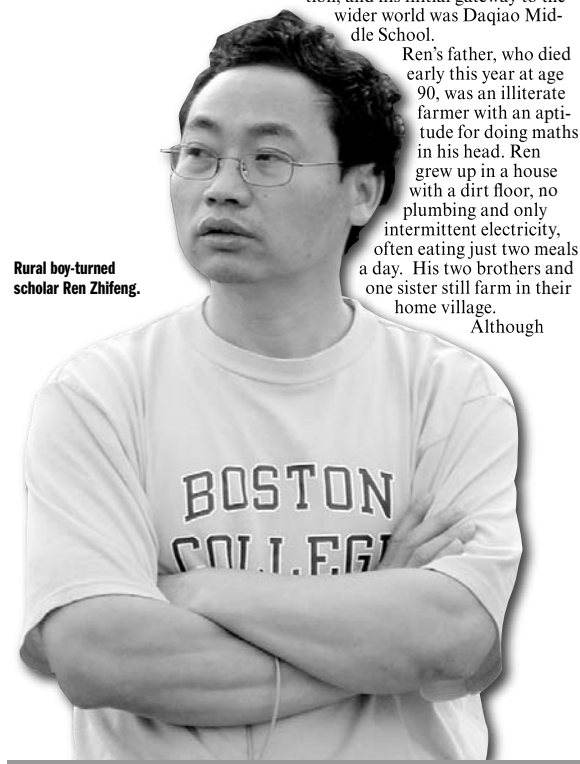


# Rural boy-turned-scholar returns to help his alma mater improve

First meeting professor of physics Ren Zhifeng on an aeroplane, Judy Polumbaum went with Ren to Nanbu County in Southwest China's Sichuan Province to find out how the scholar is trying to improve local rural education

Ren Zhifeng doesn't want this story to be about him. He wants it to be about the problems and promises of China's rural education. More specifically, he wants it to be about Daqiao Middle School, in the township of Daqiao, Nanbu County, where more than 2,000 kids from the poor eastern region of Sichuan Province attend grades six through 12. He wants to call attention to the need for more student dorms and new faculty housing and better sports facilities and ways to keep the best teachers and students from defecting to the school in the county seat. He's eager to extol the merits of balancing heavy-duty academics with music and art and fun ways of learning foreign languages. He'd like to show how a school far from centres of power and influence can go places when it has enlightened leadership, creative teachers, friends around the world and alumni willing to give back. This story is about all those things, but inescapably, it's about Ren as well. For his is the quintessential tale of a country lad finding success and fulfilment via education, and his initial gateway to the wider world was Daqiao Middle School.

