

Golden key to brightness

Project opens life door to blind children

By YU NAN
China Daily staff

"One, two, three, four twenty-one, twenty-two! Great!"

A circle of children applaud and laugh, hailing their pal inside the circle who had just bounced a ball 22 times during gym class.

The pupil in the centre, with a sweet smile on his face, slowly squats, stretches out his hands and feels the ground for his ball.

Wang Jianfeng, 11, has not been able to see since birth but he certainly can feel the elation of his classmates and teachers at the Yangquntan Primary School.

Wang began to study a year ago at Yangquntan in Xilin Gol League, located in North China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

Although blind, he studies with his peers in a regular class. The only difference is that his books are printed in Braille.

Wang still remembers the days when he was unable to go to school.

"Every day in the morning, I stood behind my home gate, hearing other children passing by on their way to school, talking and laughing so happily. How envious I was! How eagerly I wanted to join them!"

Wang was able to attend regular school with the assistance of the Golden Key Project.

According to Xu Bailun, the initiator of the project, most families in rural areas cannot afford to send their visually-impaired children to special schools.

Xu was an architect before he lost his sight in 1971 due to a medical accident. He suffered a great deal in the following years, especially when his loving wife,

Zhu Yitao, died in 1983. In 1985, 55-year-old Xu started to engage himself in the education of blind children and founded the "China Blind Children's Literature."

He launched the Golden Key Project in 1987, aiming to help rural children attend mainstream schools near their home by training local teachers in Braille.

After years' of pioneering work in various towns and villages, Xu and his staff were able to experiment with the project in a larger school area in 1996 in South China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Between 1996 and 1998, Xu and his staff, with help from the regional and local education bureaux, helped 2,145 visually-impaired children attend primary school. They also trained 2,364 teachers to teach blind children.

In 1999, Xu started to introduce the Golden Key Project in Ulanab League, one of the poorest areas in the Inner Mongolia. Then the project spread to another three places, including the Xilin Gol League, in the region.

He estimates there are some 2,230 visually impaired children in Inner Mongolia. And only 20 of them are able to study in the only two regional schools for the blind.

So far, 697 visually-impaired children have attended regular schools in their home villages.

The rural school teachers, most of whom have had no experience with Braille, have now become experts in learning and teaching Braille after a 15-day training course and one-year teaching experience.

The volunteer teachers have given blind children golden keys to open their life door in brightness, Xu said.

He You, a teacher at the



NIU YANHONG

Avid learner: Mengkey Bayar, 15, born blind in Inner Mongolia, can now use the Braille notes to write and read after a year's study thanks to the Golden Key Project.

He You, a teacher at the Yangquntan Primary School, joined the project in May last year.

He said that the summer holidays were his home. He also tutored Wang Jianfeng to help him catch up with other children when the school term began.

Wang's hard work earned him high marks in mathematics and Chinese in his first year.

"He is one of my best students," said He You. "To watch him come out of his darkness and smile at home but smile every day! His smile is the best gift to me!"

Just a year ago, nobody in the

village believed that Wang could successfully attend classes like other children.

Some people called Wang "little blind boy" and some parents didn't allow their children to play with him.

They began to change their minds when staff members promoting the Golden Key Project came to the village. They were told that a blind child has the right to study with other children.

Wang and He You's efforts changed the way many villagers viewed children with disabilities.

The children who used to tease Wang apologized, He You recalled.

Knowing Wang could not afford the special thick paper

needed to write Braille, people in the village collected their old calendars and cigarette boxes and sent them to his home.

"Seeing my child accepted by the people around him makes me happy," Wang's mother, Liu Guitao, said, wiping tears.

Xu and his colleagues have won much support from the local government.

The Inner Mongolia education commission invests 500,000 yuan (US\$62,000) into the Golden Key Project every year.

In the past two years, the project has spread to three more prefecture-level leagues and cities, covering almost a third of the region.

