

Li Wen, Educating China's 'River' Children



■ By Lei Na

On an average workday, China Universal Asset Management's (CUAM) Chief Compliance Officer Li Wen (EMBA 2010) – dressed in a sharp suit – works out of his Aurora Plaza office in Lujiazui, the financial centre of Pudong District. His office is said to offer Shanghai's best bird's eye view of the Huangpu River. But every few months he leaves all that glamour behind for a trek to the mountains of Western China. On these trips he sees, first-hand, how students struggle to access an education; and he does all he can to remove the obstacles that stand in their way. China's river-rich West is home to many ethnic minorities. It's also a place of unimaginable poverty. If the financial zone in Lujiazui is the crown jewel of China's stunning development, the poorest western villages are the country's aching flesh under her glamorous garments. Li sees it all: light and shadow, wealth and poverty, hustle and bustle versus an eerie stillness. All these scenes add a certain degree of texture to his life.

GRABBING HOOKS

Between 2007 and 2008, an article titled "Going to School by Grabbing Hooks" created quite a stir when it was published by a number of Chinese media. It told

the story of children of the Lisu ethnic minority in Nujiang, Yunnan Province, whose daily journey to school involved crossing the Nujiang River by grabbing onto hooks. The story moved many; it also sparked CUAM and CBN's enthusiasm for educational aid projects. In 2008, they collaborated on the launch of the River Children charity initiative. At the time, CUAM had only been operating for three years but their strong sense of social responsibility fuelled Li and his colleagues' passion for helping others.

A year later, Tianfu Primary School, fully-funded by CUAM, was completed in Ping'an Village. Ping'an is part of Yunnan Province. It's nestled in a little town called Shangjiang, which is part of Lushui County in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture. This was where Li first experienced the grabbing hooks, along the bank of the Nujiang River. "Even though the local people were there to help and protect me, I still had to complete the round trip by grabbing hooks. My heart was pounding the whole time," he said later as he described the experience in an article. "For the entire trip, my head was – at the most – a dozen centimetres away from the crude steel rope. And if I'd been a little careless, I'd be scraping my face or head on the rope, which would be extremely dangerous. According to the

local people, each year there were cases in which someone fell into the raging river because of heavy winds or some accident; some even lost their lives.”

INSTILLING HOPE

Since its launch in 2008, the River Children project has chosen rivers whose courses it follows as it provides training for village teachers, builds schools, organises multiple educational field trips, donates libraries and

multimedia classrooms, and awards scholarships and grants. So far the project has extended to Lushui, Yunnan, Meigu, Sichuan, Jingyuan, Ningxia, Xiahe, Gansu, Liping, Guizhou, Enshi, Hubei, Huzhu and Qinghai. It's done so by following the paths of the Nujiang, Jinshajiang, Yellow, Daxiahe, Liujiang, Qingjiang and Datonghe rivers.





China Universal Asset Management

Founded in 2004, China Universal Asset Management Co., Ltd. ("China Universal"), is regarded as one of the country's most respected and innovative asset managers. With more than 450 staff and US\$35Bn in assets under management, the firm offers various China equity, fixed income and money market strategies through a wide range of investment vehicles including mutual funds, segregated accounts, institutional accounts, and offshore investment products. By the end of September 2014, 49 mutual funds had been launched which constitute a diversified product line covering equity, fixed income, money market, index tracking and QDII funds.

As one of a handful of institutional asset managers selected by the National Council for Social Security Fund (NCSSF), China Universal has a strong track record in managing segregated funds.

"At first we were just eager to build some schools and improve the educational infrastructure there. After a couple of years' work, we found that while hardware was useful to the local community, it was not the most crucial," explained Li. They realised that the problem rested with the teachers. "Their ideas of teaching, structure of knowledge and stability were the biggest problems. Good teachers were not willing to stay, because there was hardly any hope; even if children had the opportunity to go to school, chances are they would never leave the mountains under the current system of college enrolment," he added. "So we began to adopt a strategy of 'hardware as key, software as base', and to value teacher training, because better teachers can change generations of children, and inspire other teachers... This

project gets better with time.”

Over the years, they've received support from many volunteers. In the summer of 2008, then 68-year-old Master of Psychology and Education Tang Yungmei (daughter of renowned Sino-British author Elisabeth Comber), led a team of volunteers to Nujiang. As the project grew, CUAM also organised an annual teacher training session for 50-100 teachers in Shanghai. Many well-known educational agencies provided support and *CBN Daily's* Chief Editor Qin Shuo was among those who gave lessons. Their efforts paid off. A village

teacher from Xiahe County, Gansu Province wrote in an article, “I got to know how I could be a qualified teacher during the training. Students are our children, and we must love, understand and help them. We must move them with our love, and guide their conduct with rigour. Our love should be based on understanding, respect and believing in them. The project inspired within us an attitude of giving back to others throughout our lifetime. I was deeply moved by this.”

Through it all, Li has proudly watched as all their hard work paid off. “Our schools have become the standard in educational quality for the local educational authorities, and for other

companies that do charity work... Through our small bits of contribution we really harnessed people's love and changed the West,” he says.

AN UNEVEN AND LONG ROAD

So far, CUAM has built seven Tianfu primary schools, and Li has been to each of them twice. He knows every mountain and every tree at every location, just as he knows the teachers and children. In 2009, at the second stop of the River Children project in Meigu County, a part of Sichuan, Li met a Yi boy named Enzhabuqie whose home was almost a five-hour daily trek on a mountain road from school. But Enzhabuqie loved going to school so he was happy to make the journey. In 2013 when Li went back to Daliangshan Mountain, the boy, now a teenager, was still making the journey. The only major difference was that he had become so used to navigating the treacherous path that he could outpace almost everyone else. “That road was very dangerous, in many places you had to use both your hands and feet to



climb,” says Li. “The boy’s devotion to his studies despite his daily trudge over the mountains was really moving. We asked him why [he went to so much trouble], and his answer was simply that he liked going to school...”

Students like Enzhabuqie are an inspiration for Li who confesses that sometimes he wonders if he’s making a difference. “When you first take up the charity cause, you’re full of energy. But when days go by, you find that there are so many things to do, and a single person does not amount to much,” he says wistfully. “Sometimes you even doubt whether you’re able to help them, because many things can’t be settled by mere charity.” But a minute later he shakes off his sadness and says with a smile and renewed vigour, “But if you don’t do it, there would be even less hope; so you still have to do it, and convince others to do it too. The most important thing is to make the children happy, and to give others hope and dreams.”

LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER

As a CEIBS EMBA alumnus, among those he’s convinced to do their part in the River Children project are alumni companies such as MetersBonwe and

Semir, which both donated winter clothes to children at Tianfu primary schools.

Some believe Li’s experience as a long-distance runner may have given him the personality he needs to press ahead with his often challenging charity work. He discovered his love for running when he was about 14 years old. All throughout high school and college, he would get up before dawn each day for a long-distance run. He put his hobby on hold for a few years because of a hectic work schedule, but resumed it

when he was doing his CEIBS EMBA. He easily slid back into his role as an athlete, taking part in CEIBS’ 7th Gobi Desert Challenge as a member of the Flying Fox team. Now he’s Director of the Gobi Desert Challenge Association. Long-distance running has become an indispensable part of his life. So has CEIBS. “One spends his life trying to find ways to grow and better himself; for me, CEIBS accelerated this process,” Li said in his graduation remarks. A self-disciplined, introspective man, he sees charity as a kind of pure faith, the fuel for his long-distance runs.

