

EDUCATION

Ending the silence by learning to sign

Parents take weekly classes to help them communicate with their deaf children

By YANG JUN in Guiyang
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Every Friday morning, a dozen parents with hearing-impaired children gather to learn sign language at a workshop in Southwest China's Guizhou province.

Xiong Wei, the lecturer who is deaf, uses a projector to demonstrate the different signs for dozens of words and sentences to the participants — mostly mothers — who imitate the hand gestures in groups.

Whenever a student wants to ask a question, they must write it on a piece of paper for Xiong.

Yuan Fengmei's daughter

lost the ability to hear at 4 months of age, due to complications associated with surgery for bronchiolitis — an inflammation of the smallest air passages in the lungs.

Doctors said the risk of this happening were "1 in 10,000".

"After it happened, I stood by the railway tracks near my home holding my daughter in my arms, hoping the rumbling of the trains would make her cry," Yuan said.

"She simply stared up at me with her big eyes, like nothing was going on."

Having accepted her daughter would never hear again, Yuan tried her best to raise her as normal. But this proved to be no easy task.

"One time she wanted me to buy her some candy when we were out shopping together, but the doctors had specifically told me not to," Yuan said.

"I couldn't explain such a complicated concept to her, however, so she began to cry. The sales clerk said I was a miserly mother for not buying my daughter candy. I will never forget those words or the spiteful look the clerk shot at me."

With the help of Xiong, Yuan gradually learned the basics of sign language. The first word she learned was "thank you".

"My daughter can't hear, but she can see," Yuan said. "So she must learn to be polite and grateful, just like everyone else."

Yuan puts what she has



Parents with hearing-impaired children learn sign language at a workshop held at Guiyang School for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb in Guiyang, Guizhou province. FAN GANGLI / FOR CHINA DAILY

learned to use whenever she can. She uses the "thank you" gesture if her daughter gives her something or holds open a door.

"Now she is the same with me," Yuan said. "Whenever someone gives her a seat on a bus, she says 'thank you' using the sign."

Dan Qilin, dean of the Guiyang School for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb where the work-

shops take place, describes sign language as "the mother tongue of the deaf".

"What parents need to do is to break down the wall," he said. "Children will feel lonely if they can't be understood by their parents."

Xiong, the lecturer, said parents can learn to be their children's ears.

"This is their only way to communicate, and it brings

them closer," he said.

Chen Na, a 28-year-old mother whose 4-year-old son was born deaf, has been studying at the workshop for three weeks.

"It gives me great consolation when my boy 'talks' to me using sign language all on his own," she said.

Liang Shuang contributed to this story.

CRAFT

Hoof care a dying trade in North China

By XINHUA in Taiyuan

Wang Liangzhen begins by tying a knot around the mule's neck and binding its four legs with a rope, clamping its upper lip with a pair of pliers. Then he starts to work on its feet. Wang is a farrier — a pedicurist, of sorts, whose clients are horses, mules, donkeys and sheep.

Every three days, the people of Wuzhai county in North China's Shanxi province gather at the local bazaar to trade livestock.

Wang waits there for any animals whose feet could use some prettying up.

He is the only person in the area skilled in hoof care.

Seizing a mule's hoof and putting it on a wooden bench, Wang finishes trimming it within a minute, earning 10 yuan (\$1.45) per foot.

“Only a few farmers from mountainous areas come to me.”

Wang Liangzhen, a farrier in Shanxi province

"After trimming, my mule's hoofs can firmly grip the ground to avoid slipping and falling while working on the farm," said a man surnamed Li, who was waiting for Wang to attend to his mule's feet.

Wang learned his trade in the 1980s, when mules and horses were still widely used in agricultural transportation and farm work in China.

Before the busy season each year, farmers from outside Wuzhai county come to Wang so he can treat the hoofs of their livestock.

"This job requires good arm strength. You should be stable, accurate and agile when trimming the hoofs. Otherwise, you cannot cut well and the livestock will suffer," he said.

Wang's animal expertise extends beyond their feet. After 30 years of working with livestock, he is generous in dispensing tips.