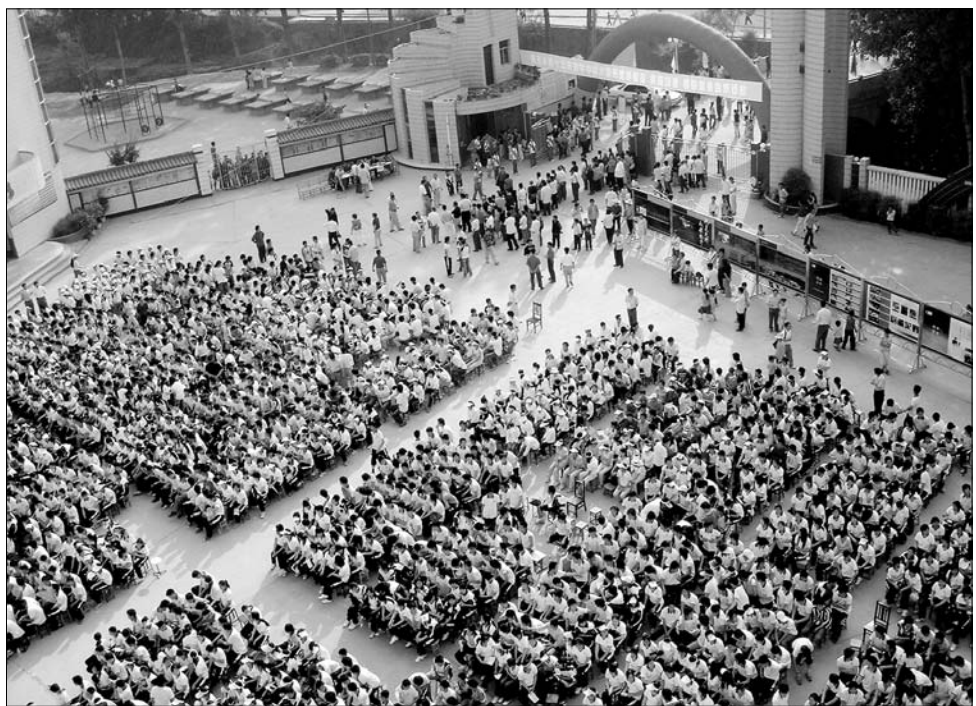


Rural boy-turned scholar Ren Zhifeng.

Ren's father, who died early this year at age 90, was an illiterate farmer with an aptitude for doing maths in his head. Ren grew up in a house with a dirt floor, no plumbing and only intermittent electricity, often eating just two meals a day. His two brothers and one sister still farm in their home village. Although conditions have improved vastly in rural Sichuan, farming still rests on backbreaking manual labour, while rising incomes depend on migrant labour. About a third of Nanbu County's population of 1.25 million today has departed to work in cities all over China, leaving the elderly to till the fields and care for the grandchildren. Against the odds, Ren is neither a farmer nor a migrant labourer. Instead, he's a physics professor in the United States and a leading international researcher in the field of nano technology, with 25 patents and hundreds of scholarly publications to his name. As for alumni giving back, Ren is as loyal as they come. He and his wife He Ruiping, along with their two teenage sons and a rotating cast of American friends, spend vacation time every spring teaching English at Daqiao Middle School.

This year, in conjunction with the school's 50th anniversary celebration, Ren spearheaded an alumni fund drive with a 100,000-yuan (US\$12,346) pledge of his own and, with total lack of ceremony, delivered the first 30,000 yuan (US\$ 3,703) in cash to the school leaders. "Chinese don't have the custom of philanthropy," he said during his most recent visit. "We need to educate people that when you are doing very well, you need to give."

**Journey out of countryside** Ren's journey from the deep countryside of Southwest China to the top tiers of international science might never have happened but for a determined teacher who came looking for him. His family had planned to send Ren to a vocational school after two years at his local middle school, thinking it the best a smart rural lad might aspire to. But the teacher, aware of the boy's extraordinary maths abilities, plucked him out of his village and took him to Daqiao to keep him on an academic track. There he studied two more years, graduating in 1980. Among about 300 seniors, he was one of



A grand celebration at Daqiao Middle School in Nanbu County, Southwest China's Sichuan Province.

PHOTOS BY JUDY POLUMBAUM

just 15 to pass that year's college entrance exams (although some tried again, and Ren says about 50 of his classmates ultimately went to university). From then on, each new educational step meant an even bigger geographical leap — to Chengdu, the provincial capital, for university; to Wuhan for a master's degree; to Beijing for a doctoral programme at the Chinese Academy of Sciences; and then around the globe for postdoctoral studies at the State University of New York in Buffalo. Ren joined the faculty of Boston College in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1999, becoming a full professor in 2004, the year he also was elected a fellow of the American Physics Society. This spring, he received Boston College's outstanding senior researcher award — at the ripe old age of 42.

He is not the only alumnus of Daqiao Middle School to make good, and no doubt would prefer people focus on others — the county's mayor, or the Sichuan University economics professor, or the military official in Northeast China, or the fellow who works for the State Council, or the various success stories in business. The contingent from Ren's class

that attended a reunion dinner before the anniversary celebration included a hospital administrator, civil servants and teachers. Today's students are encouraged to think big and pursue their dreams, and some things are in their favour. Central government subsidies for rural education have improved, especially since universal schooling through ninth grade was mandated in 2003, and the number of Daqiao students attending college continues to increase as higher education in China expands.

