

# Mountain City Views

Dazhou, China  
November 2011



Greetings friends,

We always enjoy visiting the Chinese countryside.

Not only does rural China provide a respite from the busy, crowded cities. It also gives us insights into another China--the China that contrasts sharply with the gleaming urban skyscrapers and upscale apartment villages, the China where modernity remains more a promise than a reality, the China where over half of Chinese still live.

A few weeks ago we traveled to a village to visit two of our students who are working as intern teachers in rural schools.

We tell you about that visit in this letter.

Meanwhile, seasons in Dazhou are

changing. The rain, fog and chill of a Sichuan province winter are already calling.

That's one reason we were delighted within the past week to receive two handmade prayer shawls. They are gifts from the Prayer Shawl Ministry of the Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church in Waterloo, ON, one of our partner congregations through Mennonite Church Canada Witness.

Not only will these shawls provide extra warmth in the coming cold season. They also will be daily tangible expressions of support from our friends at WKUM, and reflect their prayers on our behalf. We are very grateful.

Our best wishes to you, as you transition from the splendid colors of fall to the dormant weeks of a winter yet to be.

*Phil &  
Julie  
Bender*



The prayer shawls are a gift from Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church.

# *"Nice to meet you!" in Huodong*

Low blue mountains and terraced green fields girdle mirror-like ponds and clusters of white tile houses. Geese waddle through recently-harvested rice paddies and pick at vegetable vines, while farmers (mostly women) toil with hoes to prepare raised beds for fall planting.

Smoke from small fires of burning grass drifts upward, scenting the evening air. Chirping crickets and the putter of motorbikes break the heavy silence. A man tugging a giant, obstinate sow passes us as we stroll on the winding dirt road.

This is Huodong, an idyllic village about two hours from Dazhou that we have reached after traveling by train, taxi, river ferry and motorbike.

We have come here to visit Nina and Nancy, two of our students, who are practice teaching in small primary and middle schools. We have also come because we are curious to see what a rural Chinese school is like.

On this Friday afternoon, Nancy, who teaches in a neighboring village, is free, and is our guide.

The clean-swept cement playground of Nina's school is empty when we pass through the shiny steel gate at mid-afternoon. Classroom buildings demarcate three sides of the compound. A low mural wall, showing scenes of children playing happily, runs along the fourth side. Through the barred, glassless windows we can hear children's voices.

Music class is underway as we enter Nina's room. She is teaching her 24 second-graders a new song. Sitting erect on backless stools behind narrow wooden desks, they are singing heartily in well-enunciated English, "Good morning to you/Good morning to you/Good morning, dear mother/Good morning to you!"

On the walls, large photos of Karl Marx and assorted Chinese leaders gaze down. Above the whiteboard at the front, a slogan in bright



**Nina in her classroom**

red Chinese characters exhorts: "Study hard with persistence! Get good grades!"

Nina introduces us as her "dear teachers." "It's nice to meet you," we say. "NICE TO MEET YOU!" the students chant back in robust unison.

Soon the class ends, and another, smaller group of 12 students enters. These are older, perhaps seventh graders. They too sit smartly as Nina begins her music class.

(continued on next page)

## “Nice to meet you!” (continued)

Nina’s method of instruction is classic Chinese—lecture and command, with constant repetition by the students. For this class her song is “When the Rain Comes Down,” sung by Mennonite Kim Thiessen of Canada, which Phil had used in teaching English to Nina’s class at Sichuan University of Arts and Science. The tune is difficult, and Nina guides her students through at least 12 tedious repetitions. But though it’s late in the day, they remain attentive and well-behaved.

Along with music, Nina teaches English, politics



**Nina’s second-graders sing heartily in music class.**

and drawing. Of the 30 teachers in this school, she is the only one who can speak English. When she returns to SUAS at the end of December, the math teacher will take over her English classes.

The closing bell rings, and we join the charge to the playground outside. Immediately we are mobbed by shouting children jostling to get a close-up look at probably the first foreigners they’ve ever met.

Before we leave, Nina wants to show us where she lives during these four months of internship. So we climb to a hotel-like corridor on the third floor of one of the classroom buildings. Most of the teachers live in nearby villages, but a few others

also live in this dormitory. Her room is barely large enough for a single bed and desk, though her balcony includes a wash basin and an electric cooking plate. There is no television or internet. Toilet and washing facilities are the public lavatories beside the playground outside.

Nina tells us that this Huodong school is typical of Chinese schools in poor villages. Monthly salary for teachers is around 2,000 renminbi (\$315.00). (As a student teacher she gets 600 renminbi [\$95.00] a month.)

Though many SUAS English majors choose a teacher training track, most do not want to teach in rural schools.

They cite the low pay, difficult working conditions, and social isolation.

Teaching in large cities would be more attractive, but the competition for the limited number of urban school positions available each year is fierce.

But Nina and Nancy are drawn to village schools. They know them

well. They grew up in them. They also are aware of the sacrifices they will have to make when they become full-time teachers.

And they understand why Chinese parents constantly badger their children by asking, “Are you studying hard?” And why sometimes those parents poignantly warn, “A peasant’s child must study hard. Otherwise, you’ll end up like us.”

Maybe that’s why Nancy and Nina have hearts for these children who sit so erect at their spartan desks. And next fall, they expect to follow their hearts back to the countryside, to places like Huodong, teaching English and leading more choruses of “Good morning to you!”

## *Here and there around Huodong*



Huodong is a scenic, but poor, farming village set among shiny ponds and terraced hillsides.



Access to Huodong from Sanhuizhen, the nearest town (above), is by river ferry.



We were the first foreigners most Huodong schoolchildren had ever met.



Nancy practice teaches in a neighboring village.



As soon as music class was finished, a card game broke out on the classroom floor.



Nancy's school had recently been damaged by floods. Here students' notebooks dry in the sunshine.



Pretty much anything can serve as a shop.



A "Dollar Store," Chinese-style, in Sanhuizhen. Everything here is 2 yuan (32 cents). Business was brisk.

# Welcome to a visitor



In October we received a visit from Craig Maven, Board Chair of Mennonite Mission Network, the U.S. counterpart of Mennonite Church Canada Witness, and lead pastor of Harrisonburg (VA) Mennonite Church. Craig visited our classes and interacted with our students. Here four of our students (l-r)--Sunshine (2<sup>nd</sup> year), Emma (3<sup>rd</sup> year), Jack (4<sup>th</sup> year) and Vicky (1<sup>st</sup> year)—talk with Craig about what it's like to be a university student in China.

## Prayers

### We give thanks for:

- deepening relationships with students who are open to communicating with us

### We invite prayer for:

- wisdom in relating to students who seek us out, that we may be God's channel in providing care, counsel and hope
- patience and tact in dealing with people when our language skills are stretched
- ability to craft classes that equip our students with language skills, stimulate their minds, and broaden their outlooks

## We'd enjoy hearing from you



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