

# Local businesswoman helps Chinese women attend university

Tien Ching, who arrived in Canada from Beijing in 1983, is the founder of the non-profit B.C. Society for Educating Girls in China

BY GERRY BELLETT, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 4, 2009



Tien Ching is helping young Chinese women get what she was denied in China: a university education.

**Photograph by:** Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

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In 1983, a disillusioned Tien Ching left China, deprived by fate and Chairman Mao Zedong's cultural revolution from receiving a university education.

When she returned 22 years later as a successful Vancouver businesswoman, it was to help others receive what she'd been denied.

Ching owns the Omega Gallery and Custom Framing on Dunbar and West 27th and is the founder of the non-profit B.C. Society for Educating Girls in Rural China.

In August, Ching will be off to China's most impoverished province, Gansu, with approximately \$100,000 the society will have raised this year to defray the tuition costs of young peasant women with the intelligence, but without the means, to attend university.

The society was formed in 2005 and has almost quadrupled donations since then.

"When we first started we raised \$27,000. This year it will be about \$100,000," Ching said.

She has raised \$80,000 in Vancouver and is stopping off in Hong Kong where she expects to raise a further \$20,000 from supporters there.

The idea to help girls from peasant families get an education arose in 2003 when her daughter, Kate,

was singing with the Vancouver Children's Choir for a UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) fundraiser called Go Girls, which helped send African girls to school.

"Someone from UNICEF said that if a woman is educated, then all her children will be educated. And that planted the seed in my heart," she said.

China's infamous cultural revolution had denied her that opportunity when at 16, she and her mother, a pediatrician, were exiled from their privileged life in Beijing to Gansu.

There, in the northwest corner of China on the route of the old Silk Road, they would be "re-educated by peasants and workers."

"I had attended the best girls-only school in Beijing -- it was where Mao's children went -- but then we were sent off to Gansu, the poorest region in China, where I was sent to work in a factory," she said.

Her father, a Second World War pilot who had flown with the American Flying Tigers against the Japanese, was in prison as he was deemed politically suspect, having fought under Mao's great rival, Chiang Kai-shek.

Now she was mixing with children who were orphans whose parents had starved to death in a province that got little rain and could raise only corn and potatoes, and where being dirt-poor didn't come close to describing it.

Girls were usually engaged by their parents when they were nine and married at 12 or 13 after the bridegroom's family paid a dowry, she said.

When she finally returned to Beijing in 1981 and worked at another factory, her plan to attend university was dashed when her boss wouldn't allow her to go.

In 1983 she immigrated to Canada, settling in Vancouver where she would get married, have two children and become successful in business.

Inspired by the UNICEF concert, she raised \$27,000 in donations in 2005, \$15,000 of which came from the proceeds of an auction of donated works from the artists she represents in her gallery.

In August that year, she returned to the remote villages of Gansu and found that while the standard of living had risen, girls from poor families were still not getting an education.

That first year, she used the donations to pay a year's tuition for 250 girls to attend elementary school and helped 26 others attend university.

When she went back the following year, the authorities had begun paying the education costs for girls to attend school, so she switched her efforts to getting peasant girls into university.

Those original 26 are graduating from university this year and Ching's program has helped them each year to meet a substantial part of the costs.

One has been accepted into a post-graduate program, but will need a laptop computer.

"There's no way she can afford one. I've promised we'd get it for her," Ching said.

Through e-mail and letters she maintains a personal relationship with the 165 young women now attending universities across China who have been helped by the program.

This year she will take on another 45.

"These young women have never been to a city. They've never taken a bus. It is a great change in their lives and they need encouragement. There's a huge gap between them and the rich kids at university, and I tell them they have a special gift those rich kids don't have. They have drive," she said.

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