

Some observations and suggestions about the Rural China
Education Foundation library programs at two rural sites



Stian Håklev
shaklev@gmail.com
2008

This report has been released under Creative Commons BY 3.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>). The contents have not been endorsed by Rural China Education Foundation, but are solely the responsibility of the author.

This report was written for RCEF and based on their needs, and my observations. I am releasing it publicly, because it might offer interesting ideas or insights to others. I have anonymized the site locations, and the persons involved. Any information about RCEF programs can be gotten through their website at <http://ruralchina.org>.

Introduction

In May 2008, I visited two Rural China Education Foundation field sites. I wanted to examine the evolution of their relatively recent library programs, and see if I could make any suggestions. Site 1 was located in Shangdong province, and Site 2 in Shanxi.

My involvement

I spent six full days in Site 1, arriving on May 6th and leaving on May 12th. I lived in an empty house behind the village head's house. I spent four days at the primary school, listening in on classes, and talking to students and teachers. I also taught a few English classes, and participated in a parents-teacher meeting. I met with the reading committee three times, and the reading committee arranged for me to meet with a number of readers from the village at a "mass meeting" in the school. I was supposed to do an English corner in the weekend, but I think the information was poorly announced, and only one student showed up.

I spent May 13th to 20th at Site 2 school. I lived in an office at the village government compound, and spent all my time at the school. I listened in on classes, taught a few classes, observed students using the library, and spent a lot of time talking to the RCEF volunteers there, as well as talking to the teachers and interacting with the students. Together with the RCEF volunteers, I also visited a farmer's organization in a nearby village, including their library, and their handweaving cooperative.

Outline

I will describe each field site, the current library situation as I perceived and was told, and the feedback that I received from the teachers, children and villagers at each place. At the end, I will provide some of my own suggestions for the future. I will provide more background information about Site 1 than about Site 2, because there are permanent RCEF volunteers at Site 2 that understand the place very well. Note that much of what I report here is what I have been told by only one informant, and might not be correct - it should be quite clear what is based on my own observation, and what I was told. As for my suggestions, evaluating whether they are appropriate or not is dependent on a deeper understanding of the teachers, students and villagers, and they are offered with the hope that RCEF members will be able to evaluate which might be practicable and not based on their deeper understanding of the dynamics at the field sites than I was able to gain.

Report from Site 1

Village

There are officially 1400 inhabitants in the village, but actually 1800 - 400 are "unregistered". About 70% of the families are economically doing well, and 30% are not doing so well. Many of the older people are illiterate (half of the over 60's, some of the over 40's). There are large gaps in education between men and women among older people. The head of the village took over as village head in 2001 when they began with democratic elections. The economic situation has improved after they began a market for used machine parts from factories. Shandong is richer than the Western provinces, but Site 1 is in one of the poorest corners of Shandong. According to the principal at the primary school, the villagers that do farming and trading make at least 30,000 yuan per year, whereas the villagers who only do farming might make as little as 10,000 yuan per year. There are lots of opportunities for "dagong" (looking for factory jobs etc) in the area, so not many migrate far away.



Village head

The head of the village lives in a very simple house - the principal, who is a friend of him, says that if he had not been a village head, he could have made a lot of money, and that his poverty was proof that he wasn't corrupt. He has a lot of books and magazines about development of the countryside lying around, the old guys from the reading committee seemed to often hang out there, and read some of the material. He has been five years in the army, and lived in many places in China. He says he is the most highly educated at his age in the village.

School system

There is an elementary school in Site 1. The middle school is very close by. The high school is in a township, not that far away. Finally, there are about 20 university students in the village.

Since last year, the schools don't require any student fees (which the principal was proud about), only 15-20 RMB per year for the notebooks (the textbooks are free). According to the principal, there was virtually 100% enrollment in primary and secondary school. As for high school (gaozhong), he said that any student that wanted, could get in, but many parents chose to keep the children at home to put them to work when they reached that level. There are also a bit more boys than girls attending high school, but the situation is

better than before.

