

# CEIBS Global EMBA Students Give Back

- Class of 2015 supports education development in rural Liangshan

■ By David Yu



*One day, while the 10-year-old girl was cooking, her mother died as well.*

An essay by primary school student Liu Yi shocked readers when it was posted on the internet in the summer of 2015. The young fourth-year student wrote about how her father had died a few years ago without leaving any money for her or her seriously ill mother. Liu did her best to care for her mother on her own until one day, while the 10-year-old girl was cooking, her mother died as well. I was one of the many who read the essay online. When I first saw its title, “The Most Pathetic Essay in History”, I was expecting to find the silly musings of a child, not the deeply moving story of an orphaned girl in Liangshan, one of the poorest areas in China and home for many members of the Yi ethnic minority group where similar stories happen every day. CEIBS Global EMBA students were also moved by her plight, and decided to do something to help.

I recently sat down with Global EMBA Class of 2015 Charity Committee members to hear more about how their efforts are progressing. Beginning last September Carol Fang, who works in Siemens Healthcare China, put together a philanthropic plan to help the people of Liangshan. Passionate about helping the minority groups in China, she quickly got her classmates on board with her ideas. An



eight-person team soon came together to pool their skills, knowledge and experience to make their plan happen.

Their first event was an auction. Students contributed personal items to be auctioned off: Gurunath Shrikant Joshi from India gave a delicate mosaic plate made by his wife; French student David Kalma offered a precious bottle of champagne; Japanese student Kazuhiko Komai brought his wedding souvenir – a pair of finely-made wooden dolls. “Our classmates were amazing. They donated more than RMB130,000 in just one night. Forty-five out of 56 classmates made bids or donated cash directly,” says Carol. The entire CEIBS community participated in the event, including staff, faculty, and even exchange students from IESE Business School in Spain.

After the auction, which set a new fund-raising record for a CEIBS

class charity event, the eight had to figure out how best to put the money to work. They decided to survey their classmates, and narrowed down their options to five projects. After weighing factors such as authenticity, viability, value proposition and budget, the team finally chose to focus on the orphans of Liangshan.

The Liangshan Yi Minority Autonomous Region is located in the Southwest of Sichuan Province, at its border with Yunnan Province. Its population is 4.73 million, of which 52% belong to the Yi ethnic minority group. The region is not well-suited to agriculture or industry – 90% of the land is mountainous, and the soil in other parts is not arable. Besides the economic constraints imposed by the region’s geography, the local Yi people face serious social issues. Language barriers and a lack of transportation

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infrastructure have isolated them from the outside world; a higher education enrolment rate of just 1.07% further reduces their ability to adapt to mainstream culture.

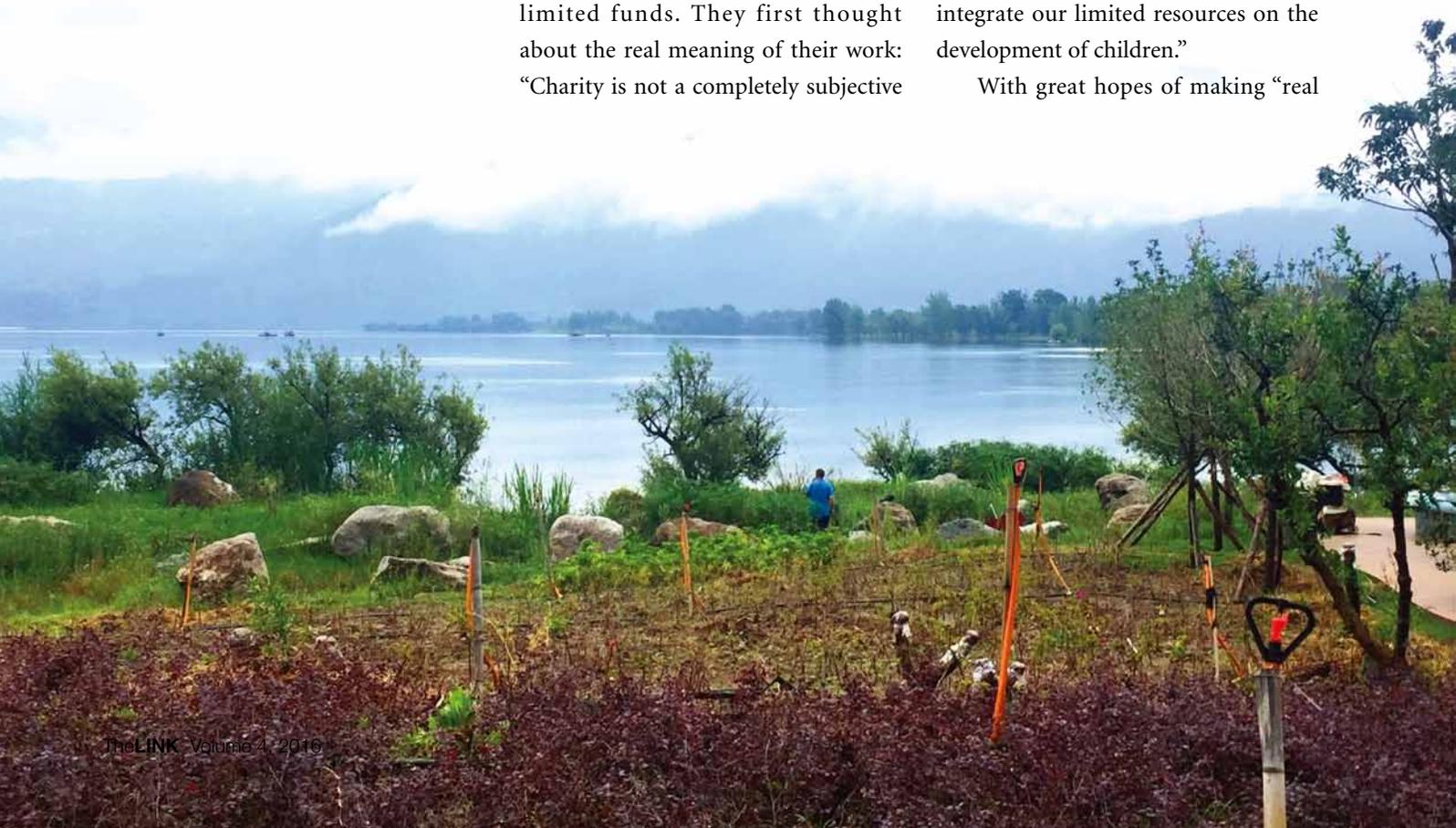
Chinese-language online searches for “Liangshan+Charity” bring up a list of hundreds of NGOs of different sizes and specialities. “In past years, we have seen huge efforts from the government and private sector, including donations and volunteer teaching. However, despite these efforts the situation here seems unchanged. Can RMB130,000 make a difference?” Carol says, explaining the uncertainty facing the group after they had raised funds.

