

100 PROJECTS FOR PEACE

Peace Through the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance in Qinghai Province, China

David Willis, Sara Eichelberger, and Jesse Schouboe

PROMOTING PEACE

China is viewed by many as a growing superpower increasingly integrated into and influencing the global political and economic arenas. Given its fast-paced development it is easy to forget that the country is in many ways divided. There is a disparity between the standards of living of Han Chinese (the ethnic majority in China, making up 91.9% of the population)¹ and those of minorities, such as Tibetans. This gap is further evident between China's rich and economically developed East and its poor and agriculturally based West. While China pushes its development forward this divide is likely to increase, and disparities between minorities and Han Chinese are likely to widen, reinforcing and creating additional destabilizing inequities between ethnic groups. Toward the goal of a stable population, minorities must be able to integrate effectively into the increasingly powerful Chinese society and economy. Integration will increase tolerance and awareness between ethnic groups, and thus promote peace by reducing tensions in the longterm. Successful integration entails educating the next generation of Tibetans, Huis, and other minority groups so that they can compete in the economy and narrow the wealth gap. This may best be done in small steps, and takes efforts on many fronts to improve education, income, and quality of life. We propose to initiate one of those small steps in the Tibetan village of Mekou, by improving access for villagers to already existing schools, markets, and medical care.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Mekou is a nomadic Tibetan village with approximately 100 families. Remotely located in Western China, the village is 385 kilometers from Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province and one of China's poorest. Mekou is not easily accessible due to poor roads and infrastructure; it is a nine-hour drive from Xining. Limited transportation routes, poor roads and the high cost of cars in China make motorcycles and mopeds the primary mode of transportation in such rural areas. Villagers rely on them to take their children to school in most parts of Xinghai County, to go to markets to buy food and clothing, and to receive medical care. The nearest health clinic is in Longzang township 50 kilometers away and about a two-hour drive, even by jeep; the nearest hospital is over 100 kilometers further still, in the county town Xinghai.

In the past, NGOs and individuals have made attempts to open a school in the village, but were hindered by logistical and legal issues. Thus, villagers rely on motorcycles to take their children to school in neighboring areas. In Mekou, motorcycles number approximately one per household. When a motorcycle breaks down (a frequent occurrence due to poor roads), a truck must be hired to transport the motorcycle to a neighboring county repair shop, which can be located over 100 kilometers away.² As Mekou does not have any means to repair its own motorcycles, villagers must incur the costs of not only transporting broken motorcycles great distances to be fixed, but also travel, meal, and accommodation costs and valuable time taken off from herding and other means of income generation.

Nearby shops sell parts at expensive prices, which common villagers cannot afford. Most men can operate motorcycles, but do not have the resources to fix them. Motorcycles need repairs frequently due to the low quality of the roads.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project proposes to implement a motorcycle repair program in Mekou village, working in collaboration with the Pentok Institute and local representatives who have invited us to the village. The Pentok Institute is located near the Qinghai Normal University in Xining, and specializes in development projects in the rural Tibetan villages of Qinghai Province. The motorcycle repair shop will provide extra income to villagers, make transportation easier and more reliable, and connect the village with surrounding communities. Although not all families choose to send their children to school, the project will give Mekou children who do attend school a more consistent means of getting to schoolhouses in faraway villages. By creating opportunities for education and economic gain, the project will promote peace by aiding integration of minorities into Chinese society.

Success of the project would require renovating an abandoned building, training several villagers in basic motorcycle repair and maintenance, and transporting supplies, tools, and parts to Mekou. The shop must be able to provide fairly-priced goods and

¹ "Ethnic Groups (All of China)." The American Forum for Global Education. <<http://www.globaled.org>>

² Pentok Institute. <<http://www.pentok.org>> The Pentok Institute is a grass-roots initiative which began in 2007 when a team of female university students at Qinghai Normal University joined forces to run small scale development projects in rural minority areas of China, including Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan provinces. In 2009, these students worked with Shamo Thar to formally establish the Pentok Institute as a service-centered organization to empower women from rural areas to take the lead in improving the quality of life in their communities. The Pentok Institute is now a not-for-profit organization based in Xining City, Qinghai Province, China. To date, 100% of the money that Pentok has received has gone directly to projects benefiting local communities.

services, and to continue operating without further funding after we leave. The project will consist of the following phases:

Building Renovation: We will hire construction workers from a nearby county to renovate the building, and buy building materials, furnishings such as shelves, tables, chairs, and light fixtures, and a solar panel to provide electricity for the shop. Trucks will be hired to transport the tools, materials, and workers to Mekou.

