top universities. But life changed for her with the beginning of the tumultuous Cultural Revolution in 1966, when she was sent to Gansu and worked in a factory there for eight years. Her university dream died consequently.

It was also during her stay in Gansu that Tian first tasted the bitterness of life and witnessed how the local people, especially women and girls, were struggling under extreme poverty.

In the 1980s Tian immigrated to Canada with the help of family friends in Vancouver, where she and her husband opened the Omega Gallery and gradually earned an affluent life. It was not until 20 years later, when her own children were old enough to attend college, that Tian began to feel the loss of her own chance at a better education.

The idea of establishing a charity for rural Chinese girls first hit Tian after she attended a UNICEF event for the "Go Girls!" campaign in her daughter's school. A phrase from the event -- "educated women have educated children" -- resonated with Tian, together with the poor lives of rural girls in Gansu, which have always been a haunting memory to her.

"After moving to Canada 26 years ago, and experiencing a society of abundance in all areas, I wanted to give something back to my home country. For me, the best

gift we can offer the next generation is to empower women with an education," Tian told Xinhua during a recent interview.

"AN ABSOLUTE ACT OF GENEROSITY"

In 2005, Tian registered the EGRC, a non-profit group, with the British Columbia provincial government following a trip to Gansu. While the EGRC has a board of directors, Tian does 90 percent of the fundraising work, organizing charity art auctions, dim sum luncheons and concerts. Most of her connections with donors and supporters are made through her art business.

In the first year, Tian raised 30,000 Canadian dollars (25,500 U.S. dollars). In 2008, the sum rose to more than 80,000 Canadian dollars (68,000 U.S. dollars). Tian spends almost all the money she receives each year on the young women back in China. Over the past four years, the EGRC has covered some 40 to 50 percent of the university education costs for 165 girls from poor rural families, giving approximately 1,000 Canadian dollars (850 U.S. dollars) to each student.

Eventually Tian hopes to cover 70 percent of each student's expenses. "Every year is like a new year for me, there's only a few thousand left," Tian says. "It is a little stressful, (but) it doesn't matter how much I raise, they (the helped students) are so grateful for anything."

To encourage more donors, Tian takes particular efforts to ensure all money is answered for. She travels to Gansu every August to interview each applicant, and get to know them, their family situation and their dreams. She also personally gave the funds to each of them. As a follow-up, She also visits the universities where they are studying.

Although it is a tremendous challenge for these rural girls to survive and perform well in modern Chinese educational environments, Tian is very proud to see all of them are adapting to their new environment, and many have achieved academic excellence.

"I have also noticed a wonderful 'domino' effect -- where all sponsored girls have expressed the desire to help others in getting an education," Tian said.

Professor Roger Boshier of the University of British Columbia, who has taught in Chinese universities and is helping authorities there build a "learning society" in China, spoke highly of Tian's efforts in helping the poor rural girls to get university education. Education not only enables rural women to change their own lives, but also gives a new perspective to their families and villages, said Boshier.

"They become something of a role model," Boshier noted. "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 Tian's gallery a couple of years ago. Since then he has donated 250 Canadian dollars (232 U.S. dollars) annually to the society. At an EGRC benefit concert in May

this year, he announced that he would be doubling his donation this year because he is so impressed by Tian's efforts.

"Her model is perfect. The model depends on Tian's integrity and competence, of which she has bucket loads ... What Tian is doing is an absolute act of generosity," Boshier said.

"THE GIRLS JUST KEEP INSPIRING ME"

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

In fact, what Tian prides herself on most is her intimate relationship with all the girls. She receives letters of thanks from them and responds to all the emails, caring about their struggles to adapt to the new environment and helping them to cope with discriminations from some privileged students.

"I tell them, you girls have something those kids from the city will never have. Drive," Tian told Xinhua. "They have to work hard. They have this kind of gift."

"Mom, you have given me so much for the past four years, You gave me the opportunity to attend university and teach me to be self-confident and treat others well. I don't know what to say to you to express my feelings. I miss you and I really want to call you Mom," a girl named Li Yongxiu said in an email to Tian.

Last month, three of the girls sponsored by Tian came to Canada to thank their benefactors. One of them, Zhang Fang Fang, 22 and a music student of the University of Lanzhou, expressed her gratitude to Tian with a traditional Chinese folk song at the Youth for Youth benefit concert in Vancouver.

"All I know now comes from the chance Madame Tian and the sponsors gave me. Without it, I would not even have dreams now," Jia Liyan, 21, who is in her third year of International Studies at Zhong Shan University, said at the concert on behalf of all the three girls.

For Tian, it is also a dream coming true. "Everything I've done in my life was to survive," Tian says. "Having the girls is beyond that, it is my dream."

Asked about the future of the EGRC, Tian is cautious. "I don't have high expectations. When things are worse you have to try harder to make things happen," she said, adding that the current economic recession has not dampened donors' efforts.

Her intention is to keep the society running for five to six more years. Then she hopes to pass the torch to someone else and perhaps do some traveling herself. Nevertheless, she says she would like to always stay involved with the EGRC.