But the school's principal and academic vice-principal, both alumni who returned to the school as teachers, say finances are still their biggest headache. Teacher hiring has not kept pace with student enrolments — since 1999, while the student body has more than doubled from 1,500 to 2,300, the teaching corps has increased from 70 to just 85. Shortage of instructional space was resolved with a new classroom building, but the lack of dormitories means some classrooms double as dorm rooms, and most teachers must find housing outside. There is a sports ground where students do morning exercises, and a cluster

of ping-pong tables, but no indoor athletic facilities. The administrators say they feel squeezed from both above and below, as they try to meet government standards and requirements for education on the one hand and satisfy families on the other. Academic pressures, parental expectations and concerns about safety all add up to a long school day — most students board and are in class until 9 or 10 pm — which the school leaders acknowledge can have diminishing returns. Compounding the challenges is an odd sort of brain drain: Nantong Middle School, which as the county's "key" school has greater resources, has been luring away quality teachers as well as bright students. About 30 Daqiao teachers have left for higher salaries and better benefits in Nantong since the early 1990s.

**Way forward** In Ren Zhifeng's view, the way out for Daqiao — and for rural schools generally — lies in alumni fundraising, intelligent investment and development of distinctive strengths, rather than in awaiting government help and trying to "compete" with each other.

He and his wife have drawn up an idealistic plan for Daqiao, eagerly embraced by the school, that incorporates aspects of US education they feel have benefited their own sons. Their vision calls for a curriculum geared toward fostering students' individual talents, with more art, music and extra-curricular sports. If Daqiao had five music teachers instead of one, for instance, "we could have a band or orchestra," Ren said. The plan also emphasizes spoken English competency, to bring youngsters "to the level where they can freely communicate," Ren said. Daqiao students already have unusual opportunities in this regard: Four years ago, he and his wife began bringing volunteers to Daqiao to teach for a week or two during their spring vacation, and it's now an annual programme. The receptive school administration arranges for housing and meals, the 10 or so regular Chinese teachers of English get extra practice and training, the visitors pay their own way and have an eye-opening experience, and the students are the most delighted of all. This spring, the couple again brought their sons to Nanbu County for spring break, along with two batches of friends. Ren and five of the US visitors stayed on at Daqiao during the first week in May for the anniversary celebration, joining students, teachers and staff who had postponed their May Day holiday for the occasion. Several hundred alumni came back for reunion dinners and a morning assembly in the schoolyard, where they mingled with excited youngsters turned out in varying combinations of new school track suits and sun visors, blue jeans and T-shirts. The seniors, many sporting shaggy hair and mildly bored expressions, resembled high school seniors anywhere. In fact, other than the backdrop of breathtaking green mountains and terraced fields in every direction, these vibrant sons and daughters of the countryside looked indistinguishable from urban kids. The student talent show that evening exhibited the unmistakable influences of TV variety programmes and music videos. After expenses, the school's first alumni fund drive raised about 200,000 yuan (US\$25,031), which Ren deemed a good start.

*Judy Polumbaum teaches journalism at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, the United States*

# Making our children ill with unrealizable dreams

By George Monbiot

**LONDON:** If we were Iraq, or Somalia or Chechnya, the trend would not be difficult to understand. But this is Britain, during the longest period of domestic peace and prosperity in modern history. After 36 successive quarters of growth and low inflation, with high employment and a low chance of being murdered in your bed, we should be the happiest, calmest, least fearful people who have ever lived. But something has gone wrong. A report published last week by the British Medical Association (BMA) suggests that there has been a steady increase in mental health disorders

among children between 5 and 16 years old. Today, 9.6 per cent of them — very nearly one in 10 — suffer from psychological problems that are "persistent, severe and affect functioning on a day-to-day basis." Roughly "1.1 million children under the age of 18... would benefit from specialist services." I don't think it would be an exaggeration to describe this as a social catastrophe. What is going on? The BMA isn't sure. It suggests that diet may be a factor, in particular a possible deficiency of Omega 3 fatty acids. It notes that while there has been no increase in the number of 11- to 15-year-olds who drink alcohol, consumption among those who do has doubled in 14 years. It found

