

Summer under the Red Flag

Two INTO members reflect on a visit to China

In early March 2004 Health Action Overseas (HAO), an Irish Non Government Organisation (NGO), confirmed that we were to travel to the small village of Toepau, in the province of Guizhou, The People's Republic of China. Our purpose was to provide in-service training to Chinese teachers working with children who have special needs. The in-service project in Anshun is HAO's only such project in China. We flew to Guiang, capital of Guizhou Province via Beijing. This remarkable, though low key, project is different in that it receives support from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Irish Embassy in Beijing and teachers on their summer holidays.

Most news and media attention has focused on Beijing, its enormous industrial and economic boom, its post Tian-a-men Square approach and the Olympic Games in 2008. In contrast, Central and Western China are still encountering desperate poverty, hunger, and constant flooding. The EU, Ireland and NGOs all agree the best way to improve life for these people is through education and self help programmes.

Guizhou Province

Until recent times Guizhou Province was one of the most isolated and sparsely populated areas in China. Guizhou is the poorest province in China after Tibet. Mountains and plateaus make up most of its topography and the average altitude is over 1,000 meters. The province, due to its inaccessibility, is not a tourist area. Life for the small minorities in the villages seems to go on as it has for centuries. The Han, Miao, Buyi, Dong, Tujia, Yi, Gelao and Shui peoples all live in small villages, most of which are inaccessible by road and many live in sub-standard conditions. Transport, industry, communications and infrastructures are still developing (over 60% of villages are inaccessible except on foot or by motorbike). With a population

of about thirty eight million, twelve million live below the Chinese national poverty line. In Anshun, there is a juxtaposition of old and new. In the midst of the mushrooming high rise towers, poverty is evident everywhere. Children with baskets on their backs collect scrap; old men and women forage in dustbins. The smells are of open sewers and poverty. Even though there is a consciousness of cleanliness nothing is clean. The scenery is beautiful but there is always someone pushing a cart or shouldering a large basket. Local people are extremely pleasant despite all their hardships.

The HAO Project

The in-service training project for teachers, working with children with special educational needs (SEN), is in its eighth year. This year over 110 teachers attended bringing the number of teachers who received training to over 2,000. It is impossible to imagine the sacrifices that these teachers have to make to access this training. Many have travelled for over 24 hours – they walked from their village, took a bus, then a train to get here.

Special education is undergoing huge and positive change. There are now 38 special schools for students of SEN with more than 2,000 students on roll. These schools cater for children with visual impairment, hearing impairment and general learning disabilities. In Anshun Teacher Training College, the Special Education Department are trying to introduce change and new innovations. They plan to develop a new

SEN Curriculum and realize that this is a very daunting prospect. They continue to look to Ireland for support and inspiration.

Special Educational Needs Training Course

The Special Education Training provided in-service to teachers working in special and mainstream schools. Classes ran each day from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. with a break for lunch. Teachers, from all over Guizhou, lived on campus for the duration of the course. Many of the services that we take for granted in Irish schools

are not available here.

Often teachers are isolated from colleagues and have few opportunities to receive advice or support. Special class sizes compare favourably with the Irish system. Classes in mainstream settings have as many as 60 students. Students are

diligent and learn mainly by rote, emphasis being placed on acquisition of knowledge rather than its dissemination. Primary and secondary teachers are subject orientated, which means students may have four, five or six teachers in their six hour day.

Our task was difficult given the language barrier. However, our interpreter, Mr Lu Jun, coped wonderfully with all the educational terminology and jargon that we used. He was with us throughout our stay and without his help we could not have presented, asked questions or bought lunch.

Schools in the Mountains

In the fourth week of our stay a meeting with Mr Yao Shoulun, Deputy Director General,

Foreign Affairs Office of Guizhou Province, gave a new direction to our work. He has always been very supportive of the HAO Project and of Marie Irvine, from St Anne's School, Roscrea, the teacher originally involved in the training. We talked about a special school that we had visited in Guiang and asked if we could visit a rural special school.

Following a call from Mr Yao, we were brought high into the mountains where we visited a special school for children with a GLD and hearing impairment. There are 34 students on roll and five teaching staff. The rooms are dimly lit, with little or no ventilation. All the schoolbooks and equipment were in one press. It is a residential school and the students have to sleep three or four to one bed. There are no computers, books, indoor toilets and the five teaching staff also must supervise the residential services.

The following day we were taken to a mainstream school high up on the mountains. It is in a village of mud huts. Two hundred children attend this school and it is in a deplorable condition. The school is a mixture of wooden buildings and mud and wicker walls and totally unsafe. Some rooms have desks and others have none. The floors are plain earth. The blackboard was the only teaching aid in evidence.

Our real hope is to support these schools in summer 2005, our next visit.

Michael O'Keefe, St Michael's House, Ballymun, Dublin and Bob Keating, St Brigid's School, Mullingar.



Dei Ming, an eight year old girl living in a small village in the mountains



A group of officials, accompanied by Mike, view the local school