Elementary school

The principal also teaches science. He has gone to the RCEF training in Beijing, and was proud of being a "member" of RCEF. The school has 13 teachers, 10 are "real" teachers with more or less than a specialization in teaching, whereas 3 are "daike laoshi" - villagers that don't have any higher education or teacher training, and are paid much less (280 yuan per month). The teachers are paid between 1000 and 1700 yuan per month. The schedule is daily from about 7:30 to 12, then a three hour break when the students and teachers return home to eat and sleep, and teaching proceeds again from 15 to 18 - 18:30. I asked if some of the time during the "lunch break" could be used for activities, but they said that was very difficult, everyone wanted to eat and sleep.



The school has 200 students (counting the kindergarten), and has won the best school in the district for the last 7 years, which they are very proud of. It is also the smallest school in the district. Many students from other areas would like to enroll, but are unable to, since it is based on where you live.

A very positive aspect is that they seem to really encourage

continual improvement and peer-critique, with a system of teachers listening in on other teachers' classes (sometimes even across schools). During the last teachers' meeting on Friday, they distributed who would listen in on whose classes during the next week. I never heard anyone provide feedback on what they had seen though - but this might be done in private to save face, etc. The principal presented it as the school having always been quite good, open-minded, etc, but with the RCEF volunteers in the summer, they had received a "real boost". His superior, who was visiting to listen in on classes, also said that he noted a "new atmosphere" in the school after the RCEF summer volunteers - hard to tell

if he was being sincere though.

One teacher I talked to, when asked what he wanted in terms of future training, said he would love to visit other schools to see how they teach - especially city schools.

Use of computers

They have two computers, with a quite fast internet connection. The teachers stated that they often used the internet to look up information etc. However, they did not seem very internet savvy, and I am sure some training in information finding, judging what material is reliable, etc, would be useful. They also have incredibly slow typing speeds - the principal spent a lot of time typing up a report or something. Some of the more wealthy villagers also have computers (I visited one such family - according to their bookmarks, they mainly watched movies online, and got information about weather etc). The cheapest computers cost around 3000 yuan, but according to the principal, a larger obstacle was the fee to connect the computers to the internet, which might be more than 1000 RMB per year.

Impressions of RCEF volunteers

Everyone I met seemed to be very excited about the RCEF volunteers that had been there in the summer (zhijiao). They showed me lot's of pictures, and always talked about them. Especially an American volunteer came up a lot, and I was often asked if I knew him. The students said they had liked the volunteers a lot, especially the fun English classes and the hands-on science classes. They also believed that the teachers were getting "better and better" since the RCEF volunteers had been there. (Their main complaint was against teachers that used physical punishment frequently).

Library

The library was started by RCEF volunteers from Shandong university in March 2008.

Custodian

If I understood correctly, there was originally an older teacher who lives in the school building (the only one) who was in charge of the library, however - possible because he or someone in his family had been sick for a month, and he had been away - the main responsibility now seemed to rest on a young local teacher.

Physical location

The library is stored in a small room with two shelves. The room is kept locked and the young teacher, as well as some from the reading committee (dushihui) have keys. The books all seemed to be in very good condition (not strange since the library has not been open for very long). The library holds books both for children and for adults in the village. Each book is marked with a category, and a unique number.



Procedure for students

The students are not allowed into the room, but every Wednesday they can choose from a list of the whole book collection - a teacher then goes and fetches the book immediately. This list only contains the code (including the category), the title of the book, and the price. Currently there is only one printed list in the entire school. I never got to witness the actual distribution, but it seems clear from interviews that the teacher handling the distribution - often the young teacher - plays a guiding role in the selection, for example suggesting certain books that might be relevant to their studies and preventing them from accessing books that she deems inappropriate for them (for example books about ghosts or other scary things). They said that in the future each teacher would have a copy of the list, and would perhaps be able to arrange

borrowing for his/her own class. All borrowings are written in a notebook, with the name of the student, and the name/number of the book borrowed. This makes it very easy to get a quick count of how many books have been borrowed (the students and teachers are noted in one side of the book, and starting from behind, are the names of the villagers, and the books they have borrowed).