that children living in poverty were much more likely to develop disorders than those with richer parents. But as child poverty is falling, you would expect this to mean that psychological problems were declining. The BMA also points to changing family lives. But another report on the same issue, published by the Nuffield Foundation in 2004, found that "marked changes in family type... were not the main reason for rising trends in behaviour problems." The same study contains one of the most arresting statements I have ever read: "Rises in mental health problems seem to be associated with improvements in economic conditions." As our GDP increases, we

become more disturbed. Among other possible causes, it blames rising pressures at school, changing relationships with other children, and a decline in the limits and rules set by parents. But all these, it admits, are "untested hypotheses." As anyone's guess is as good as anyone else's, I feel justified in hazarding one of my own. I accept that this is a complex problem, and that there are doubtless many causes. But I propose that one of them is Willy Loman syndrome. Loman is the hero of Arthur Miller's play "Death of a Salesman." He is torn apart by the gulf between his expectations — the promise held out to everyone of fame and fortune — and reality.

Even as his modest powers decline and his career falls apart, he believes that he can still be No 1. This used to be called the American dream. Now it is everyone's nightmare. A survey published in April by the economist Tom Hertz showed that the United States has one of the lowest levels of intergenerational mobility in the rich world. A child born into a poor family has a 1 per cent chance of growing up to become one of the richest 5 per cent, while a child born into a wealthy family has a 22 per cent chance. Hertz noted that "among high-income countries for which comparable estimates are available, only the United Kingdom had

a lower rate of mobility than the United States." In April the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a study showing that UK citizens in their 30s today are twice as likely to be stuck in the same economic class as their parents than people born 10 years earlier. Here too, declining mobility is accompanied by rising expectations. In January, the Learning and Skills Council found that 16 per cent of the teenagers it interviewed believed they would become famous, probably by appearing on a TV show like "Big Brother." Many of them saw this as a better prospect than obtaining qualifications; 11 per cent of them, it found, were "sitting

around 'waiting to be discovered'." And this is surely how much of our economy now works. A vast industry is devoted to selling people images of themselves that bear no relation to reality. The most obvious of these (this is hardly an original point) is the celebration of extreme thinness just as childhood obesity becomes an epidemic. The gulf between what we are told we should be and what we are is growing. As children's expectations lose contact with reality, they are torn between their inner lives of fame and fortune and the humdrum reality their minds no longer inhabit.

*The Guardian*

## CROSSWORD 8109

- ACROSS
- 1 - chance
- 4 Just fine
- 8 Catch a glimpse
- 12 Admirer's response
- 13 Up to the task
- 14 Post-workout feeling
- 15 Spooky noise
- 17 Big black dogs
- 19 Currently popular
- 20 Got two fives for --?
- 21 More open
- 23 Refrain syllable
- 24 Most docile
- 26 Peculiar
- 29 Neap and ebb
- 30 Roulette color
- 31 Diamond-like gem
- 33 Over-refined
- 35 King beaters
- 36 Prime invitees (hyph.)
- 37 "Snow" veggie
- 38 Costumes
- 40 Sundial numeral
- 42 Scripts, mostly
- 44 Declare
- 46 Pitcher - Young
- 48 Cello kin
- 49 Catch
- 50 Mystique
- 52 Thud
- 54 Country lodging
- 55 Scheme
- 56 Como - usted?
- 57 Peggy or Brenda
- DOWN
- 1 The "f" in f-stop
- 2 Heart outlet
- 3 Quaker pronoun
- 4 Symbol of might
- 5 PC capacity
- 6 Joins forces
- 7 Birthday count
- 8 Move gingerly
- 9 Dixie st.
- 10 Honour society letter
- 11 Itch
- 16 Silly tricks

## BRIDGE

By Phillip Alder

Thorstein Veblen, a Norwegian-American economist and sociologist, rearranged a well-known adage to produce "invention is the mother of necessity." But who originally pointed out that necessity is the mother of invention? At the bridge table, it can be necessary to "invent" a bid or play. This deal features two opportunities for "inventions." First, look at the South hand. Your partner opens one diamond, you respond one heart, and he rebids two clubs. What would you do now? Look at the North hand as well. Ignoring the East-West distribution, in which final contract would you like to land? Finally, you are South, the declarer in six hearts. West leads the spade king. Invent a line of play. When you have game-forcing values but do not know the right strain, wheel out fourth-

