

Tzu Chi Laiyao Village

Written by Tu Xin-yi

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Nine out of ten residents in Liuchuan are outsiders that have moved in from out of town. The main draw of the town for so many has been the availability of water, the abundance of which allows an acre of farmland to produce more than seven times what can be produced in an equivalent area of dry land elsewhere. One transplant in the town summed up the general attitude of residents: “At Liuchuan, every effort can be turned into money!”

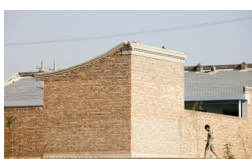
In 2007, Zhang Shuqin (张淑琴) and her family had a new cistern installed in front of their home in Ruoli, Jingyuan County, Gansu Province. The cistern was part of a Tzu Chi project to help the population in Gansu meet their demand for water. Tzu Chi had plans to build over 8,000 cisterns near residences over the next four years in Jingyuan County alone.

With the new cistern, Shuqin and her family were supposed to be able to save the miles that they would otherwise have had to walk each day to fetch water. A 30 cubic-meter water tank, even only half full, could last the family over a year. The Zhang family was overjoyed to have the cistern so handy.

Unfortunately, Ruoli—always short on water anyway—was experiencing a particularly long dry spell. There just wasn't enough water to fill the cisterns in town. Families and individuals who had the financial means moved away. “Before long, the village was almost devoid of the noise of children. Entire neighborhoods stood empty,” Shuqin said. “We stayed though. Mom had previously borrowed money just to pay my tuition; we simply didn't have the money to buy land and a house down in the lowlands.”

The Tzu Chi cistern-building project at Jingyuan, like those in five other counties in Gansu, was generally considered a success. Just a few good rains a year can fill the cisterns enough to last their owners through the year. “Many families here live an easier life now that they have the cisterns near their homes,” said Zhang Wen-lang (张 Wen-lang), a Tzu Chi volunteer involved with the project. “The one marked exception to that success has been Ruoli, where the extremely low precipitation and huge water evaporation renders even cisterns futile.”

Once Tzu Chi volunteers realized the inadequacy of the cisterns in Ruoli, they quickly developed a solution. The foundation decided in March 2008 to build a new village and relocate 210 needy households, a total of 1,050 people (about seven percent of the residents), out of Ruoli. The new village is located in Liuchuan, about two hours by car to the northwest.



Liuchuan, the giving land

August is a busy time of year in Liuchuan. More farm produce changes hands than in any other month.

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In a bustling wholesale market, sacks of onions are stacked up high as farmers and their hired hands continue to fill sack after sack with the pungent vegetable. They are expecting buyers from neighboring provinces like Qinghai and Xinjiang, and even from as far away as Guangxi. They are also expecting better prices for their onions this season: at least 74 fen a kilogram (five US cents a pound). An average harvest yields a farmer 8,000 kilograms of onions per mu (a sixth of an acre), which translates into about six thousand renminbi (US\$880). That amount is quite a respectable income for this area.

Potatoes and tomatoes are also major crops that farmers in Liuchuan sell to other locales. Grinning from ear to ear, farmer Zhang Mingqin (张明勤) had just sold a truckload of onions. He commented, “None of these crops are native to the area; they’re all transplants.” Then he tilted his head and smiled as he continued: “In that case, aren’t I just like my crops? I’m a transplant too.” Originally from Caoxian, Zhang moved to Liuchuan 15 years ago.

In fact, transplants are common in Liuchuan. Nine out of ten of its 31,000 residents are immigrants—mostly the result of a government policy initiated 20 years ago that encouraged people to move out of perpetually dry areas. The households that took up the offer back then were each granted a one-acre plot.

The government program sounded very good to Ma Shenghui (马生辉) of Ruoli. When he broached the idea to his mother, however, he got a stern admonishment: “You can hardly feed your family of five here with six acres; you want to trade that for a single acre down there? You’re sure to starve!” She talked as if her son was off his rocker.



Ma knew that he wasn’t crazy, and he knew that one irrigated acre would yield more than his seven parched acres ever could. Soon thereafter, he took up the government’s offer and moved with his wife and kids to Liuchuan. They were penniless on the day they moved—the only things of value he and his wife owned were two sacks of wheat in each hand. They improvised a shed to live in with some plastic sheets. It had no windows and no door. Ma’s mother stayed at Ruoli with her two other sons, who three years later also moved to Liuchuan. The matriarch moved with them this time.