The students do not pay deposits for the books, but they have to pay the cost of a book if it is lost. This has happened one time so far. Some secondary school students who know about the library also come directly to the young teacher to borrow books.

Feedback from students

They like to read tonghuashu (children's stories), gushishu (story books) and zuowenshu (essay books?). When shown examples, these categories looked very similar to me, but I was told by the students that zuowenshu can help them with their schoolwork. One of the common desires of the students is that they be able to enter the library. They would also like more books - since some of the most popular are often lent to someone else. They would all like to be able to read magazines, and their families never bought them any. I asked if they had any books in their homes, and they all said that there were no books, except for school textbooks. They had been to the bookstore in the township (a bikeride away), but only to buy school supplies etc.

Feedback from teachers

The principal, when asked about the success, said "Although having a library in itself is

already a big success, when it comes to promoting the use, we are still in the very beginning phases." They didn't have a place large enough for all the students to enter, and he was also very worried about control, and books disappearing. Several of the teachers did borrow books on teaching methods, and they would like more books on this topic.

One young teacher was reading "Optimistic teaching", and said it helped her whenever she was depressed in her teaching. She also said that in total she read a lot more, now that they had the library, because there was often a lot of "downtime" during the day, and she always kept a book in her drawer ready to be read. They also said they would like more "tool books" (gongjushu), like dictionaries, encyclopaedias etc. However, given the procedure for using the library right now, that doesn't seem very helpful (one would have to "check out" a dictionary for two weeks to look something up).

One young Chinese teacher said the library was great. He used to read a bit every day for his fifth grade students from a novel that he loved, and he said he couldn't have done that if the library wasn't there to provide the book (I later observed him reading in class from this book). He also underlined that more books were needed, because students got frustrated when the books they wanted to borrow were not available. He said he often tested his students orally on the books they had borrowed to see if they had actually read them. He also suggested having a quiet corner reserved for reading somewhere, for those students who wanted to read during breaks etc, because the classroom often got very messy and loud (which I also observed).

The young teacher, who is now responsible for the lending to students, said that having the students enter the library would be impossible, they were far too wild, and would drag apart books that two students both wanted to borrow, etc. The sixth grade was the worst, the younger students might be a bit better behaved, she said.

Procedure for villagers

The villagers are usually introduced to the library by the 12-15 members of the reading committee who tell their friends and neighbours etc about it. They have one copy of the book list, and stated that they often introduced appropriate books to people depending on what they worked with, for example books on growing vegetables, books on raising animals, or on fixing machines (because of the used machines market). The reading committee then goes to the library to get the book for the villager (as far as I understand, they have a key to the library, but not to the school gates. maybe the old man living in the school can open in the evening).

The reading committee never mentioned this, but the young teacher told me that some villagers that had already "understood the system" would come to find her directly at the school to borrow books. The same with some middle school students that didn't have a library at their school. However, this was difficult, because the school gates are locked during school hours, and the young teacher is often busy teaching, etc.

The villagers pay a deposit for the books according to the price of the book rounded up to

the nearest whole yuan. This is returned to them, if they return the book in a good condition.

Reactions from the reading committee

When asked if they didn't think it was a lot of bother (mafan) to have to go get the books for the villagers, they said they didn't mind (bu pa mafan), and that they were especially inspired by the RCEF volunteers that had been there in the summer - if these young people can work so hard for free, then we old people should make a contribution as well. They said that both young and old people borrowed books, but a bit more men than women. They would like more books about machines (including how to repair them), raising animals and growing crops, how to live healthy, cooking - what different dishes go together, etc.

One member suggested that they take some relevant books with them when they go around to the villagers, and that in this way, the villagers would be more easily enticed to borrow books. They also wanted to hold more "mass meetings" to promote the library. They are quite happy with the general procedures for the library, said that the RCEF volunteers put down so much "blood and sweat" to write them, so that we shouldn't change them easily.

