



Education: Development begins with the young

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By Michelle Borok

Anita Fahrni grew up and studied in the United States, but has lived in Switzerland for the past 46 years. A former member of the Cantonal Parliament of Thurgau, she has built up a large network of politically active women worldwide. Working with Mongolian schools and universities for the past 17 years, she has provided training and many tons of material for both teachers and students. For the past eight years, she has been a board member of the International Takhi Group, the Swiss organization which helped to reintroduce the Przewalski horse to the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area.

In an exclusive interview with Anita Fahrni, The UB Post learns more about her decades of work in Mongolia and why she's so devoted to enriching education in Mongolia.

You've been coming to Mongolia every year for nearly 20 years. What first brought you here?

After attending the UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, I started networking among women's groups internationally, realizing that cultural and social exchanges among women are extremely valuable, not only for the women but also for their communities. My good friend Sheldon Severinghaus was then director of Asia Foundation here in Ulaanbaatar. He suggested that I come to meet the strong women here. I went to Mongolia for the first time in 1998. The active groups here, and also their need for books and of international contacts,

made an impression on me. I started sending books and have, over the past 17 years, sent about 450,000 books in English and German to institutions throughout this country.

How are the books that you send put to use?

I will admit that, in the beginning, I sent many books which were not being read. In my opinion, there were several reasons for this. I had not realized that Mongolian university students and their teachers do not read much. This is unfortunate. In Europe and America, the best

education is based on the students and their teachers having read a great deal. Mongolians speak of honoring books – but they seldom read. Unfortunately, more hours are spent watching stupid television programs than reading. At the beginning, I also made the mistake of sending books which were above the reading level of the students and teachers who were receiving them. With so much homework to do and that homework is done by reading short articles of questionable value on the internet, the more demanding books are not attractive. In my opinion, this is very unfortunate but describes the situation here.

What makes reading so important?

Being well educated – especially in a world in which so much information is available, some of it false – involves the ability to take information from many reliable sources, to evaluate it carefully, and to form one's own opinion about the topic. Thinking for oneself and not simply accepting other people's views is the basis of critical thought. Learning to evaluate information and to formulate new ideas is the source of originality, of creativity, of progress. Simply repeating what others have said is not true learning. If a country like Mongolia is to develop well, its people must read about and learn from the past, seek new ideas for the future, and find a way of implementing their vision – even if this involves ideas very different from those of the government or the teachers. This power of the individual can be achieved only through reading.

If reading is so important, what can be done to improve the reading habits of Mongolian children and adults?

Children learn the pleasures of reading only if good books are available to them. In my opinion, good books for young children are those which ignite their imagination, which have characters with which they can identify, but also characters who are different, independent, creative, sometimes even mischievous. Good books should open a different world to the reader, showing him or her things outside of their local experience; encouraging the reader to think and to ask questions. I realize that, in the present economic situation, schools do not have the money to build up a library with such books. Therefore, many of the children's books which I send in English and in German go to countryside schools. I have also distributed many children's books and larger reference books in Mongolian. Good libraries for adults are also necessary.

What can parents do to encourage their children to read?

Parents have a great influence on their children's reading habits. If parents don't read regularly for their own pleasure, if they don't read stories to their children – beginning at a very young age – their children may not learn the real excitement of getting into a good book. It would help if parents and friends would give children books instead of candy or plastic toys. Frequent visits to a library or a bookstore would also help.

In addition to bringing books to Mongolia, you also began a student exchange program.

This week, the 100th Mongolian student of the German language will be selected to attend a Swiss university program or a middle school for one year. Seven are now in Switzerland. It pleases me greatly to follow the paths of the 87 exchange students I've brought to Switzerland over the years, most of whom are now involved in education in Mongolia, teaching or using their language ability in other ways. Their year abroad – living with host families, traveling within Switzerland and Europe, doing internships in Swiss schools, and experiencing what good teaching can be – broadens their horizons tremendously, preparing them to help develop good schools in their home country. Almost all of these women grew up in the countryside and would not have had such an opportunity otherwise. Luckily, I have now been able to turn this part of my work over to others, to friends who now run the exchange.

Have you also worked with Mongolian teachers?

About 35 Mongolian teachers of English or German have spent three months in Switzerland, or in the US, as interns working in schools, improving their language skills and their methodology. They, too, have expanded their horizons and can pass on to their students what they have experienced. In addition, I have sent about 140 people to Mongolian schools and universities to teach English or German for varying lengths of time, from one month to three years.

The main purpose of this working visit to Mongolia is, however, a different one.

For the past eight years, I have been a member of the board of the International Takhi Group, the Swiss non-governmental organization which is reintroducing the Przewalski horse into the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area, in southern Gobi-Altai and Khovd. This year we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the successful reintroduction of the wild horse, the takhi, which was extinct in Mongolia in the mid-1960s. With a photography exhibit at Blue Moon Gallery, we called attention to this successful work and hoped to find support for it here in Mongolia. The Mongolian government supports the program. The very active, well-trained, and knowledgeable rangers and the director of the program, as well as our office manager here in UB, are all Mongolian. However, few Mongolians know of this work and are willing to support it financially. I am here for the opening of the exhibit and to spread information about our work in whatever way possible. Ours is basically a Mongolian program for Mongolians.

What does “successful” mean in the context of the International Takhi Group’s efforts?

There are now over 165 truly wild horses roaming in complete freedom in the Great GobiB. Last year, a record number of foals were born and almost all of the takhi survived the winter. Some of these wild horses were brought here from foreign breeding programs. However, most of them were born here, in the wild. They have grouped themselves into about 13 harems, or herds, in which one stallion gathers many mares around himself. There is also a group of stallions which roam together and several individual stallions. It is truly inspiring to see these wild creatures gallop through the spectacular Gobi, a sight worth making the long journey for. The rangers in Takhintal know all of the horses individually and protect them conscientiously. The nomads and the local population support the work of the rangers, passing on information to them when necessary.

What support for the takhi is needed from Mongolians here in UB?

In my opinion, it is important that people know about this project, as it involves a true symbol of the real Mongolia. The takhi is the only truly wild horse on Earth. It is a symbol, too, of the importance of a natural environment in which all wild animals can live. The takhi was extinct and has been reintroduced, brought back to the Great Gobi B, in Khustai Nuruu and in Khomyn Tal. However, there are other wild animals on the verge of extinction which need protection and which cannot be reintroduced should they disappear completely. It is important for all Mongolians to realize this.

For the International Takhi Group, support can be financial. Friends of the Takhi Mongolia is a group here looking for members. By paying a modest annual membership fee, one can help finance the building of a water system for the ranger camp and the tourist gers. Members of the organization will receive the "Takhi Post" in Mongolian twice a year, as well as invitations to events here in UB or in Takhintal. Information can be found on the website savethewildhorse.ch, which is also in Mongolian. We hope that our photography exhibit made more people become interested in becoming involved in our work.

What have you learned about Mongolia from this visit?

The bad economic situation is evident, especially noticeable in the fact that there are very few containers in the container lot where my donated materials arrive. This indicates that there is little import or export at the moment. Prices continue to rise while the general salary level remains very low. Teachers are paid perhaps 400,000 MNT per month, but one can certainly not live in UB on that amount. That has obviously led, in many fields, to more corruption rather than less. Talking about fighting corruption is not enough; the government must have the will to combat it honestly. That is evidently not the case, and thus, the quality of life in the city has declined. People have become frustrated and skeptical, unwilling to fight for improvements. As everyone must fight for his or her immediate survival, people are not willing to collaborate, to work together for a better society. This saddens me.