To answer this question, the committee started analysing how it could make a long-term impact with limited funds. They first thought about the real meaning of their work: “Charity is not a completely subjective

concept. Serious charity needs logical business thinking. First, we needed to develop a thorough plan and assess whether it could be run as a company. This was done to ensure the project’s sustainability,” says Carol.

Each committee member did extensive research on the dilemmas faced by Liangshan. “In the 70s and 80s a drug problem developed which led to an outbreak of AIDS. Poverty, drugs and disease became a vicious cycle for the Liangshan people,” says Charity Committee team member Chen Yan, who is Financial Director at Corning. “This is what led to the failure of many earlier philanthropic efforts. We decided that rather than continuing to invest in and tolerate those who do not appreciate the opportunities, we should integrate our limited resources on the development of children.”

With great hopes of making “real





achievements” and doing “real charity”, the committee contacted the Liangshan Yi Women and Children Development Centre (LYFE), which has many years of experience in local charity work. The plan was that the CEIBS Global EMBA students’ charity committee would raise the funds and LYFE would execute the details for local distribution.

LYFE provides impoverished students with basic general courses as well as training targeted at their abilities for work. It also helps students learn to manage their personal finances. “This coincides with our ‘teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime’ concept. For generations Liangshan’s people have been locked inside these mountains, both physically and psychologically. But for the younger generations, we want to

teach them to understand the value of work and the meaning of money before they get older,” says Charity Committee team member Chen Yan.

Having raised funds, confirmed the project, and found a partner, the Global EMBA students wanted to visit the children in Liangshan before the project began, to make sure everything was as it should be, and to build a closer partnership with LYFE. In July, the charity committee made the trip to present the donations on behalf of the entire Global EMBA class.

“We prepared ourselves for the local situation before setting out, but when we arrived we were all still deeply shocked. Children there had no idea of the most basic knowledge of modern life, not to mention the



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lack of infrastructure,” says Charity Committee team member and Director at Accenture China Guo Dong of that first meeting with the children. “Many of them didn’t even know what a toothbrush or toothpaste is, and they were not used to washing their face.

Some even thought the bars of soap we brought were food.”

Everyone on the visit was touched by the story of a mother and daughter aided by LYFE. The girl’s father died of AIDS, and her mother had also contracted the virus. The family faced discrimination from local villagers and when the father died, he did not leave anything valuable for them. The mother even had to re-build their house; with no modern tools, she could only use the most primitive method which was to collect loose rocks from the mountain, haul them uphill, and put them in place with her bare hands.

Felicia Li, Global EMBA 2015 Class Coordinator recalls, “This was a great mother. Her and her daughter’s life were supported by basic living materials from LYFE, they had very little savings. During our visit, this mother kept saying to her daughter, ‘After I pass away, you still have to try hard to stay alive, and believe that your life will become



better and better.” Felicia added that the mother and child’s tenacity could also be seen in their appearance. While you might expect villagers in such a desperate situation not to care about their clothing, “I still remember the mother dressed in red and her daughter in pink. Their clothes were extremely neat and decent,” she says.

The Global EMBA team has high praise for LYFE’s persistent efforts in Liangshan. “Some children were marginalised and even discriminated against because of issues like family tragedies. After the local partner got involved, the children were given access to education, and have indeed become more confident and optimistic,” says Gareth Yu, a team member who has made touching videos from this trip to Liangshan “We don’t expect these kids to be admitted to university, but want them to learn how to read, to be part of the civilised world, and have basic life skills such as brushing of teeth

and washing of hands. This will make a difference in their lives, and inspire them to make their own living and fight their current status quo.”

The charity committee is continuing with its efforts to help these children and bring attention to their plight. A few days before I met them, the committee received a donation from the Naked Hub incubator in Shanghai. This donation, together with others they continue to collect, will be used to develop education programmes in Liangshan. The committee has also begun planning its next visit to the community, which is scheduled to take place in March 2017.

There is a saying in the Yi language, “Even the sourest pomegranate will turn sweet one day.” Education has planted hope in the hearts of many local children. If they believe in a better future, the seeds of hope will grow and eventually blossom.

As I concluded my interview with

the Global EMBA Charity Committee they showed me a video they had recorded in Liangshan that featured the children singing a song to welcome them. Their naive voices were very touching, part of the lyrics said, “Spring winds brush softly, reminding young birds to start their journey”. I hope the next spring will arrive sooner to their mountains and that the spring breeze will bring these children some good news, as the lyrics of their song suggests.

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