"Adult mules and donkeys are unwilling to do farm work before they are tamed. It is best to tame mules and donkeys with few people standing around and staring at them, or they will be frightened and it will be harder to tame them," he said. "You need to follow their temperament and get them adapted to farm work."

He gives his customers free advice on choosing a good mule or donkey at the bazaar, as he said he can tell the age and condition of livestock just by looking at their teeth.

But the farrier's trade is a dying one.

Fewer animals are used on farms across China as a result of improved agricultural machinery.

Not many young people are eager to learn the trade due to the low income, which ranges from 20,000 (\$2,900) to 30,000 yuan per year.

Wang is the only farrier in eight counties across western Shanxi, including Wuzhai. "Only a few farmers from mountainous areas come to me. Large machines cannot be used there, so the land is plowed by donkeys and mules," he said.

GROUND LEVEL: PEOPLE

Determined scientist studies desert for 30 years

By XINHUA in Lanzhou

En route to Shapotou, there is not much to see except an endless sea of sand. The district, in Northwest China's Ningxia Hui autonomous region, is located where the Yellow River meets the Tengger Desert. For more than five decades researchers have been coming here to fight desertification. Li Xinrong is one of them.

His mantra is: "Sands are as precious as forests", and having been here for three decades, he has clearly developed a close connection to this arid land. "Deserts are landmarks god has given us. They nurture special biotic resources. We must protect them," he said.

Shapotou first hit the headlines in the 1950s with the construction of the Baotou-Lanzhou Railway, an artery that traverses the Tengger Desert six times. The project ran into difficulties in Shapotou's ever shifting sand dunes — hardly an ideal foundation for a railway track. That was when the first group of scientists arrived.

When the trains finally began running in 1958, Shapotou had become renowned as a paradigm of successful sand control, principally the result of the "straw checkerboard" technique. This requires straw, usually made from wheat or rice, to be laid out in a grid shape across the desert

and partially buried.

The checkerboards have remarkable, though poorly understood, properties — acting as a windbreak and helping to keep dunes in place, allowing topsoil to form. When a sufficient amount of soil has been established, drought-resistant plants can be grown. However, a receding water table has led to recent degradation of vegetation and a decline in the checkerboards effectiveness.

"We can't just sit back and relax. We must become tireless tree planters so that others may rest in the shade," said Li to his colleagues when he first arrived in Shapotou in 1987.

"Upon our arrival, my colleagues were gnashing their teeth and wringing their hands," he recalled. "There was no toilet. There were rat holes all over our dorm. The only way to receive a radio signal was to climb up to the top of the dunes."

So isolated were they that they almost starved. "In the end, we survived by eating the seeds of elm trees," Li said.

One third of China's territory faces the threat of desertification, and almost 400 million people are subject to frequent sandstorms and strong winds. An old saying goes, "People in Gansu province eat three jin (1.5 kilograms) of dust every day."

The latest weapon in the war against erosion is a microbe that inhabits the soil above the



Visitors can have a camel-riding tour of the Tengger Desert in Shapotou, Ningxia Hui autonomous region. WANG SONG / XINHUA

straw checkerboards. It can lock up the soil by forming a crust, but the process is much too slowly, taking at least five years to grow.

Li's team has extracted similar microbes from algae and moss and cultured them in the lab. When sprayed on the sand, the crust grows much faster, and holds the soil "just

like a carpet," Li said.

"This biotechnology protects local plants from invasive species. It helps defend the original desert ecosystem."

Shapotou now has more than 30 kinds of cultivated vegetation. Biodiversity is crucial to combating desertification, according to Li.

"The oldest vegetation has

been here for a little over 60 years, while the youngest was planted 10 years ago," said Zhang Zhishan, deputy chief of the Shapotou research center. "Time has shown that we made the right choice of vegetation for this area."

The lessons learned at Shapotou have helped many other places, such as the Muus

Desert in Shaanxi province; Horqin, China's largest sandy area; and Erdos in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region. Researchers from the Middle East and Africa have also been trained in Shapotou.

