

Document 18.4: Excerpt from “Bridge over the Digital Divide” by Rong Jiaojiao in *China Daily*, March 29, 2006

...“The ancient farmers’ houses of these Zhuang¹ minority groups have three floors. The first is for raising animals like pigs and hens, the second is for people and the third is for storing grain and corn.

“It’s a pretty smart design because it saves space and is very environment-friendly,” said 11-year-old Tang Zijun, a fifth-grader at Haizhuzhonglu Elementary School in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong Province with a population of 10 million.

Tang is talking about the PowerPoint photos she just received from Tong Jingyan, a student of Jingxi Pilot Elementary School of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 688 kilometres west of Guangzhou.

In the county town of Jingxi, where 99 per cent of the population of 580,000 is Zhuang minority, Tong is studying photos of ancient Guangdong farmhouses taken on Tang Zijun’s recent school field trip.

“The ceiling is so high to handle the mild weather, plus there are three doors to ensure safety,” said the 11-year-old boy. “I think it must be very comfortable indoors, cool in summer and warm in winter. No need for an air-conditioner.”

New ideas

This exchange forms just one small link in a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) distance education project launched last year.

¹ The Zhuang are the largest minority group in China, numbering around 15.5 million. They live primarily in the southwest and southern provinces. For more about China’s ethnic minorities, see Chapter 1.

The project involves 15 primary schools in Guangxi and Chongqing Municipality, and seven schools in Guangdong and Anhui provinces and Shanghai.

Students were divided into groups to conduct research on the same topic, exchange ideas and discuss their findings in a chat room at the project website (www.isnet.org.cn).

Guangxi and Guangdong students have taken weekend field trips to photograph rural homes, interviewed local residents and then search for more information about them on the Internet. Finally with their teachers' help, the students assembled a PowerPoint presentation to show their online friends.

The housing project gave Tong Jingyan a new outlook on history.

"I think our forefathers were in a way more intelligent than today's people at coping with the environment.

"I feel like an expert searching for treasure that is invisible to others, or," his eyebrows raise, "as if I were entering a magic tunnel that converts time."

Time travel and treasure-hunting aren't the only online activities.

"She (Tang) taught me how to use QICQ(an instant messaging program), and how to find information through online search engines like Baidu or Sina," Tong said. "It's so convenient."

He has picked up a handy tip from his online pal. "I now know how to play online electronic games," he giggled. "I need to practise regularly to improve my skills, but teachers don't allow us to play."

The pictures of skyscrapers also excited the Zhuang boy, who has never been to a big city.

“They’re like rockets on top of the road. I think my head will hit the back of my shoulders if I try to see the top of one. If I were there, I think I might fall over.” ...

Besides exchanging information on their homes, students from different schools worked together online creating their own designs.

Zhang Jing of Xinjing Centre Elementary School in Guangxi drew a face for the logo of the distance education program. His friends at Luying Elementary School in eastern Anhui Province didn’t seem satisfied.

“We discussed it online and finally decided to change the eyes of the child into two computer mice to address the importance of the computer in our life,” explained the fifth-grader.

Then they came up with a slogan: Hand in hand for a better world.

“A better world, in my opinion, is a world with no war and no hunting of animals,” Zhang said.

“Animals are rather unfortunate. So we should help not only children in war-stricken areas but also those beautiful creatures. They shouldn’t be made into fur coats or delicious meals.”

Such fresh ideas surprised even Annette Nyquist, a UNICEF distance education project official. “It’s not that important how marvellously they master these information technology skills,” she said. “It’s an active learning attitude and a sense of co-operation that really counts.”

Wide gap

The project is a co-operative venture between UNICEF and the National Centre for Educational Technology (NCET). With US \$230,000 funding from US CitiGroup, the hope is that it will reduce the great digital divide between eastern and western China.

“With the steady torrent of impressive statistics coming out of China’s information technology sector in recent years, it’s easy to forget about those who have been left behind and whose lives remain largely untouched by the information revolution,” said Li He, an NCET official in charge of the project.

“So distance education in a way reaches people in circumstances in which they would otherwise be deprived of opportunities to learn.”

Xinjing Centre Elementary School in Guangxi is very different from its sister in Guangdong. The 99-year-old school of 1,509 students has one room that opened in 2002 with 40 computers, only half of them online.

“When we have online discussions with them (students in Guangxi), they told us that a group of five students share one computer to chat with us,” said 11-year-old Lao Shanyi from Haizhuzhonglu Elementary School in Guangzhou.

“But for us, everybody has his or her own computer. I think we’re really lucky.”

The 672 students of Guangzhou Haizhuzhonglu Elementary School are indeed lucky: They have 130 computers in three computer rooms, established in 1996. Each computer room has round-the-clock Internet access. Three students here even won national computer operating awards in 2004.

Lao Shanyi’s teacher, Hu Xinghua, sees real benefit for both sides from the exchange.

“Students learn to share information together and seek answers to questions actively instead of waiting for teachers to feed them,” she said.

Nyquist notes that the project is designed to put students in the centre of their own learning. “This online practice plays an important role in transforming teacher-centred instruction into child-centred instruction to finally improve education quality,” she said.

“Plus, these urban kids come to realize that some children of their age in the west are deprived of the resources that they often take for granted,” Hu said....

This gap is very much on the mind of the Chinese Government. By the end of 2003, at least 10,000 primary and middle schools in the poor western provinces had been equipped with primitive computing facilities or Internet access.

The United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) distance education project covers 180 schools in 18 counties of 12 provinces in China. The project plans to expand from 15 to 50 schools in 2006, adding Sichuan Province and more counties from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region....

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