Statistics

So far only one book has been lost, and the price was compensated by the student's family. The library has been open for about 1,5 months (opened 2,5 months ago, but was not operational for one month because of sickness in the family of a key person). So far, roughly 160 books have been borrowed by students (and teachers). Although there are 200 students (including kindergarten) at the school, the teachers said that the lowest grades never borrowed books, and that the "borrowing public" might be around 140 students, which indicated a bit over one borrowed book per student in 1,5 months. When I talked informally with students, fourth grade students indicated that they had borrowed 1-2 books each, and sixth graders that they had borrowed 3-4 books each. Not sure how accurate these numbers are. Among the villagers, about 40 books had been borrowed, which is of course very little. In total, the library has around 530 titles.

Specific suggestions for the library in Site 1

For the school children

- More books - all the teachers, students, and villagers mentioned this. I am guessing that this would be especially relevant to the children's books, since if every student borrowed one book, that would remove half of the library books from the shelves. If only part of the collection is appropriate for children, and some books are more popular than others, it seems like this would often lead to popular books being unavailable. I would have to study the current collections much more in-depth to ascertain what kind of adult books should be added, although there seems to be a great interest among the teachers for teaching/pedagogs related books, which might be a great place to start. The suggestion about books like dictionaries and encyclopaedias would only be useful if the library was able to be kept open regularly for students to access books.
- Although there is a lot of resistance from teachers to keeping the library open to students, this idea should still not be completely abandoned. Being able to access the library would both promote reading interest (it is much easier to get enticed by a physical book, than a printed out list), but also be a pre-requisite for actively using the library as part of the teaching and learning. The current location is clearly very small, and I am not sure if a larger location can be found. An alternative would be to only let in a certain number of students at a time. Alternatively to take out a number of books at a time to show to a class - either for reading in class, or for borrowing. For example, it is likely that also the younger students would be interested in picture books etc, but might not be able to choose from a list. If a teacher went into the library and picked out a number of simple books with big pictures etc, and brought these to the class and let the students spend an hour doing silent reading, I think even first graders and kindergarten students would be able to benefit from this. Many of the things I will write about improving the experience with the open library at Site 2 would be relevant to a possible future open library at Site 1 as well.
- All the students mentioned that they would love to read magazines, and that they had no access to them currently. I wonder if either the library could subscribe to some youth magazines (perhaps we could be sponsored by the magazines?) if the library is open (this applies to Site 2 as well), or if the library is closed, if each class (nianji) could subscribe to one age-relevant magazine that could stay in the classroom to be read by students between classes, etc. (The old issues could then be cut up and provide material for posters and projects etc).

Reaching the villagers better

- In general, lending to the villagers is still at a very early stage, and this is clearly the area that needs the most thought in Site 1. In a way, what RCEF is doing here is moving from trying to improve primary education - a very narrow and well-defined topic - to the much trickier task of "village development". In order to do this well, one would have to understand the social relations in the village to a much deeper extent than what I was able to during my short stay. However I have a number of

suggestions.

- The library might be promoted during communication to the parents from the school, and especially during parent-teacher meetings (jiazhanghui).
- It seems like it might absolutely be worth experimenting with adding some DVDs/VCDs to the collection, given that almost all villagers have access to DVD player and a television. Many of them are very interested in learning more about farming, taking care of their families etc, but might not be comfortable enough reading long books. There are different considerations here - would the availability of DVDs and VCDs entice more villagers to use the library at all - and thus perhaps in the future also borrow more books? Is it an important priority for RCEF to improve the reading skills also of older villagers, and in this case, would DVDs or VCDs hinder this? Some DVDs might also be used by the teachers, but so far, the big television is hidden in the teacher's lounge and does not seem to get almost any use.
- Currently the villagers are charged a deposit equivalent roughly to the cost of each book. Although the reading committee insisted that this was never a problem for villagers, I still have my doubts, since everything that makes borrowing more difficult will reduce the amount of borrowings. I wonder if the deposit is really necessary, and if it is, perhaps it would be possible to set a fixed, low amount, for example 5 or 10 yuan, rather than a varying and uneven amount (like 24,50).

