

Rural reading rooms a gift for future

Libraries help change children's lives in villages

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When Zhang Dongdong arrived in Qinglong county in August 2019, he visited a community called Sanbao Street, which was home to people who had moved from poor mountainous areas two years earlier.

Located in the Qianxinan Bouyei and Miao autonomous prefecture in Guizhou province, Qinglong was one of China's most poverty-stricken counties.

Zhang, a manager at the Beijing Chinese Language and Culture College, was sent to the county as temporary Party secretary in charge of poverty alleviation at Zhanma village, Chama township, deep in the mountains. The month after he arrived, Zhang's position was made official.

He discovered that 90 percent of Sanbao Street's residents lived in poverty, and that many of the children had been left in the care of older relatives after their parents moved to large cities to find work.

In those families, he found no reading material except textbooks, and he saw children sitting on low plastic stools while using higher stools as tables to do their homework. Zhang, who has a 3-year-old child, immediately started a campaign among his friends to provide books and quickly amassed more than 3,000 from all over the country.

The day after he arrived, he visited the village primary school, which had 196 students. Zhang found that the various-sized desks in the classrooms had been used for more than 10 years, so the surfaces were badly dented. The school library looked like a warehouse for old books and lacked any space for reading. After school, the students had nowhere else to go to read or study, and they could only amuse themselves by playing in open spaces.

"In response, we renovated the deserted offices of the village committee and opened the village library," Zhang said.

The renovation program began at the end of 2019, and on June 1 the following year, World Children's Day, the Zhanma Village Library opened its doors, dedicated to the local children.

The library, which covers less than 30 square meters, is open from 3 pm to 6 pm every day. It has 20 seats and about 3,000 books. The custodians had planned to close later, but some of the children have to walk for 30 to 40 minutes through the mountains to get home.

"I'm not the only Party secretary in charge of poverty alleviation sent by the central government that has built a library for a village," Zhang, 38, said. "In fact, most secretaries choose to build village libraries as a very important part of our work."

The central government has sent more than 3 million cadres to poverty-stricken villages nationwide. The construction of public cultural spaces, libraries in particular, has become one of the most important tasks to help rejuvenate China's rural areas.

In March, when he delivered the Government Work Report at the two sessions, the meetings of the top legislative and political advisory bodies, Premier Li Keqiang said: "We will promote the integrated development of urban and rural public cultural services and launch new public cultural projects. A love of reading will be fostered among our people."



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It was the eighth consecutive year the report had included plans to nurture a society that loves reading. This year, the development of rural public cultural services has become a main priority.

On March 17, the government released a notice specifying seven major tasks to promote reading in society, including the improvement of related services to guarantee the needs of children in rural areas, especially left-behind children whose parents are migrant workers in large towns far away.

The latest available statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs show that by August 2018, there were 6.97 million left-behind children, a decline from the 9.02 million registered in 2016.

"As their parents go to cities to work, kids in poor areas stay at home with their grandparents, many of whom are illiterate. Books can be good company for them, enriching their childhoods and maybe their lives," Zhang said.

Fostering interest

In the last 15 years, Wu Jingxun, from Foshan, Guangdong province,

has often visited poverty-stricken areas to teach children how to use picture books.

The 47-year-old believes such books provide children with a good start, as they can help foster an interest in reading that will provide lifelong benefits.

In early April, Wu's team traveled to Ganxian, a county in Jiangxi province, to visit primary schools in some of the most remote villages. They had been there before, and this time they took various items for the children, including books, basketballs and soccer jerseys.

Over five days, they visited four primary schools, each of which had 100 to 300 students. Ninety percent of the students were left-behind children, Wu said during a phone interview with China Daily, conducted while he was traveling to a primary school in Ganxian.

As China had completely eradicated extreme poverty by late November, primary schools in Ganxian's poor rural areas have largely improved facilities, including libraries, music rooms and multimedia equipment, according to Wu.

He added that there is still a lack of teachers for art education, which is a very important subject.

As a result, Wu's team gave 15 lessons in the four schools, including reading and music classes.

"We even found a brand-new piano in a primary school. We have a team member who can play it, so for the first time in their lives, those kids heard Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* played on a piano," Wu said.

He taught the children how to read picture books, trying to inspire an interest in reading, which "will nourish their souls and teach them what is true, beautiful and good, especially when their parents are not around".

Reward system

The library in Zhanma faces similar problems. For Zhang, the difficulty is not to establish a library with several thousand books, but "how to encourage kids to come to the library to read".

He invited graduates from the College Student Volunteer Services Program in West China to manage the library. They invented the "reading deposit books" system, which records the time each reader spends

in the library. Each hour equates to one point, and each point is worth a nominal 1 yuan (15 cents).

Next door to the library is a non-profit shop that sells stationery and toys donated from all over the country, which children can "buy" with their reading points.

Zhang was happy to see that every day, 10 to 20 children come to the library to read and study. On Saturdays, he shows movies in the building, using a computer and a projector donated by one of his friends.

