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Changing Basic Education in China—the Canadian Way

It's a fair question: "Why is Canadian foreign aid, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), still flowing to China?"

The most recent economic and business reports underscore a strong and growing economy. For example, China's currency, the Yuan, rose in value to the United States dollar, with further increases expected; second, two US companies, Maytag and UNOCAL, and one United Kingdom automotive firm, MG Rover, were potential takeover opportunities involving Chinese companies; third, Wal-Mart announced it will almost

double its number of stores in China, from 48 to 90, by the end of 2006.

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The answer is both complex and simple—what else is new!

The reality is that China's economic juggernaut is centred in the eastern half of China and not in the central or western portions of the country, which are ethnically and linguistically diverse and socially distant from and



The author touring the Sichuan provincial education television and radio broadcasting facilities in the city of Chengdu. These facilities provide programming similar to BC's Knowledge Network.

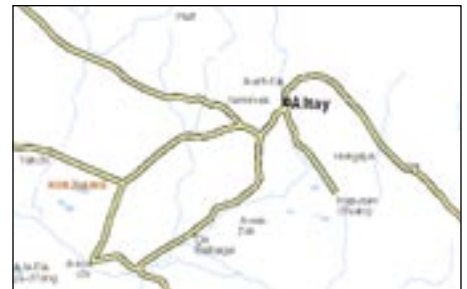
significantly poorer than their eastern cousins.

Canada has recognized the growing economic realities and reduced its aid involvement with China. Under the new 2005 allocation policy, the Canadian Government, through CIDA, has designated 25 priority countries. China is not included. This is a significant development aid policy change from the previous 15 years.

In 2002, however, Canada's recognition as a world leader in adapting student-centred instruction to ethnically and linguistically diverse populations became the catalyst of a special request by the Chinese Government.



Tibetan ethnic minority children during morning recess at the Yu Lin Centre Primary School in the County of Kangding, Sichuan Province



This map shows the location of the most northern region where Canadian education specialists work with local teachers and educational administrators. The city of Altay is north of Urumqi and within approximately 100 kilometers of the Kazakhstan/Russian/Mongolia borders. See map of China on next page.

It had become clear to the Chinese leaders that their present teaching system in grades 1 through 12—especially the primary grades 1 through 6—had become dysfunctional. The country’s traditional system was teacher- or podium-centred, combined with a provincial and central exam-driven structure, and was educationally catering to the intellectual and privileged elite. Inadequate teacher classroom interaction and innovation led to a lack of student creativity and student-driven interest in these learning environments—just the opposite human-resources development environment required of a 21st Century knowledge and skills-based system.

The classroom learning process depended on rote memory output keyed to this external exam structure. Consequently, there occurred significant student dropout in primary grades and concurrent lower-than-desirable retention rates and mobility into higher grade levels.

Finally, only a small and elite portion of the student population achieved post-secondary entrance. These negative products of an outmoded education and training system had to be changed—and quickly. The Canadian student-centred instruction model was



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identified as one of the best, if not the best, in the world, especially in its adaptation to an ever-increasing student population that was ethnically and linguistically diverse.

Because of the complexity and importance of the issue, Canada, through CIDA, co-designed with the Chinese Ministry of Education and National Centre for Educational Technology the “Strengthening Capacity in Basic Education in Western China” project.

This is a five-year (2003 to 2008) \$12 million project whose goal is “to improve the quality of basic education in western China” and whose purpose is “to strengthen basic education through enhanced teacher training systems using distance education in selected poor counties of western China.”

Agriteam Canada (Calgary), in a consortium with the Universities of Alberta and Calgary, plus Alberta Learning and Athabasca University, is implementing the project in three provinces and two counties (school districts) from each province. There are 360 project-participating schools, each with a Learning Support Centre. The counties were selected on the basis of need, culture, and language. In Sichuan Province, the counties are Kangding (90 percent Tibetan) and Tianquan. In Xinjiang Province, the counties are Altay (50 percent Kazak and 2 percent Uygher and Mongol) and Shanshan (almost 65 percent Uygher with Hui, Kazak, and Mongol populations). In Ningxia Province, the counties are Xiji (over 50 percent Hui) and Guyuan (43 percent Hui).

The project activities focus on teacher education in China’s newly introduced curriculum by linking the introduction and adoption/adaptation of a student-centred instruction model to replace its traditional teacher-centred/ external test-driven model. To achieve its goal and purpose, while effectively implementing its activities, the project focuses on four themes:



Computers are becoming an educational reality even in the most extreme geographic locations of China. This is the computer Room in the Experimental Primary School in the County of Altay, Xinjiang Province, where the majority of students are either Kazak or Uygher.

1. in-service teacher education;
2. distance education, including student-centred instructional resources development, production, and distribution;
3. distance education policy and planning, especially for provincial and county requirements; and
4. the use of school-based Learning Resource Centres by both school participants and the local community.

Overlaying the four themes is a gender equality strategy and an ethnic minority strategy—cross-cutting themes found in all project activities.

The increased emphasis on student-centred instruction has become a significant challenge for the Chinese Ministry of Education and its provincial and county agencies. Teachers and educational managers know little if anything about student-centred instruction and have few available teaching resources that would normally support such a national initiative. The latter requirements also present a challenging teacher-education resource development and distribution dilemma for the National Centre for Education Technology and its counterpart organizations at provincial and county levels.

So how well is the project doing to date? As a private educational consultant with CIDA, I am monitoring the project.



A Canadian team member from the Canadian Embassy giving an impromptu private computer lesson on PowerPoint to two attentive Experimental Primary School students

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For those who read my previous article, “To Vietnam’s Children—With Love,” [Volume 14, No. 4 of *The Scrivener*, March 2005], this assignment in China will sound very familiar. From March 13, 2005, until March 31, 2005, along

with the CIDA Development Officer and the Agriteam Project Manager, plus one translator, I visited three provincial agencies, two county (school district) agencies, and six schools. Provinces visited included Sichuan, Xinjiang, and Ningxia, all three of the project’s provinces. The two project counties and schools observed were Kangding (with four project schools) and Altay (with two project schools).

In addition to the provincial and county level agencies, we visited



Just before afternoon classes start: a general student assembly at the Tang Ba Centre Primary School in the County of Kangding



Mid-morning physical education class for all students (and teachers) of the Gu Za Primary School in the County of Kangding