I think availability of the books is a huge problem - currently the books are only available either through the reading committee, which shows a list of titles and then fetch the book that is needed, or through villagers directly finding the young teacher at the school, here are some suggestions to either improve these methods, or add new methods:

- It seems like the reading committee, although very committed, only reach a specific subset of the population. This subset is certainly limited by age (quite old) and gender (male), and possibly only to their friends (I don't understand the social relationships well enough to tell). A possibility would be to either extend the reading committee, or to create separate committees. One possible venue to reach women would be the informal dance groups that exist - perhaps we could work with them to not only distribute books (through the book list), but ideally also form reading groups that meet and discuss the books they read, etc. Even though literacy might be lower among women, I believe that some books, like recipes, books on child health etc, would still find a ready audience - and perhaps starting from this, they could work themselves up to novels, etc. I was wondering if we could also work through some of the female teachers at the primary school, although they are all quite young, and I am not sure how well connected they are.
- Another group is the younger people. I was wondering whether we could for example induce the university students to take a leading role here - possibly against some kind of symbolic reward or "honor", however I am not sure how much time they spend in the village (but even if they are just there during the summer months, this option would still be worth exploring). The same applies to the high school students. I don't know how many young men and women live in the village, or if

they have mostly left to find work, but they would also constitute an important group.

- Although the teachers are strongly opposed to opening the library for children, I would propose that the library be opened for access by the villagers during for example one or several nights each week. There are unlikely to be many of them coming at once, and so the small space available would not be a large problem. The only thing needed would be someone volunteering to keep it open, and record borrowings, which if rotated among the reading committee should not be an insurmountable burden. This would enable villagers to directly browse for books, and immediately check out interesting material.
- One of the members of the village committee suggested that they bring some of the books with them around in the village to show to the villagers. This is not a bad idea, and to take that a bit further, one thing that would probably increase the access of the library enormously is some kind of a library-bicycle. I am thinking of a three-wheel bicycle with a luggage rack, of the kind that already exists in the village, with the capacity to carry 50-hundreds of books in display format. In this way, a good selection of the library's adult material could be put on the bike, and taken around to the different locations in the village where people congregate, for example in the machine-part market, or outside some of the shops. Villagers would be able to immediately borrow the books they liked (or return books they had finished). It's quite possible that the necessary material already exists in the village, and the investment would be minimal - what is needed is someone who is enthusiastic about taking on the role as an ambulant librarian. This method is frequently used in Indonesia.
- In Indonesia, much of the idea behind people's libraries (reading gardens, as they are called) is to make it as informal, and easy to access as possible. Usually the libraries are housed in someone's house, or, when it expands, in a small structure in someone's backyard, etc. This idea might not fit at all with a Chinese village, but I still wanted to mention it: What about housing the adult part of the library collection (minus the books on pedagogy and teaching) in for example the head of the village's house? He or his wife seemed to almost always be around, and many of the other villagers seemed very comfortable about dropping in, leafing through the reading material that his house is already full of, etc. I didn't discuss this with him, so I don't know even if he would be willing to do this, and there might be all kinds of problems that I cannot foresee - whether other villagers would be "jealous", or whether only his friends would use it, and not those who didn't like him, etc. But unless the library in the school radically expands access to villagers, the primary way for villagers to access books would still be through the reading committee - whether through the list of titles, or in a possible future, through an ambulatory book-bicycle etc. In these cases, the storage location might be arbitrary, but storing it with the head of the village, or someone else in the reading committee, would make it much easier to access for them. Certainly, it would not be hard to find space for the 200+ books in question.