"Li's research is an important benchmark and all our data can be freely shared," Zhang said.

Around China

CHONGQING Spicy gluten caused family rift



A woman in Yubei district has filed a lawsuit against a food company, claiming its brand of spicy gluten caused a family conflict. The woman, surnamed Liu, said the gluten's packaging looked like that for a condom, which angered her husband and caused him to demand a divorce. She said she contacted the company but a customer service representative allegedly ignored her complaint. The company has apologized to Liu and offered her some free spicy gluten, but she has refused to drop the case.

CHONGQING MORNING NEWS

HUBEI Children rejected mother's will

A will made by a woman in

Wuhan that bequeathed her house to her second son has been declared invalid by a judge. The 84-year-old woman, surnamed Zhou, made the will last year but did not write it herself or sign it because she was illiterate. Four of her five children rejected the will and the matter ended up in court. A judge has now ruled that the will was invalid and ordered the house to be divided equally among the five children.

WUHAN EVENING NEWS

GUANGXI Hunting partner shot dead

Three men in Xing'an county have appeared in court after their hunting partner was shot and killed while tracking wild boars. Tang Defa, Han Dayong and Fu Youneng went on a hunting trip with the fourth man, surnamed Chen, on Feb 27. Chen went into the undergrowth to flush out their prey, when Tang allegedly mistook him for a boar and shot him. At first, Tang, Han and Fu told police that Chen had shot himself after his gun

discharged accidentally. However, Han and Fu later changed their stories, leading to Tang's detention. For harboring a criminal and illegal possession of a firearm, Han was sentenced to 28 months imprisonment with three years' probation, while Fu was jailed for 7 months for harboring a criminal and Tang is still awaiting trial.

CHINA NEWS SERVICE

ZHEJIANG Son spent parents' life savings

A 14-year-old boy in Lishui has spent his parents' entire life savings in a little over a month on an online game. From Oct 7 to Nov 27, the boy gave 30,770 yuan (\$4,455) to five people who played the game for him to level up his character. He was able to access the money because he knew his mother's bank account password.

QIANJIANG EVENING NEWS

Falling worker had lucky escape

A construction site worker in



Hangzhou had a close call on the morning of Dec 4 after he fell from the top of a tower crane. Fortunately, the man was wearing a safety harness so instead of falling to his death, he was suspended about 20 meters above the ground. A team of 14 firefighters were sent to rescue the stricken worker, whose condition has been described as stable following emergency treatment.

QIANJIANG EVENING NEWS

BEIJING Computer thief struck early

A man has been detained for allegedly stealing computers

from college dormitories while the students who owned the machines were out doing morning exercises. The man, surnamed Bai, is accused of breaking into the college in the early morning of Oct 11. He was detained on Nov 22.

BEIJING TIMES

SICHUAN Drunk had leg crushed by truck

A man in Yibin city who drunkenly laid down in the middle of a road had to have his leg amputated after it was crushed by a truck. Zhang Ting, a 48-year-old migrant worker, had lain in the road for more than 10 minutes before the truck hit him, according to eyewitnesses. However, no one tried to help Zhang until after the accident.

CHENGDU COMMERCIAL DAILY



Toddler treated for bladder stone

A 2-year-old boy in Chengdu has been hospitalized with bladder and kidney stones that doctors attributed to his poor diet. The child, nicknamed Qiang Qiang, is the youngest person in the province to have been diagnosed with a bladder stone. Doctors said the stones may have been caused by Qiang Qiang's love of peppery snacks and drinks containing lactic acid.

CHENGDU COMMERCIAL DAILY

LIAONING Mom wants help for obese son

A mother in Huludao city has reached out to the media, in search of a cure for her morbidly obese son. Zhang Shaoli, 41, said she was unable to explain why her 10-year-old son weighs 91 kilograms and has a waistline measuring 123 centimeters. The boy has slept in a chair for the past three years as he is unable to lie down comfortably and he cannot use the toilet without taking off all his clothes first.

LIAONING EVENING NEWS