



“The Little Ferry Boat” of Tao River

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The Tao River is plain and unattractive. Even the locals at Ziyang city would be hard pressed to come up with its exact location. However, at the mention of the “The Little Ferry Boat” of Tao River – Mr. Li Xudong - everyone within the parameter of fifty miles, all the way to the next town Zizhong, knows who he is. He cares about his students as his own. Rain or shine, he escorts his students across the river one by one. He is also an excellent teacher. Out of 300 plus students taught by him, more than ten students went on to study in vocational schools and/or colleges. During his tenure of 20 years, there was no increase of new ill-literate person in the six villages of the school district of the Tao River Elementary School!

Then, why would people affectionately call this everyday teacher the “Little Ferry Boat” of Tao River? On one hand, he is the boat that literally ferries all the students across the river everyday. On the other hand, he is also the vehicle that carries the poor students at the closed-in Tao River area away from ignorance and helps them embark on a journey towards the sea of knowledge.

During the rainy season, folks at Tao River will invariably witness a moving scene in the morning hours before school: Li Xudong, wading across the river with one student riding piggy back on him, two students clutching his hands, and at times, a fourth student clinging onto him under his arm. He was like a mother hen sheltering and guarding her chicks. He has been doing this for twenty years, losing count of how many times he has waded across the river, thousands, or ten thousand times? All he knows is that he has developed a serious case of arthritis by now.

This peaceful and lovely river in the mountain becomes turbulent and wreaks havoc during rainy seasons. Li Xudong had tried building a small bridge many times, at several different locations. Every time, the surging water brought on by the rain wiped out the bridge just in one single flash. As a result, Li has to ferry the students on his back, in his hands...One day in May of 1992, a storm caused the temperature to drop precipitously. Li came to the river early to meet the students. He saw a fourth grader Zhen Yun step onto the bridge he built. Before he could reach out to her, a flash flood from upstream

barreled down and instantly capsized the bridge and Zhen Yun. Without hesitation, Li jumped into the roaring flood and swam towards Zhen Yun. Finally he grabbed her hair and managed to raise her above water and clutched onto the debris of the bridge. Suddenly, another current hit them head on. The two of them were swept down the river for more than ten meters. Li choked on the water several times but still kept Zhen in his grip. Parents alarmed by the cries of the students on the riverbank rushed to them and rescued Li and Zhen from the torrents. Li was shaking all over from cold. Cuts from the sharp river rocks marked his body with deep lines, and the beach turned red with blood...

Tao River Elementary School is in fact a one-teacher, one classroom school. Li Xudong is an average teacher who does not even have a teacher's high school diploma to his credit. But for more than ten plus years, the quality of teaching at Tao River Elementary School has been ranked at the top among the elementary schools in the entire county, surpassing the county magnet center school on many occasions. Tao River Elementary has produced 55 college and/vocational school students, citywide Mathematic Olympic contests winners, and citywide essay contests first place winners! What is the secret of Li Xudong?

Li answered my question by saying that: "A strong sense of responsibility and sincere love for the students propel me to do a good job." In order to make up for his deficiency, he kept on studying, and did research on teaching materials on his own. He traveled long distance to take music lessons; bought piles of drawing instruction books to practice on a small black board. Over the years, his school offered lessons also on music, physical education, fine arts, natural science, crafts, and character and morals up to the rigorous standards of the educational guideline.

Over 20 years of experiment, Li has developed a unique teaching method to teach the students of multiple levels sitting in one classroom. Lessons are carefully designed for such a classroom: a class period of 45 minutes shall be best divided into three sessions, language used in teaching shall be compatible with the children living in the mountains, examples used shall be relevant to their ways of life. I sat in Teacher Li class once. He first introduced the different types of "angles" to the fourth graders, then taught the second graders multiple adding and multiple subtracting, and finally gave reading lessons to the kindergarteners... Within the 45 minutes, Teacher Li performed like an outstanding concert virtuoso, gliding through tenor, baritone, and bass in a skillful and natural way.

It is quite commonplace that students in the mountains will become absent every now and then. Once fallen behind, the student will find it hard to catch up and the progress of the entire class will be held back. To make up for the absentees, Li bought a small lantern and made a small blackboard to tutor the students at nighttime in their homes. In the spring of 1994, student Wei Huajun missed school for 18 days due to a bout with smallpox. Li went to tutor him every night for two weeks. On a cold rainy night, Li trudged home from tutoring Wei, holding his umbrella and a bag in one hand, a lantern and the black board in the other. He was met with a gust of wind and the lantern went off in an instant. Li lost his footing and fell more than one meter down the embankment.

Not being able to rekindle his lantern and his umbrella now gone, he just muddled on in the pitch darkness. He would have to rest in the muddy water in the company of the rain that night if his wife did not come searching for him and pull him back up the embankment.

During his tenure of more than 20 years, there has never been one student who dropped out, or one who had to repeat. Not only all the school age children in the school district of Tao River have been educated, children from the neighboring townships have come all the way to be taught by him. Due to Li's hard work, 100% of the school age children have attended school and they have all stayed on to graduate, and again all 100% of them have moved onto junior high school.

Teacher Li Xudong is no more than ordinary. But it is exactly because of these tireless teachers who quietly and faithfully carry on their duties, in spite of hardships of all kinds, that the children from the vast areas of rural and mountainous villages stand to escape a life of ignorance and walk closer to civilization day by day. These teachers are the major forces in bringing progress to the rural and mountainous areas.