

Escape From Ruoli

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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The town of Ruoli in Jingyuan County has little in the way of natural scenery or anything else to attract tourists. What it does have is a lot of land that is too dry to do much good. The town is infamous for its dryness and poverty, even in a dry, poor province like Gansu.

The townspeople are willing to do anything to stay and make a living. They walk the hills for miles to fetch water from far-off wells. Some residents have water cisterns, some of which Tzu Chi built for them for free, to store water from occasional rains and snow. At best, the wells and cisterns may satisfy the needs of people, but nobody can fetch or store enough water to change the parched land back to what it was just five decades ago, when hills and valleys as far as the eye could see were covered with grass which grew as tall as a man's chest, nurtured by plentiful rains.

Since their land no longer supports them, many people are packing up and leaving for greener pastures.

"I was born here among these hills and mountains, but they have never provided for me," Zhang Kebo (张柯波) said about his hometown, Ruoli. His voice, though calm, betrayed his sadness.

His schooling ended after fifth grade, and he started farming. When he was of age, he married and started his own family. He quickly realized that no matter how hard he worked, the harvest from the family's land could not even put enough food on the table for his three growing children, much less fund their education. He knew that if things remained the way they were, his children would end up with a hard life just like his own, a prospect that he dreaded.



"For me, the only way out is to work in the cities down below," Zhang said. Therefore he took a leap of faith and went to the nearby city of Baiyin, believing that he could work there toward a better future for his family.

Like most youngsters from Ruoli, Zhang had no marketable skills. Therefore he could only do unskilled work as a laborer that paid 12 renminbi (US\$1.76) a day. About his own cheap labor, he said, "That was very hard, but at least the pay kept coming in." He lived in a makeshift shed and ate simply so that he could save every dime for his family in the mountains. This went on until his three children were all in school. He put them up with a relative, thus freeing his wife to work with him as well.

Once every three months, the couple would go home with the money they had saved. They would spend a happy time with their children, but only for three days. Then it would be time for

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them to leave the kids and return to work—undoubtedly the hardest time for the family. But the children would not show any visible signs of distress at seeing their parents off, notwithstanding their disappointment and sadness. They knew why their mom and pop had to leave.

The children's understanding broke Zhang's heart. Then their oldest son quit school, and he would not say why. Zhang knew that it was not because school was too hard for him because he had always been a top student. The young one just wanted to leave school so he could work and help his parents save for a house in the city where the whole family could live together.

Six years after he had started working in the city, Zhang felt comfortable moving his family there. He said to me, "I literally fled Ruoli with my whole family." Fled? He confirmed his choice of this word with a question: "If you desperately wanted to get out of a place that offered you no hope, wouldn't you say flee?"



A thriving land gone bad

Pottery dating to the Stone Age was unearthed by farmers in Ruoli, as were forts from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Civilization and human activity were evident even back then, but one might wonder why people chose such a dry place as Ruoli. Jin Zihe (靳子合), 55, may shed some light on this puzzle. He recalled what his father had told him about Ruoli in the middle of the last century: "The rainfall was plentiful, the soil rich. The mountains and valleys were densely covered in green plants, some as tall as your chest. One year's harvest would feed people for ten years!" The town was so desirable that parents in the lowlands sought out Ruoli men to take their daughters as brides, knowing that their girls would never go hungry there.

Spread over 433 square kilometers (167 square miles), Ruoli in its heyday boasted more than 30,000 inhabitants. If the farmland in the town had been evenly divided, each household would have gotten about six acres. That much land, based on Jin Zihe's description, would have been big enough to provide for any family. Sadly, this is no longer the case.

Since the 1970s, rainfall has been decreasing in the area. Now Ruoli gets about 240 millimeters (9.5 inches) of rain each year. But for every drop of water Ruoli gets from rain or snow, it loses 7.5 drops to evaporation (71 inches a year), making water shortages more critical year after year. No land can withstand this level of water overdraft for long. Crops have suffered, and local agriculture has been forced to adapt to the new harsh reality. Now peas, kidney beans, corn, and wheat are planted in place of earlier crops that demanded more water. Sadly, even these supposedly drought-tolerant varieties are limping along—barely.

Water is so precious and so hard to come by that it is not at all a stretch to say that it has become as valuable as gasoline. Farmers cherish water dearly as evidenced by the way they tend to their crops: To cut down on evaporation, they cover their fields with plastic sheets with small openings through which plants grow, and they deliver water to those openings with pinpoint accuracy—all to ensure that the plants get as much water as possible.

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The land, however, has not reciprocated the painstaking efforts of the Ruoli farmers. Yields, in fact, have been progressively worsening. Farmers used to be able to get a hundred kilograms (220 pounds) of wheat per mu (one sixth of an acre). “Now they jump with joy if they can reap just 25 kilograms,” Zhang Kebo lamented. In comparison, farmers elsewhere get 300 kilograms from fields richer in precipitation.

Dry wells and empty cisterns



Farmers in Ruoli attribute declining rainfalls in the area to fate; “global warming” is much too complicated a term to enter local vocabulary.

Rain has gotten so scarce that even the well and cistern systems that local people have relied on over the years have fallen short.

Ma Zongju (马宗聚) recalled that they used to have a few wells in this vast town. Fetching water from wells could take several hours each day. Though not much—baths were out of the question—and not very convenient—the mud in the water had to settle before the water could be used—well water has helped local people survive for some time. But even this source of water has become unusable due to the severely reduced rainfall.

Dry wells led to greater reliance on cisterns, tanks or holes that people had dug in the ground to store water. The cisterns got water not from underground springs but from rain or snow which villagers had to put into the cistern one bucketful after another. Water could also be channeled into cisterns from surrounding water collection devices. Ma Zongju had three cisterns which he used to store rainwater in summer and snow in winter. “If we diligently put rain or snow in, we could have enough drinking water to last my family all year round,” Ma said.

But declining rainfalls and snowfalls gradually rendered even the cistern system less and less useful. The six-year drought that started in 2003 emptied just about all the cisterns in Ruoli. Lei Kai (雷凯), deputy town administrator, said that he would always remember the day he took office in 2006: “Every cistern I checked was bone dry right to the bottom.”



The government tried hauling water up for the town, and separately some people did the same with their own money. But it took at least two hours each way for a water truck to reach Ruoli. The cost of transport made this arrangement non-sustainable.

The government noticed how uninhabitable Ruoli had become and encouraged residents to relocate to lower lands by offering them farmland and building materials for their new homes there. Villagers responded; sometimes a single household would move down, and sometimes

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20 to 30 families moved together, testimony to how hard living up in the mountains must have been. Now the town has about 14,000 people, down from more than 30,000 at its height.

The exodus has been massive and rapid. Gu Bingbo (郭兵波) noticed the marked difference between now and 2007, when he first started visiting Ruoli as a Tzu Chi representative overseeing cistern-building projects that the foundation was underwriting. Generally, cisterns have proven very effective in lifting people in Gansu Province out of the misery of water deprivation, but they have been largely futile at Ruoli. As Gu walked around the villages in the area, he noticed that one village had four families remaining and another had just one—an old man with his grandson.

Life in Ruoli is hard. Why is anyone still there? Some people are probably too old to move, and some younger people are staying to care for the old.

For those who are staying, the government is building a new road down the mountains to make transportation easier. For those who have moved out, the government is providing assistance to help them settle down. Tzu Chi has chipped in too—by building a new village for 210 households.

Though it is never easy for people to pick up and leave their homes, it is time that they look ahead and work for a better tomorrow in a new homeland.

※ [Tzu Chi Laiyao Village](#) ※ [Drought in Gansu](#)

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