

*Daniel Wright is an Institute Fellow studying  
the people and societies of inland China.*

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Team Water Buffalo

—Report from Big Nest Village (2) —

Zunyi District, GUIZHOU, China

JULY 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
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Dear Peter,

My friend and I were walking from the township center toward his village home. Just as we stepped off the stony country road onto a shaded side trail, five young boys dashed up to us from behind. "Ge [Big Brother], you've come back," one of them said shyly, nudging me on the arm to make sure I had heard him.

These children were village cowherds — "Team Water Buffalo" as I came to call them — on their way back from sending their cows to the mountainside for pasture. Breakfast would be ready soon.

Over the next three weeks, these children, particularly two 12-year-old cousins, Chen Xiaobo and Chen Zhibo, became my buddies as they allowed me to join them in their work. By doing so, they also introduced me to an additional slice of the world of Big Nest Village: the world of children.

### SEND OUT THE COWS

After Xiaobo removes the slats from the pen's opening, the first thing to emerge is the the water buffalo's enormous head.

"Come on you lazy, good-for-nothing!" Xiaobo yells at the buffalo — just as

*The sleepy water buffalo emerges from the pen, not sure, it seems, about beginning another day. For ease of handling, a rope wraps around the animal's head and through its nose.*



his parents barked at him minutes before. It's not yet 6:00 in the morning. We're all groggy, including the buffalo.

The split-hoofed beast knows the drill: he steps out of his weed-bedded pen, turns left, then a quick right and up the trail. Within five minutes the animal has emptied his bowels, creating some of the biggest "mud pies" I've ever seen.

With an amazing sense of timing, other cowherds and their buffaloes begin to congregate on the mountain trail.

Bamboo switch in hand, Xiaobo rips into the buffaloes' leathery rump, already lined with stripes from lashings on days gone by. When the cowherds really want to sting the animal, they strike it on the back of the calves. Ouch!

Most of the whipping has little to do with getting the lumbering water buffalo to walk faster. The key, it appears, is to let the animal know who's in charge. After all, what 50-pound child wants to lose control over an object many times his or her own weight.

It's also about 12-year-old boys becoming men.

The bumbling buffaloes appear to be on autopilot as they walk toward one of two areas where they are led each morning. The most frequented destination is a untilled mountainside about 25 minutes from the Chen home. Because of its rocky soil and boulders, little grows there except for grass and weeds. Perfect for pasturing.

If the weather is exceptionally hot — something water buffaloes are especially sensitive to — the cowherds send the animals up a wooded mountainside a 15-minute walk behind their home.

Rain, sun, snow or sleet, "Team Water Buffalo" is responsible for making sure the family cows get out to graze and safely home by the end of the day.

Once the buffaloes are put to pasture, they *usually* stay put. This way, the children can go to school, or play or help with chores after they return home for breakfast. Should the animals get into trouble, news usually comes back quickly through a villager who has seen the problem.

One afternoon, for example, I was playing with the boys back at the house when word came from an urgent-sounding uncle:

"Your cow's in someone's corn patch, and the field doesn't belong to our village!"

Zhibo took off like a rocket. By the time he had arrived at the scene of the crime, his cow had done quite a bit of damage. The angry villager had arrived as well. There was 12-year-old Zhibo, embarrassed and unsure of what to do, standing by his huge, naughty animal. The following day, after a bit of negotiation, Zhibo's father compensated the farmer with ten pounds of corn seed.

Despite the occasional hassle, cows are an essential part of family life — the equivalent of the family tractor. Though plowing is all they do and they are mainly put to work to prepare for planting in the Spring, their role is indispensable.

Most families have one water buffalo. A few families in the village use "yellow cows," which look similar to beef animals. Yellow cows do not plow as deep, but they



*Xiaobo, Zhibo and another cousin drive their cows out the mountain trail. Notice the graves (mounds) on the right side of the path. The Chen family has been using water buffaloes for generations.*





*By the time Xiaobo and Zhibo have reached the stony road, other kids have joined them for the last leg up the mountainside.*

less sensitive to heat and are easier to care for. Even so, the water buffalo remains the traditional beast of choice.

No one uses horses in Big Nest Village, though other villagers I know in Guizhou prefer horses because of their dual-use capabilities: plowing (though their furrows are

not as deep as those of either yellow cows or water buffalo) and for transportation.

By their demeanor, water buffaloes seem to care about nothing. "But you should see when two males lock horns in battle," a villager told me. "Once they do, there is no way for a human to separate them." The simple solution:



*Boy driving his young albino buffalo out to pasture. While the animal grazes, this boy will dig potatoes from his family's field and carry them home in the basket on his back.*

male water buffaloes are kept separate.

Yellow cows' temperaments are a different story. They seem to be naturally aggressive and are always in a bad mood. They are even more prone to bite and fight when they have young with them.

One morning a yellow cow, eyes bulging with fury, tried to drive a water buffalo off the side of a cliff. And for no apparent reason. You should have seen the 50-pound cowherd take off after the 400-pound beast with his switch, whipping it into submission.