As far as I understand, the different middle schools (chuzhong) near the primary school do

not have their own libraries. As seen above, a few middle school students who know about the library come directly to look for the young teacher, and borrow books. Perhaps in the future, this could be expanded, either by giving them a list of book titles, having them order the books they want, and then having a teacher, or student volunteers etc, fetch the books from the primary school library. Or, by using the "library-bicycle" to provide access to library books on a/some set day(s) a week. In both cases, this would probably be contingent on adding more books to the library, and RCEF would have to decide whether it would be a better idea to contribute to libraries directly in the middle schools themselves, and whether they should keep their focus on the primary school. It is natural (and realistic) to believe that primary school students who have had positive experiences with borrowing books during their years at the primary school will be looking for access to more books when they reach middle school, and it would be sad if they did not have access. In fact, a generalized service with an ambulatory library bicycle in the village, would also potentially reach the middle school and high school students who reside there, so it doesn't have to happen through the schools.

I will provide ideas for integrating the library into teaching and learning, and how to manage an open library, after a description of the situation at Site 2. Most of this is or can be relevant to Site 1 as well.

Report from Site 2

Brief introduction

As I stated above, I will not describe the village and the school in as much detail as above, because there are people in RCEF who understand this much better than me. Suffice to say that the village itself is a lot smaller than Site 1, and is also quite a bit further removed from the closest township (still in bicycling range). There is also no regular public transport to this village. The primary school was originally a publicly run school, that was closed down because of low student numbers, and taken over by a local couple who have turned it into a non-profit (minban) dormitory primary school. Many of the kids, who stay at the school for 12 days, and then go home for two days, are the children of migrant workers, and stay with their grandparents.

Because the school is not run by the government, it has a bit more wiggle-room in experimenting, but they are still tied to a lot of regulations, and it would be more correct to call it a Chinese primary school that is committed to excellence, teacher development, and a slightly more rounded view of development, rather than a full-blown experimental school with an alternative pedagogics. The classes I attended at Site 2 were very similar to the ones I attended in Site 1, but the teachers were often trying to push the envelope a little bit, and involve the students more. In addition, because it is a dormitory school, there is a much larger space for activities outside of class that can contribute to the children's development. A great example is the fields behind the school, where different grades grow vegetables, and where the kids run enthusiastically every day after class to water "their" plants - this is a great way of connecting the children to their agricultural heritage, and also provides a potential plethora of opportunities for integrating real life into teaching about for example the environment, plants, etc.

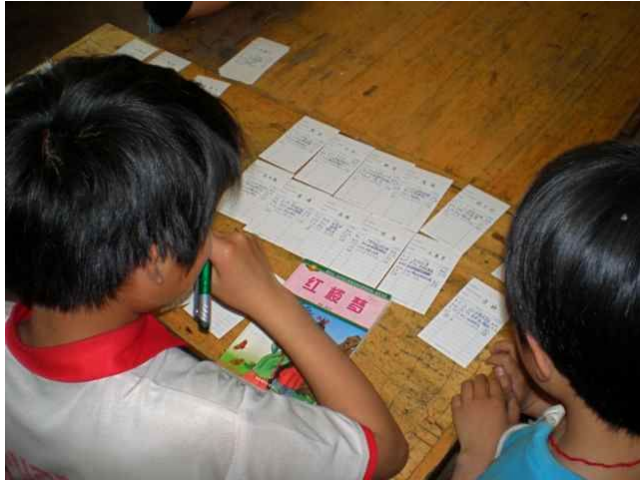
Two volunteers from RCEF have been living on and off in the village since October, and the school currently has one long-time teaching fellow who teaches English. The school is also connected to a primary school in the US, who has provided pen pals for one grade, and there were also pictures of a school class from that school in the library, etc.

The library

The library is in a room the size of a classroom, with shelves lining all the walls, and a large table in the middle of the room, with a few benches. The books are organized by groups and displayed around the room - there seems to still be a lot of space for more books (partly because a lot of the books were in circulation when I arrived). There is also a computer in the library, with an internet connection, as well as a number of masks for disguises, and some sports equipment that the students get access to by asking a teacher. As far as I



understood, the students are able to use the library once a week, during which time they enter the library and spend time reading books in the library, as well as check out books to bring with them. The books to be borrowed are noted on individual index cards for each student.




