

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

By Opal Redman



Drop a pebble into a body of water and at first you will see a small splash, seeming barely to affect the water around it. But watch over a period of time and you will see concentric ripples beginning next to the point of impact and multiplying and spreading to greater and greater distances. The effect remains, even after the far-distant ripples seem to have disappeared.

The result of the Oakland University/Guizhou Province connection, begun 20 years ago, has been very much the same. At the beginning the noticeable impact was in the close relationships that developed between Chinese and American educators, as scholars, exchange students, and American teachers of English were given an opportunity to know each other first-hand and on a one-to-one basis. The warmth, respect, and friendship created have increased with every passing year; for many, the experience of living as an insider (or as close as one can get to being an insider) in a totally foreign culture has changed not only our view of that other culture and of the world, but of ourselves as well. Nothing in our perspective on the world and the multiplicity of its cultures has been the same since that initial experience.

We all thought at the beginning that what we were doing was to be educational in the narrow sense of the word: we would teach (teachers) and learn (scholars and students in our classes) and hope to pass on some of the results to those with whom we customarily interact within our own educational establishments when we returned to them. It is at this point that the ripple effect becomes apparent. In China an expected outcome was the use by Chinese teachers of new skills and knowledge gained in the classes and through outside contacts with the American teachers in Guiyang.

But the American teachers, upon their return home, took upon themselves a mission to spread in the southeastern Michigan area as much awareness of China as possible. On both sides of the Pacific information about the countries involved was gained primarily from television, and there was little information there. So returned teachers began writing articles for private newsletters, giving lectures – free of charge – in libraries, senior citizen groups, churches, and classes (public school and university). Chinese scholars and exchange teachers and students who came to our area were also exceedingly generous with their time in spreading their culture in classes.

As the range of contacts for outreach grew, so did the range of the program itself. By formal arrangement with the Guizhou Department of Education, Oakland University welcomed graduate students to its campus to complete the second year of a two-year masters program, the first year having been spent in China. And in Guizhou Province itself, the Summer English Language Institutes spread from a single Institute in Guiyang, with four or five teachers, to institutes which eventually were held in every prefecture in the province on a rotating basis, with 10 to 12 teachers per year.

A further ripple appeared when a group of Michigan school districts in the area of Oakland University formed the China Consortium of School Districts, dedicated to furthering contacts between their individual districts and the educational establishment in Guizhou Province. Neither national group had a real understanding of how education was handled in the other country, so successive delegations from Guizhou Province came to study organization and funding of districts in Michigan, school administration, counseling, special education – each delegation made up of administrators, headmasters, and other appropriate officials. The districts that made up the Consortium hosted these groups, showing and telling the Chinese educators what they asked about.

Some of the Michigan districts, in turn, sent similar information seeking groups to Guiyang. Out of these visits direct contacts were made between individual Consortium districts and officials in Guizhou, and eventually groups of high school students from both China and Michigan visited the other country.

The ripples have extended to areas not originally included as part of the specifically institutional aspect of education. A visit from the Miao-Miao Performing Group made it possible for people in this area to be exposed to the talents and background cultures of Chinese Han and minority children. A Chinese Children's Project was organized in 1996 to provide money to send impoverished children in the Guiyang area to school; 70 sponsors made a 10-year commitment to donate funds to send 258 children to school, and the project is still in operation. Delegations to and from Oakland County have expanded the area of interest into the business and government area. And an interest in women's concerns led not only a delegation of Chinese women officials who visited Michigan to see what socially and governmentally we were involved with, but I was privileged to be taken to meet with women's committees in Guiyang and Huaxi, and to visit a Buyi village whose extraordinary economic and social advancement was primarily owing to the guidance and leadership of the women of the village.

The difficulty in dealing with the ripple effect of the Oakland University/Guizhou Province program is that no one person can see the total picture; even hitting some of the highlights is difficult. Statistics can provide a range of the numbers of educators and students impacted; but there is no accurate measure of the depth of the impact. The long term cultural and intellectual effect on each individual is known only to that individual. Out of each individual change eventually will come the larger changes toward which we are all working.