Today, Ma and his wife live in a reinforced concrete house, have put their three daughters through college, and have picked up some more acreage along the way. Their farming income is further boosted by their daughters’ salaries; the whole family takes in more than 100,000 renminbi a year. If they had not moved away from Ruoli, their household income would have been, according to government figures, a mere 1,300 renminbi.

“I estimate that I’ll be able to buy a car in a few years,” Ma said, with confidence in his voice. “At Liuchuan, every effort can be turned into money!”

What makes Liuchuan tick?

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Like most towns around, Liuchuan was once very dry, so dry that many residents lived on food rations from the government. Life was very hard back then. Because of the harsh living conditions, Liuchuan was sparsely populated: Fewer than 4,000 people inhabited the geographically vast town of 422 square kilometers (163 square miles).

One of the town's native sons, Shi Zhendong (石震东), remembered his younger days: "Two hundred years ago, my ancestors moved here to escape a famine in Shanxi Province. I often wonder why they didn't pick a better place." Shi hummed a Liuchuan folksong to flesh out his gloomy description of the town in the old days: "Hills bald as a monk/Water dear as gasoline/One harvest in ten plantings/Sandstorms knock down cows."

But all that changed when the Chinese government and the United Nations provided funds for an irrigation system to be built for the town. In 1975, an aqueduct to channel water from the Yellow River 20 miles away was constructed. Liuchuan was chosen over other towns because of its flat terrain.



After the aqueduct was built, the government started offering land and other incentives to entice people to relocate to the town. Immigrants flocked in.

The abundant water from the great river has since transformed Liuchuan into a prosperous oasis. Newcomers can choose to plant wheat and potatoes, the same as they used to plant back home in the arid highlands. The difference is that the abundance of water results in much higher yields. If the newcomers want to try something new, they can plant tomatoes or peaches. Some have ventured into livestock husbandry. Residents can even find work in the nearby cities of Baiyin and Jingyuan, two of the largest cities around.

The immigration policy got off to a really good start, and so the Jingyuan county government kept the policy in place. Since then, over 20,000 people have moved into Liuchuan.

The success of the government incentive program eventually forced its modification. As more people moved in, there was less land left available for newcomers. The government had no choice but to ease off on the incentives. The earliest immigrant households received an acre of land with ready access to irrigation water as well as timber for building houses. Those arriving later could claim the same size and type of land, but not the timber. The most recent immigrants have to pay out of their own pockets to purchase land, and even those plots are not so desirable.

Ma Shenghui observed, "Now the only available land is far from aqueduct hookups. Land-owners must pay quite a lot just to get water from the aqueduct to their plots of land."

The result of this is that now many people who want to move to Liuchuan cannot afford to do so. And if they cannot move to Liuchuan, then they have to stay where they are, leading

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miserable lives in their dry, harsh homes in the highlands. Even cisterns cannot help them there. But in March 2008, Tzu Chi came to the rescue with plans to build the new Tzu Chi Laiyao Village in Liuchuan. Volunteers identified 210 families from Ruoli that they would help relocate to the new village.



Tzu Chi Laiyao Village

According to the current government policy, new immigrants to Liuchuan could no longer receive free land. Without land to farm, those 210 poor families would face almost insurmountable odds of succeeding in their transition. Therefore, Tzu Chi petitioned the government for a special grant of free farmland for the village residents. The authorities graciously agreed and allotted about 230 acres in two tracts, which were further divided into one-acre lots, one for each village household. Tzu Chi helped lay all the necessary pipes to channel water to individual lots.

In all, each household in the new village received a house on a lot of about one tenth acre, farmland of about an acre, and a pipeline to supply the farm and the homestead with water. Each house came with a pen for livestock, a methane pit for collecting human and animal waste, and a yard. All of this was without charge.

Such a large project involved and required the cooperation of many government agencies, dealing with water resources, utilities, agriculture, transportation, and education. To facilitate the work, the government established a new agency called the Tzu Chi Projects Office to coordinate. In addition to the construction of the village, the office handles all Tzu Chi projects in Gansu, from the new construction of cisterns or schools to simple maintenance projects.

Wang Yi (王毅) has headed the office since its inception and was the point man in overseeing the construction of the Tzu Chi village. A stickler for quality, he discussed and considered all aspects of the village project, including potential village sites, resident safety, and training for new agricultural techniques that would be needed by residents. He is very mindful of how he discharges the responsibilities of his office.