Statistics

It is much harder to provide statistics on the use of this library for two different reasons. First of all, because it is a partly-open library, many books are read during "opening hours", and not officially registered as checked out. In addition, the way registration of borrowings happen makes it very difficult to quickly estimate borrowings. It also makes it hard to find out who has borrowed a specific book. However, the library seemed very well liked - students were enthusiastically

reading books during their visits in the library, and during some of the "quiet" hours during the day, when students have to self-study, I saw many reading intently in their library books (including some of the youngest students, which is an interesting contrast to Site 1).

Suggestions

Improving the library environment, and access hours

- Site 2 has already begun well, by finding a well-sized room for the library, and allowing students direct access. That this is successful is clear from the enthusiasm of the children. However, I believe that the real potential of the library has not yet been realized. Right now, the students are only able to access the library one or a few times a week. Because the school is a dormitory school, students - in contrast with the students at Site 1 - spend all their day at the school, and have lot's of free play time, where individual students could potentially visit the library. Barriers to more general "opening hours" are both the need for supervision, and the fact that the library, when I was at the school, was frequently used as an "office" by RCEF volunteers, a place to hold teacher meetings etc.
- 
- As for the fact that the library is being used as an "office", is a result of the lack of space at the school. Hopefully this will be partly remediated by for example the new wooden buildings that will arrive. To a certain extent though, if individual teachers wanted to use the library to study, this wouldn't be an obstacle to opening it to the kids - but when RCEF volunteers use laptops, with cables stretched across the room, etc, combining it with library services becomes problematic.
 - Supervision is also a difficult problem. Perhaps the situation will be easier next year, with the addition of more teachers, and some library service can be assigned to each teacher - during which he or she can also be correcting papers, preparing for class etc. I wonder if it would actually be possible to use students to supervise the room - perhaps selecting among the oldest ones. This would depend on turning the library into a calm reading and studying environment, which is the next point.
 - Currently, some of the students entering the library still act in a "wild way", chasing each others and shouting, etc. This is not improved by the fact that there are masks for disguises, and sports equipment also stored in the room. I believe that successfully extending access to the library would depend on turning it into a place with different rules, and a different atmosphere, than the rest of the school - and instilling into the students the rules of behaviour in a library. The library should be a calm and peaceful oasis, where students can retreat from the wild games and shouts of outside (which are wonderful expressions of youthful enthusiasm, but not appropriate in a library). When one enters the library, one should automatically speak with a lower voice, and calm down. Running around and shouting will not be tolerated. Perhaps the interior of the library can also support this atmosphere, for example one could experiment with playing low classical music, etc. I don't know

if this is too idealistic, but if the students were really trained well in how to behave in a library, it is possible that students could eventually supervise the opening of the library, making sure that students behave, and that all books taken out are registered as borrowed. This would mean that students could go to the library during their breaks, their self-study sessions, or in the evenings, and study on site. This is also a prerequisite for many of the ways of integrating the library into teaching and learning, which I will discuss next.

Integrating the library into teaching and learning

- In addition to simply promoting pleasure reading - which by itself has a hugely positive effect on literacy skills and school learning outcomes, it would be very beneficial to tie use of the library into the curriculum. I have already seen teachers send their students out to find certain countries on the world map pasted on the exterior wall. In the same way, we can imagine sending students to the library to look up something, especially in a reference book (*gongjushu*), such as a dictionary, encyclopaedia etc - which now become really useful tools for the students. If this happened during class time, the teacher could open the library and bring the students in, even if it is usually closed.
- To extend this, one of the most characteristic features of Western education is project-based work, and in this, a library is essential. From what I understand, this has yet not been tried, but with an open library a teacher could give a group of students (or individual students) the task of gathering information about a topic, for example a certain foreign country, a profession, an animal, etc. They then have to go to the library in their spare time (when it is generally open - see above), find the resources needed, and write up their findings. I think this kind of task would be very appropriate for at least the 4th-6th graders, and would teach them to work independently, to search for information themselves, to summarize and choose the most important points, to organize their thoughts logically, etc. It also teaches them to regard the library as a place where we go when we are looking about information, and will be a useful preparation whether they will go on to be university students, or farmers who one day will need information about a certain disease, or a certain kind of fodder. If material is available, the results of the students' tasks could also be presented on posters, that could be posted both in the classroom, but also in public areas, so that other students could read about it. Or even written on the blackboards. For example, currently, one group could research about earthquakes, another one about Sichuan geography, big disasters in history,



etc.