According to Xu, by 2003, the

project will reach the whole region, enabling at least 90 per cent of the visually-impaired children in Inner Mongolia to go to school.

When He Chengbao, the director general of the region's education commission, was asked whether it was worthy to launch this costly project, he replied firmly: "It is worthy of the investment!"

"The meaning of Golden Key Project has gone far beyond leading blind children to brightness,

"This is a 'golden key' to demonstrate the progress of our society, to clarify the responsibility and meaning of our education and to open the door of happiness to all of us!"



Courtesy of Xu Bailun

Persistent initiator: Xu Bailun (right), initiator of the Golden Key Project, listens to the reading of Liang Yanli, a blind girl in rural Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Many reasons to see 'Beauties of Cathay'

by XIAO HU

More than 60 national treasure works of art, including the spectacular Hundred Beauties of Cathay can now be seen at the exhibition of Chinese History.

The large-scale exhibition comprises modern carvings, boustrophedon Qingtian carved Garden Suzhou Yuanshiing Fushan Artistic Carving Zhejiang Province in East China.

The Hundred Beauties of Cathay is the most attractive of the exhibition.

The exhibition of these pictures started in 1986, taking 11 years to complete and using 32,000 working hours. More than 100 artists participated.

In two years when the exhibition was held in Kunming in 1999-2001, more than 10 million domestic and foreign tourists, including more than 300 foreign leaders from various countries, enjoyed its beauty.

A precious album named "The Hundred Beauties of Cathay" was published in June by the Shanghai People's Art Press.

Chen Yufu (1900-2001), a senior and a leading member of the Kuomintang, wrote the Chinese text for the cover of the album.

The 100 pictures in the first section were selected and led by the 112-year-old artist Su Juxian when he was 100 years old.

The names of the ladies in the work were written by artists from Xiling Seal Firm.

The descriptions on metal and stone, ivory, wood carvings, and lacquer, general assembly words of poems were well-known factories as craftsmen from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces and

Precious stones

The book of "The Hundred Beauties of Cathay" is not only a collection of traditional Chinese arts but also a concentrated reflection of the culture of women in the 100 years of Chinese history. At the same time, it is a collection of the jade resources of

This work is made of more than 100 kinds of top-grade jades and other precious materials.

In order to select red sandalwood materials with no scars and cracks, Lin Jiajun, the planner and main creator, went to Thailand three times.

The artisans used a lot of precious soft stones -- in various colours -- to decorate the beauties. Gold and silver threads, pearls, agate, coral, jade, jadeite, and mica are inlaid into the dresses, the headwears and other ornaments, fully displaying the nobleness of the work.

Women emperor

For example, the 56th picture in the work is Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907).

To express the splendour and grandness of the glory days of the Tang Dynasty, the artists inserted more than 400 pieces of soft jades on the skirt of Wu Zetian as decorations. Only this figure used more than 800 working hours.

The total weight of the work is 4,200 kilograms. All of it is composed of precious and rarely seen materials, clearly displaying the value of the work. Even the seniors in artistic circles and many experts of the Palace Museum are lost in wonder before "The Hundred Beauties of Cathay."

As a precious work of art, it firstly portrays the broad and profound traditional national culture.

It integrates traditional Chinese skills, proficiently using nine carving techniques: jade, stone, wood, ivory, shell, lacquer art, painting, seal cutting and lettering, as well as reviving and developing light-pushing painting (one kind of lacquer art) and snail-skimming technique that have been lost to the world for a long time.

The masters also created a new technique of repeated inlaying on the basis of traditional techniques.

Zhang Shufen, of the Palace Museum, in the foreword of the Exhibition of the Precious Carvings of China, wrote: "From theme, subject and composition, to the use of skills according to materials, instead of imitating the ancients, the works profoundly embody the art masters' aspiration of learning from the ancients."



File photo

Complex art: The figure of Empress Wu Zetian, who lived more than 1,300 years ago, has over 400 pieces of jade on her skirt, taking approximately 800 working hours to complete.

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