

Shandan News - October 2013

Brendan Corbett has been teaching at [Shandan Bailie School](#), Gansu Province, China, since September, 2013. He will finish his stint in February, next year, at the end of the third semester. The following is his first 'report' that is very interesting and, incidentally, needed very little editing. Hopefully, he will send us others.

Greetings from a very sunny but a little chilly Shandan Bailie School. When I looked for Shandan on the map of China it took a little searching to find. It has a reputation way bigger than its physical presence. But, as Dave Adamson [NZCFS Vice President South Island] has frequently mentioned, “This is the real China”, and after 6 weeks here I am happy to agree. Shandan is real in every sense. It has that raw agricultural heartland feel and the raw agricultural aroma. I love it! There is that beautiful anarchic flow of people, vehicles, animals, doting grandparents of treasured grandchildren, commerce flooding on to the footpaths and streets and always the beaming smile on the faces of ordinary people getting on with the job of living.

I arrived in early September in Week 2 of the new school year so it was straight to work which suited me fine. It is an uncomfortable situation being here as a 'foreign expert' but without much difficulty my cover was happily blown. There is a group of very able and accomplished [*Chinese*] English teachers here who deserve the 'expert' mantle. I have a more humble mission, that of encouraging the students to converse in English. Getting to know some of the teachers and quizzing each on how things worked or didn't in our respective countries' education systems produced a whole raft of similarities. Our conversations regularly erupted into laughter when we uncovered yet another 'international trend' appearing in China and NZ. The emphasis on university over other pathways, parental perceptions of schools and 'academic flight', teachers' wages and working conditions, issues of homework, assessment regimes impacting on creative teaching and on and on. It feels like I am still in NZ.

One issue that is regularly raised by teachers and students is the lack of opportunities to speak English. The Principals of all 3 schools I visited with the Darfield High School delegation all raised the same issue. This offers an exciting challenge to be solved creatively. That is something to put your minds to, people!

A really nice thing that has developed is the casual language learning and conversations around the cafeteria tables at lunch and dinner. The classroom has never been a good place to expose your lack of confidence in speaking a foreign language but students and teachers are much happier chatting over a bowl of noodles. As a consequence, my Mandarin ability is surging ahead in leaps and bounds. I have moved on from managing nothing more than 100 *ni haos* a day to yesterday succeeding in topping up my mobile phone in a local shop. Amazingly the shopkeeper understood my “*wo xiang guomai yixie dianhua chong zhi*”. I wasn't ready for her reply of “what is your number”. Arrggghhh, the usual confusion set in again, but Google translate was my saviour. One word and a phrase a day is my learning goal.

As it turned out, the phone didn't need feeding with money. The SIM card had refused to work due to desertification inside my phone! That is how dusty it is here when the Gobi Desert can claim your phone. Spare a thought for the farmers. The dust is just everywhere. Clothes that look reasonably clean turn the washtub water brown. My apartment, despite regular dusting and sweeping, has sand dunes

creeping out from the walls after a few days.

All the school cleaning is the students' responsibility. They are self organized and super efficient. Hallways are mopped, classrooms swept and windows wiped clean. Rubbish is picked up and all done with laughter and smiles. It is a little stressful for a health-and-safety conscious NZ teacher to find 4 students standing on narrow ledges cleaning the outside of the windowson the 3rd floor!



The teachers' rooms are kept dust-free by the clever method of splashing a jug of water on the concrete floor. This lowers the dust and raises the humidity a little. Most offices have a lovely collection of pot plants in the middle of the room to improve the air quality but there is a love affair with the cigarette in this country that requires a lot more planting to counteract.

The title of one of Rewi's Shandan books is “**An Adventure in Education**” and this so captures the spirit of this town, even with the passing of the years. They are embarking on a frantic Adventure of Modernization creating an entirely new administrative and residential precinct to the west of the old town. The similarities with Christchurch can't be overlooked. Shandan is one huge construction site.

Dave Adamson and Dave Bromwich have both been up here in the last month and were able to give some perspective to the speed of development. The town of 6 years ago is almost unrecognizable. The mother of one of the teachers remarked that she has trouble finding her way around on her annual visits due to the loss of old landmarks. Does that sound familiar to Christchurch people?

The most inspiring aspect of my time here is seeing how this community has kept alive the memory of Rewi Alley and his contribution to this whole province. Tributes to Rewi are everywhere. The school itself has a memorial building with a huge photographic archive of the period of Rewi's life in China. There is the Rewi Alley Museum with his collection of rare and unique artifacts gifted by Alley to the Shandan community. The Rewi Alley Park and the Rewi Alley (and George Hogg) Cemetery. The township council funds a full-time attendant to maintain the cemetery and deal with the steady stream of visitors. The new [Gong Ho cooperative](#) office and training centre overlooks the cemetery.

All of this is soon to be outdone with the opening of the magnificent Rewi Alley Hotel on the equally grand Rewi Alley Avenue. Surrounding the hotel will be a new Alley Museum, three times the size of the current building, which will be able to display the entire collection. Opposite the hotel a New Zealand-themed housing and commercial district is planned. All of this is the gateway to Shandan's new administrative and residential area. [Zac Athfield](#) from Wellington was yet another welcome Kiwi visitor last month. He was here at the invitation of the local council and the NZCFS to look at the feasibility of design input into the New Zealand Village. Hopefully a relationship will be possible and an authentic (and brilliant) NZ design will be the result.

So, for a New Zealander to come to this little town in the Western Chinese desert and find all this going on is massively humbling. Here was a man who was wounded in the first World War and came to China for an adventure and soon joined in the struggle of ordinary people against the brutality of the British, Japanese and American Imperialists. It would be a great thing if New Zealanders could support the efforts of the Shandan people in honouring Rewi the way they have by making Shandan a place of

pilgrimage. Here one understands what it means to be an Internationalist dedicated to peace and progress. Rather a pilgrimage here than to the commemoration of imperial slaughter on the beaches of Turkey and the fields of Europe. China has moved on.

History aside, this part of China is a tourist mecca. This is China with a third of the world's population but all around are vast empty open spaces stretching to the horizon, pristine mountains draped in ancient conifer forests, clear blue skies and endless sunny days. This is cycling country, from sedate journeys down tree-lined country roads to exciting mountain trails. It is biking and hiking heaven. If wine is your thing there are vineyards on an epic scale. No expense has been spared in the attempt to produce world-class wine. The old Silk Road is becoming the world's most exotic wine trail. Transport is fantastic. There are buses, trains and the greatest public transport initiative I have ever seen. All cars can be taxis if a bit of cash is needed by the driver. Two out of every three vehicles are electric powered and most have only two or three wheels. Traffic flows around town at about 15 km/hr max and all road users look out for each other, just brilliant!
Happy respectful people.....Shandan.

Well, that was late Summer and Autumn. Now it is -4 degrees centigrade at 7:30 am and morning exercises don't look very appealing. My comments about how cold it was were greeted with laughter: in January we will be doing morning exercises at -28 degrees. At least it is always sunny!

Cheers,
Brendan



After school fitness outside like everything in Shandan



Automotive engineering - peer tutorin



Students cataloging new library books



Refridgeration engineers building new units

Also see next page:



The nicest of the 3 cafes on campus. My teachers group in the centre



Auckland City ratepayers might like this idea for maintaining the verges... Here in Shandan, grazing the long acre is still the way to keep the town tidy. These clever goats can trim a hedge to a perfect straight edge!