## Solution to No 8108

F	A	R	R	O	A	M	D	R	E	W
A	X	E	E	D	G	E	I	O	T	A
C	O	I	F	F	E	R	S	T	A	N
E	N	N	U	I	A	V	E	I	C	
	N	T	H		E	S	S	A		
P	A	I	D	A	M	O	K	A	W	E
A	L	M	S	H	A	G	B	R	A	N
C	A	P	C	A	L	L	L	A	I	S
E	N	S	U	E		E	T	E		
	L	E	E	K		H	E	A	V	E
R	U	S	T	R	E	T	O	P	P	E
A	G	A	R	M	E	A	L	E	R	A
W	H	O	A	A	L	E	E	D	A	M

**Chaoyang Theatre**  
Acrobatics Macrocosm  
www.bjcyj.com

Chaoyang Theatre specializes in acrobatics all the year round. Top acrobatic artists from all over the country exhibit the charm and elegance of the acrobatic art with uncanny speed, power and agility. The thrilling 75-minute show, including cycling, balancing, hoop diving, diabolo playing and lion dancing, will amaze you at every turn.

**Time for acrobatics:**  
5:15-6:15 pm, 7:15-8:30 pm, nightly  
Small Hall of Chaoyang Theatre  
Magic Shows: 6:00-7:00 pm, 8:40-9:40 pm  
Peking Opera: 7:20-8:20 pm

地址: 朝阳区东三环北路36号 (广中心东北100米)  
Tel: 86-10-65072421, 65060838, 65068116, 65060837  
Prices: 180, 280, 380 yuan

Venue: Chaoyang Theatre, 36 Dongsanhuan Beilu, Chaoyang District, Beijing

**BRIDGE** BY PHILLIP ALDER

Thorstein Veblen, a Norwegian-American economist and sociologist, rearranged a well-known adage to produce "invention is the mother of necessity." But who originally pointed out that necessity is the mother of invention? At the bridge table, it can be necessary to "invent" a bid or play. This deal features two opportunities for "inventions." First, look at the South hand. Your partner opens one diamond, you respond one heart, and he rebids two clubs. What would you do now? Look at the North hand as well. Ignoring the East-West distribution, in which final contract would you like to land? Finally, you are South, the declarer in six hearts. West leads the spade king. Invent a line of play. When you have game-forcing values but do not know the right strain, wheel out fourth-

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12			13				14			
15		16		17		18		19		
20			21			22		23		24
25		26		27		28		29		30
31	32				33	34				
35					36					
37			38	39				40	41	
42	43						44	45		
46	47		48				49			
50		51		52		53		54		
55				56				57		

- 18 Drill attachment
- 21 Solemn assent
- 22 Perch
- 25 Uproar
- 27 Put down, slangily
- 28 Boring
- 29 Escalator part
- 30 Sentra maker
- 31 Channel-surf
- 32 Luge surface
- 33 Worm-out horse
- 34 Jag
- 36 Coral islands
- 38 Moo goo - pan
- 39 Wed on the run
- 40 Father of sci-fi
- 41 Peace goddess
- 43 Dreaded czar
- 45 Colorado ski town
- 46 Mortarboard
- 47 "Futureworld" name
- 49 Exercise place
- 51 Nile god
- 53 Extra hrs.

North	.....		
♠	—		
♥	7 6 4		
♦	A Q J 6 5 2		
♣	A J 9 6		
West	East		
♠ K Q J 9	♠ A 8 5 3 2		
♥ J 9 8 5	♥ 3		
♦ 9 4	♦ 8 7		
♣ Q 8 2	♣ K 10 7 5 3		
South	.....		
♠	10 7 6 4		
♥	A K Q 10 2		
♦	K 10 3		
♣	4		
Dealer: North			
Vulnerable: East-West			
South	West	North	East
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
??		2♣	Pass
Opening lead: ♠ K			