

Tomorrow's Life

And you don't stop ... Grandmaster Flash still going strong **Gigs**

Wang Lee-hom says role helped him reclaim his heritage **Screen**



Glide tidings: Learn to fly the silent way **C7**



FASHION TRAVEL TIME OUT DIVERSIONS ON AIR

Life

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2007

www.scmp.com



Rural mainland students hope higher education will give them a brighter future, but many families struggle to pay rising fees, writes **Zhang Lijia**

The grade escape



Photo: Zhang Lijia

When the mail arrives in Liu Ji village, Anhui province, Peng Zhaomin is overjoyed. She's just learned that her 18-year-old son, Ren Liusuo, has been accepted by Huainan Technology College, about 100km to the east.

"Good boy! I was praying for this," Peng says, her dark, flat face creased with happiness. Only 10 per cent of the mainland's students go to university, and even fewer make it from the paddy fields. To celebrate, the family treat themselves to a big watermelon.

But Peng and her husband Ren Yongxing soon begin to worry. Attached to their son's acceptance letter is a long list of fees, including those for tuition, books, insurance and accommodation. It adds up to 11,000 yuan per year. Yet the family's annual income is only about 8,000 yuan from growing rice and wheat, and, more importantly, from Ren's seasonal work as a builder.

However, the family vows to get by. Peng plans to sell all their grain and borrow the rest from relatives and friends. "We'll tighten our belts," Ren says, touching his "belt" - a cloth string tied in a knot around his faded blue

cotton trousers. "Only a university education can ensure our son [can] become a real city man."

Having laboured at urban construction sites, Ren knows well how migrants are treated as second-class citizens in mainland cities.

The Ren family is just one of tens of thousands of mainland households who are struggling to meet the spiralling costs of higher education. For decades, free tuition was one of the proudest boasts of

the Communist Party. However, fees have increased from 100 yuan per semester in 1989 to an average of 5,000 yuan today.

This rise has drawn a strong reaction on the mainland. A *China Youth Daily* survey this year reveals that 86.1 per cent of nearly 20,000 respondents say university fees are too high. As the mainland transforms from its old welfare state to fee-paying systems, the poorest take the heaviest toll, and the

burden of tuition expenses can lead to tragedy. Every year the media carries stories about parents committing suicide because they can't afford to send their children to university. Last summer Shanxi shepherd Chen Xuqing killed himself after learning that his son did well in a college entrance exam. His suicide was followed a week later by that of another Shanxi villager who learned his daughter was accepted to a Xian university.

Two years ago, an impoverished mother from a Yunnan village, Li Fenxiang, was so depressed that she couldn't afford her daughter's university fees that she hanged herself. Just after Li died, a letter from the university arrived to explain there were loans available for poor students.

It's unclear how many students can benefit from the reduced fees and scholarships offered by universities, or the loans that have been introduced by state banks in recent years.

The *Beijing Evening News* last week reported that when an orphan named Tao came to register at Sichuan Normal University, she tried to apply for a loan. But she was told that she had to register first before her application was

considered, which meant she had to pay more than 10,000 yuan in tuition fees. Unable to raise the sum, Tao returned home.

Peng has faced similar problems. When she asked a local bank for a loan, her application was rejected because her son's university wasn't prestigious enough.

Yet she presses on for her son's future. Her nephew, Bian Yang, went to college, and she often cites his success to inspire her son to make good.

"Look at your uncle Bian Yang," she would say. "Once he went to university, he was out of the muddy field, out of the hard life here, forever."

Bian has done well. Raised in a neighbouring village, he did an engineering degree and honoured his ancestors by becoming the first university student from the county. Now he lives in Beijing and drives a company car as the marketing director of a machinery firm.

"I would never have finished my university if I had to pay. My family had barely enough to feed us. I studied hard," he says, recalling how he had to hand-copy his textbooks. "My father always said for peasant boys like us, education is the only way to change our fate."

Look at your uncle Bian Yang. Once he went to university, he was out of the muddy field, out of the hard life, forever

Peng Zhaomin, mother

Some Anhui villages are even more impoverished than Liu Ji, Bian says. "Only one hour's bike ride away from Huai River, you'll see shocking poverty, where 10,000 yuan is simply an astronomical sum," he says. "It makes me angry to see some bright students being deprived of the right to education simply because they are poor."