- When it comes to Chinese class (yuwen) and perhaps to a much smaller degree English class for the most advanced students, many of the suggestions I make in the section on increasing reading interest can also be applied.

Increasing reading interest/use of the library

- I would suggest that with increasing reading interest, we set two different goals. The first is to get the students who are not very enthusiastic about reading more interested in the library, and the other is to push students towards more advanced reading materials. I noted that in some of the higher classes, some students would be reading proper novels (for children), whereas others would still be leafing through picture books meant for first and second grade. This isn't necessarily only linked to reading capabilities, but also in "laziness", and I believe that these students need to be "challenged" in a positive sense to "stretch further". Here are some ideas.
- Have students write short book reviews about the books that they like the best, and post them on a board for the other students to see. (Teachers and others can also contribute to this, of course). Variation: Choose one each month, as the most well-written, or the most enthusiastic, and have a small prize, or recognition.
- Have some kind of a prize for number of books read, for example a bronze (or white jade, etc) for five books, silver for 10 and gold for 15 books. The students would have to write a tiny book review for each (enough for us to know that they've read it, but not so much that it feels like a burden). We should also have some limitation on the kind of books - for the early grades, any books can be OK, but for the higher grades, there should be a minimum amount of pages for example, to avoid them reading five picture books. We could also tie this to the Olympics, having a "reading Olympics". The people who win can be written on a list (blackboard?), get a recognition (diploma), and even be awarded during an "Olympic prize ceremony".
- Having a "reading day" or "book day" every year, where all the different activities are tied to books, reading, and libraries.

General ideas around literacy and creativity

- In addition to promoting use of the library, we should promote literacy, writing, and creativity in all forms and shapes.
- We could have a story writing competition, where all students were welcome to submit stories around a certain topic. The prizes could be divided by grades, the best stories could be posted around the school (and also on RCEF's web page, etc). (They could also exchange stories with the American school - we send you our best three stories, and you send us your best three stories. This would need translation. For example, for Site 2 students: Based on everything you know, write about a day in an American students life).
- How much does custom publishing of books cost in China? What if all the students contributed poems, short stories, reports from field trips and drawings to a book, that was printed, and distributed to the other RCEF sites?

- In fact, the RCEF teaching fellow who teaches English also gave me an idea. What if all the students contributed in making an English textbook - designed around the lives of children in Chinese villages, with texts about farming, studying, parents going to apply for jobs in Beijing, etc. with all the illustrations done by different students - there is no lack of talent!). This could be a wonderful learning opportunity and challenge for the older students.

Conclusion

Although the library program is very young, and it was implemented without much preparation, I believe that it is already quite successful in reaching primary school students. There are many possibilities of increasing the use and utility of the libraries, and I hope that some of my suggestions can be useful. As for the ambition to reach villagers in addition to primary school students, in Site 1, is very ambitious, and has not been as successful as the program for primary school students. I provided a number of suggestions for how this can be improved, but these should be reviewed by someone who understands well the social dynamics in the village.

It will be very interesting to follow these two programs in the future, and it would also be good to find out about what models the other library sites employ, and see what we can learn from them. A possible task for the research team would be to look into what kind of success indicators, and ways of evaluation, that other library programs - even public and school library programs in developed countries - use, and whether we could adopt any of these in measuring the success of RCEF libraries. I would like to thank RCEF for giving me this opportunity to get a first glimpse at RCEF programs, and I hope to be involved in different ways in this discussion in the future.