Villager Training: Two or three villagers who have volunteered and have some prior motorcycle knowledge will apprentice with mechanics in a nearby county for one month. The apprenticeship will be modeled after a program used successfully by Tibetan Village Projects (an NGO specializing in small development projects in Tibetan communities) to train motorcycle mechanics for a similar project. Once the training is complete, the villagers will return to Mekou to organize and run the repair shop.

Transporting Motorcycle Parts: Parts and tools will be transported to Mekou village via truck from Xining.

Sustainability: As a result of the project, the building will be stocked with a sufficient supply of extra parts and tools so the shop mechanics can perform repairs promptly, without waiting for shipments from other areas. The project will endow the shop with some start-up money, and help to establish a supply chain from Xining so that the village mechanics are able to get more parts independently. Working with village leaders and the mechanics, we will suggest a management system that is compatible with village culture and that promotes the sustainability of the shop. A model based on a cooperative, in which village leaders help manage the shop, will ensure that the shop's services remain fairly priced and open to everyone, and that the shop uses its profits for the benefit of all villagers.

TIME FRAME

Starting in mid-June, and extendable up to a month if needed.

Weeks 1-3: Meet Pentok representatives, Stan, and contacts in Xining. Spend time in Mekou getting to know village. Hire trainers.

Weeks 4-5: Start apprenticeships, buy supplies and bring to village.

Weeks 4-7: Renovate building, establish management system, logistics. Initiate interactive learning program with villagers.

Week 8: Shop opening.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some of the logistical challenges inherent in this project include arranging for accommodations and food, language differences, dealing with any medical issues that may arise, and building relationships within Xining and Mekou village. In Xining, with the aid of Sara's aunt who lives there, we will be accommodated in a low-cost hotel. Because Sara and David speak Mandarin, as do the majority of people in Xining, we will be able to work with representatives of the Pentok Institute to buy materials and parts and set up transportation to Mekou village.

In planning, we will collaborate with a student of Qinghai Normal University, Quedan Jia (Stan), who grew up in Mekou village, and originally suggested it could use a repair shop. He is an intern at the Pentok Institute and was recommended to us as a reliable and helpful contact. Stan has secured accommodations and will serve as a translator and guide while we are there since most villagers do not speak Mandarin. Eating utensils, pots, pans, and food will be secured prior to the start of the project.

In the event of any serious medical problem, we - like any injured or sick villager - would have to travel to a neighboring town for medical care because Mekou village lacks a hospital. However, we are all certified in CPR and Wilderness First Aid, and are confident we will be able to assess and treat any basic medical issues that may arise while we are in Mekou. We have been and continue to be supported and advised by Dr. Keith Dede, Associate Professor of Chinese at Lewis & Clark College and a visiting scholar at Qinghai Normal University. He has lived and worked in Qinghai and is confident this project is both feasible and beneficial in a community like Mekou. He will also be in Qinghai in July, and will be available to assist us.

TYING BACK TO L&C

Internships: Internships can be developed with the Pentok Institute at Qinghai Normal University for Lewis & Clark students participating in China overseas programs. Students could check in on the Mekou shop and work on similar development projects in the area. We have initial support from Larry Meyers, Director of the Lewis & Clark overseas programs, and Shamo Thar, founder and managing director of the Pentok Institute. In addition, Keith Dede is highly enthusiastic about the internship possibility and can utilize his connections and knowledge of the region to support and/or organize Lewis & Clark students interested in the opportunity.

Portland Sponsors: We will ask local businesses (co-ops, bike repair shops, etc.) for advice, support, and potentially donations of tools and money. We would also try to cultivate international connections by promoting the idea that businesses could have a sister shop in China and encouraging a photo exchange.

Face 2 Face Forum: We will arrange a forum with students and professors and maybe someone from Qinghai to talk about minority issues in China. Skype meetings may be organized in which Lewis & Clark students may have dialogue with students of Qinghai Normal University and Shamo Thar of the Pentok Institute.

Economic Development/SOAN Lecture: We will ask professors from Chinese, Economics, Sociology/Anthropology, and East Asian Studies departments to address students/the community about issues relating to China, such as the rich-poor gap and how minorities are affected by China's fast-paced development.

"Sponsorship" from Lewis & Clark students: Students may donate small gifts, such as notebooks, pens, and pencils for schoolchildren in Mekou.