Most urban residents are luckier. China's one-child policy is enforced most rigidly in its cities and heightens parental pressure on children to succeed. More than 70 per cent surveyed vowed they would push their only child to attend university, whatever the cost. According to the State Statistics Bureau, urban families are willing to spend at least 10 per cent of their income on their children's

education, often with a special fund set up as soon as the child is born.

Such commitment is welcome news to some government economists, who try to encourage people to tap into their savings in the hope that university spending would stimulate consumption and boost the economy.

Shen Dingli, a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, disagrees. "I acknowledge that free education is too much a product of [a] socialist planned economy, but to turn education into [an] industry is misleading," the government adviser says.

Nevertheless, the Ren family has raised enough money to send Liusuo to college. The teenager has just started classes at Huainan, and is relieved to find a few classmates from a farming background, although most are from the city.

Liusuo is deeply grateful for his parents' sacrifice, but he also feels enormous pressure. "How can we pay back the debt?" he says.

Liusuo has chosen to study property management, with an eye on the construction boom and an increasingly vibrant property market. He sees plenty of opportunity and a city job, too. Just like his uncle Bian.



Ren Liusuo (top) has made his parents, Peng Zhaomin (left) and Ren Yongxing, happy by being accepted for college; graduates (above) celebrate in traditional fashion at Fudan University in Shanghai. Photo: Reuters

People

Photos: Reuters/AP

Jail time for Die Hard director

John McTiernan, the director behind such blockbuster action films as *Die Hard* and *Predator*, has been sentenced to four months in prison for lying to federal agents.

McTiernan (right) was one of seven defendants who pleaded guilty in connection with the conspiracy and racketeering case of disgraced celebrity detective Anthony Pellicano, who was charged with using illegal wiretaps and illicit database searches to eavesdrop on dozens of Hollywood celebrities and movie executives.

McTiernan, 56, pleaded guilty in April last year to making knowingly false statements to FBI agents investigating Pellicano when he denied having asked Pellicano to



wiretap producer Charles Roven, with whom the director worked on the 2002 film *Rollerball*.

A judge denied a motion by McTiernan to withdraw his guilty plea. In addition to his four-month prison sentence, the director also received two years of supervised release and a US\$100,000 fine. Reuters

Von Teese stars in Peta ad

Model and burlesque dancer Dita Von Teese shows off her curves in a racy advertisement promoting spaying and neutering pets. The ad unveiled in Los Angeles by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) stars the former Marilyn Manson flame as a corset-wearing spokeswoman for the group's animal birth-control campaign.

Von Teese (right), whose real name is Heather Sweet, is shown standing in front of a blackboard in a pink and black corset, fishnet stockings and black stiletto heels. A seated bookish-looking older man stares up at her.

"Almost four million dogs and cats are put to death in the US every year because there are not enough good homes. You can help prevent this," she says in the ad, shown on Peta's website.

The ad also asks people considering dog or cat adoptions to adopt from local animal shelters. Actress Alicia Silverstone appeared naked in a Peta commercial promoting vegetarianism which was set to run in Houston last week. The ad never aired because of its nude content. AP



Gere takes a swipe at Bush

Richard Gere criticised the Bush administration when he picked up a lifetime achievement award at the San Sebastian Film Festival.

Discussing his film *The Hoax*, about a fabricated autobiography of Howard Hughes, Gere linked the small lies "that people don't take responsibility for" to the "big lies" that lead to history-altering moments, like the decision to invade Iraq.

He also appealed to Chinese authorities to rise to the occasion of next year's Olympics by becoming an open society.

"This is China's moment for radical change," he said. Reuters

Spacey meets with Chavez

American actor Kevin Spacey has met privately with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, one of Washington's most outspoken critics in Latin America.

Neither Spacey - who won Oscars for roles in *The Usual Suspects* (1996) and *American Beauty* (2000) - nor Chavez spoke to the press after the nearly three-hour encounter in the presidential palace in Caracas. The pair (right) shook hands warmly on the red carpet as Spacey left after a dinner with Chavez.

Hours earlier, the actor visited a US\$13 million film studio founded last year by the government to support Venezuelan filmmaking. Details were not released about the rest of Spacey's itinerary.



Chavez has said Venezuela hopes to produce its own films as an alternative to the "cultural imperialism" of Hollywood. Yet, Chavez speaks highly of some Hollywood films.

He has also hosted recent visits by stars including Sean Penn and Danny Glover. AP