## LIBERATE TAIWAN

One morning, while Zhibo, Xiaobo and I walked on the wooded mountainside with the cows, I wandered off to look around the forest. When I returned, the boys were playing a game on a nature-made playing board: a large stone slab, large enough to sit on. They had scratched lines into the rock, in a design that looked like a star-shaped checkerboard.

They glanced up at me with smiles then continued their game. "Jie-fang-tai-wan," each said in turn as he moved one of his three playing pieces the required four positions. Like chess, the object was to maneuver around the board so that by the third jump he had landed on the opposition's piece. The entire game, in fact every four-move turn, included the repetitive: "Jie-fang-tai-wan."

I couldn't believe my ears: "Jiefang Taiwan" means "liberate Taiwan!" And here we sat on a hilltop somewhere deep in the mountains of one of China's poorest provinces.

"What does 'Jiefang Taiwan' mean?" I asked.

"I don't know," they both replied, shrugging their shoulders.

"Do you know what Taiwan means?"

Blank stares.

Later I asked Xiaobo's older brother if he knew about the game. "Yes, as long as I can remember, the kids in this village have played it," he answered.

They've probably been playing it since 1949!

After "Taiwan" had been "lib-

erated" many times and enthusiasm began to wane, I said, "See that tree over there? I bet you can't hit it with a rock."

We started pitching rocks at the tree, shouting in glee when our target resounded with a hollow wooden sound.

## WHEN I GROW UP ...

What better place to get to know "Team Water Buffalo" than sitting with them on a big rock overlooking a valley or chatting as we threw stones?

"Do you enjoy taking care of the cow?" I asked Xiaobo one day.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"It's not bitter [ku]. I don't have to work," he says with a big smile.

Indeed, compared to his brothers and sisters who labor in the fields or haul human and animal waste up and down the mountains, Xiaobo's got it easy. He's been in charge of the cow since he was seven years old. He doesn't see it as work. For him and his friends, even though they have to take out the cows regardless of the weather, it's all play.

Based on their grades, it is obvious that they do not enjoy working in the classroom either. Report cards came



*Kids of all ages enjoy playing, especially 12-year-olds. In fact, when they're not whipping their cows, these children are usually chasing each other, wrestling, laughing and pinching each other. In this photograph, "Team Water Buffalo" has some fun on the road home. Note that one of the children is a young girl, seldom seen among cowherds in Big Nest Village.*



out while I was staying at the Chen-family home, and the two boys averaged scores of less than 50 (out of 100). At the family meeting big brother and I called to discuss the children's performance, everyone simply laughed when the scores were read aloud: 30s, 40s and 50s.

But these kids are clearly intelligent. What's the problem? The most common response was that many do not believe studies will get them anywhere. Few — children or parents — see any direct link between school and their welfare. Not in a society where people become government officials through good connections, opportunity flows not from hard work but from favors, and quick cash comes through construction jobs on the coast. For most, school is a necessary evil.

The quality of their teachers makes things much worse. With poor training and even worse attitudes, most teachers do little to motivate their students. In fact, they spend most of their day gambling — even while at school. The students are often left on their own. The severity of the "teacher problem" has been evidenced by a few cases of how well classes did when the teacher really put their heart into the job.

On another day, as Xiaobo, Zhibo and I sat on a boulder, the cows munching on shrubs ten feet away, I put them to a little test: "Who's president of China?"

"Jiang Zemin."

"Right!"

Who's premier?"

"Li Peng."

"Close. Actually, since last year, Zhu Rongji has been premier."

Their answers impressed me.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I continued.

"A government official," Xiaobo replied without hesitation.

"Why?"

"So I can relax and play."

"And you? Zhibo, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I just want to play."

Certainly, many of their answers re-

involved around the fact that most 12-year-olds want to play more than anything else. In thinking about it, though, I realized that these kids are also set on playing now (and when they grow up) because they see how hard and relentless life is in the village — especially when compared to the of the government officials they see.

"Guys, I know you probably don't think about this very much," I said as we continued to pitch stones at the far-away tree, "but how many children do you want to have when you grow up?"

"Two," Xiaobo responded automatically.

"Why?"

"Because that's government policy."<sup>1</sup>

"Any other reasons?"

He thought for awhile, then replied, "Yeah, they could wear better clothes if there are less children."

In their simplicity, I discovered that these village children were not just cowherds — they were among the best commentators on life in rural Guizhou that I had yet met.

Sincerely,



*Chen Zhibo and Chen Xiaobo, cousins and best friends, take a break on a big rock halfway up the mountainside.*

<sup>1</sup> In ethnic-minority townships, parents are allowed two children instead of the usual one.



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## INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Shelly Renae Browning.** A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. **[SOUTH ASIA]**

**Chenoa Egawa.** An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Paige Evans.** A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Whitney Mason.** A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." **[sub-SAHARA]**

**Jean Benoît Nadeau.** A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Susan Sterner.** A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Tyrone Turner.** A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Daniel B. Wright.** A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andraee, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. **[EAST ASIA]**



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