Gradually, Zhang has seen changes in the children. Earlier this month, he received a call from a girl who reported that the lights at the library had been left on, even though it was closed.

"I was touched because it meant that kids have taken the library as their own place. They care. So I praised the girl and awarded her a pen," he said.

"We hope this village library will provide good company for the kids, helping them to fall in love with reading, to learn to express themselves, to understand the broader world and to change their lives."

Policy Digest

Measures aim to improve livelihoods

A slew of fresh policy measures will be rolled out to help job seekers and those in dire need of improving their livelihoods, according to a circular released on Thursday by the General Office of the State Council.

The circular outlined tasks set for various regions and departments to help ensure stability and security in priority areas and promote high-quality development in the near future.

In particular, the circular said pragmatic and effective policies and reform measures should cover employment, market entities, consumption, foreign trade and investment and people's livelihoods to increase the sense of prosperity among businesses and the public.

To create a better environment for job seekers, the number of professions that require government-approved licenses for entry should be reduced.

Thresholds for taking professional license exams should be lowered in certain cases to help those individuals with little or no working experience, it added.

Subsidies should be available to support occupational skills training and be managed by proper standards and dynamic adjustment mechanism, the document added.

Efforts will be made to remove hidden barriers against emerging industries and business models to boost employment in more areas.

Panel reshuffled to spur private education

A governmental panel has agreed to reshuffle its member departments and the way it convenes to better help spur the growth of privately funded education and better regulate cram schools.

The General Office of the State Council approved adjusting the functions and member units of the interministerial joint meeting system on private education, according to a circular released on Friday.

Under the leadership of the State Council, the joint meeting system should coordinate efforts to push forward the reform of privately funded education, regulate after-school training institutions and extend advanced practice and experiences.

Led by the Ministry of Education, the joint meeting system consists of 20 departments, including the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission and the National Development and Reform Commission.

A senior official with the Ministry of Education will serve as the convener, and the conference's office will work with the ministry to undertake daily tasks.

The circular also specifies system rules regarding the convening of meetings, the submitting of reports, the studying of issues and risks and the dispatching of joint work groups.

Departments involved should actively take on related work and form a long-term working mechanism, the circular stated.

Fewer traffic accidents reported nationwide

China has seen fewer road accidents in recent years, as the number of major ones dropped from 13 cases in 2014 to just three cases last year, according to Ministry of Public Security spokesperson Li Guozhong.

The decline came as the number of motor vehicles on the country's roads increased from 264 million to 372 million during that period, Li said on Thursday.

There are now 456 million people driving, compared with 302 million in 2014, Li added.

The ministry vowed to eliminate potential risks involving passenger buses, tourist buses, minibuses, heavy trucks, and vehicles carrying hazardous chemicals during a national conference on traffic management held recently in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province.

Campaigns targeting speeding, overloading, fatigued driving, drunken driving and other traffic violations will also be launched, the ministry added.

ZHANG YUNBI

Project aims to boost passion for books

By YANG YANG

Reading is an important cultural strategy for China in modern times and an important way for the country to inherit and develop its traditions and spirit, said Yan Hongbin, deputy director of the Palace Museum in Beijing, at the opening ceremony of a nationwide project to promote reading among children at the museum on International Children's Book Day earlier this month.

Li Pan, who hosts a reading pro-

gram on China Central Television, introduced the project at the ceremony.

Li said it aims to persuade society to create a good atmosphere for children to develop a passion for reading and to help them broaden their vision, enrich their knowledge and nurture their sense of goodness and justice.

The 17th National Reading Investigation Report released in April last year showed that in 2018, Chinese adults on average read 3.32 books,

and minors 8.91 books. Among minors, 80.4 percent read, lower than the 84.8 percent in 2017.

The biggest drop was among the group aged up to 8 years old, down from 75.8 percent to 68 percent. In this age group, only 68.7 percent of children regularly read in the company of their parents, a decrease from 71 percent in 2017.

Moreover, children in this age group on average read only 7.23 books that year.

The statistics serve as the backdrop

of one of the seven major tasks specified by the government to promote reading among the people, including strengthening efforts to increase children's reading in the company of their parents.

Speaking at the ceremony, Wang Huan, who heads Shijia Hutong Primary School in Beijing, said children need to gain knowledge not just from textbooks, but also from other works.

"Reading will not only broaden children's vision, but it will also help to shape their personalities and boost their courage to conquer difficulties," Wang said.

"If children can foster good reading habits, it will benefit them

throughout their lives, and it also might urge their parents to read," she said.

Museum director Yan said that young people are the future.

"From *Journey to the West* to the science fiction work of Jules Verne, children can read characters traveling by wind or in submarines through the oceans. Now in reality, we have spaceships and submarines. Dreams are dreams before we walk step by step to realize them, and reading is among the first steps," he said.

"We hope that, starting from childhood, all Chinese people will develop a love of reading."