Wang said that his team passed on the first potential village site because a high-voltage power line passed through it. The second potential site was skipped because it was too low-lying and had an inherently higher risk of flooding. The site that was eventually selected had none of those problems and, more importantly, was right beside national route 109, making commuting much more convenient for work or school in nearby cities, including Jing-yuan (10 miles), Baiyin (20 miles), and Lanzhou (the capital of Gansu, 45 miles). Route 109 would also bring travelers, and therefore business, to town.

Wang was very confident in and proud of the houses in the new village, which were built with quality materials and workmanship. He pointed out that his team had sent the village design

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diagrams back to the drawing board for improvement more times than they could remember. The houses were again redesigned following the great earthquake in Sichuan on May 12, 2008. Wang commented, “We thickened each wall by 12 centimeters [5 inches], and we added cross braces and columns for extra resistance to earthquakes.” Even the bricks for the homes were unloaded off the trucks by hand, to avoid chipped or broken corners.



To acclimate villagers to their new homes and new agricultural practices, the Tzu Chi Projects Office conducted workshops in Ruoli before the move. The new fields required farming skills starkly different from the traditional farming methods needed for the large, dry farms in the mountains. The immigrants were trained how to farm in fields that would be waterlogged or even water-filled, how to fertilize and weed, and how to farm a much smaller plot.

Happy residents

Wang Chengqiao (王成桥) was one of the earliest to move to the new village in 2008, when only a few units were completed. The advance training he received before he moved enabled him to do very well with his new field of kidney beans. “The land down here is indeed different from that in the highlands. My harvest here is several times greater than what I was able to eke out up there,” Wang said, referring to his field in the mountains of Ruoli.

He was happy for another reason: The house was far superior to what he had imagined. “I wouldn’t be able to afford the house that Tzu Chi gave me even if I toiled for eight lifetimes straight.” Tapping his knuckles on a wall of his house, he said with a smile, “See, it is so strong and beautiful.”

At a small eatery just a stone’s throw from the Tzu Chi village, Zhang Qiaomei (张巧妹) wiped her hands on a towel and took a break following the busy lunch-hour rush. “Sure, this is tiring, but I’m glad I can keep busy,” she said of her work tending her little eatery. Qiaomei had also moved to Liuchuan from Ruoli, where she alone had tended 7 acres of fields while her husband had worked and lived out of town. Back then, he could only go home and see his family once every four months because Ruoli was simply too far out of the way. As much as she would have liked to keep him at home, they could not afford to do so. Her family had needed his income just to survive.



“But since we moved down here to Liuchuan, my husband has been able to come home once a week,” Qiaomei said happily. She walked to the front of her store, pointed at route 109, and said, “This highway makes commuting possible, and it also brings customers to my store.”

In another village household, Zhang Shuqin, a rising 12th grader, loves the plentiful natural light

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in her new home. Her old mud home in Ruoli was always dark inside, even on the sunniest days. To get some light, Shuqin usually took a desk out to the courtyard and did her homework in the sweltering heat. When it was too cold to work outside, she pulled her desk indoors next to one of the two small windows. The poor lighting in her old house hindered her studies. But those problems are memories now.



For Shuqin, another advantage of moving to Liuchuan is that now she has more time to do her homework. In the mountains, she had to help her family farm seven acres, which inevitably took time away from her studies. In Liuchuan, her mother is able to farm their acre lot by herself, freeing her older brothers to work out of town and Shuqin to focus on her school work. As the family finances and her school work improve, she is no longer the girl who dared not dream about a future outside her withering native land. “I want to get in a good school,” she said confidently. “I want to see how big the outside world is.”

Compared with what they had up in Ruoli, these contented transplants seem to be prospering in their own way in their new homeland, just as the government and Tzu Chi intended. The town of Liuchuan is also poised for further development: It has recently been incorporated into the Lanzhou-Baiyin economic zone and has been designated an industrial zone. The town will need a larger labor force to support the expected boom, and the infusion of Tzu Chi village residents seems to have come at just the right time. It is good for the town, and it is good for the residents, new and old.

- ※ [Escape From Ruoli](#)
- ※ [Drought in Gansu](#)

Source: [Tzu Chi Quarterly](#) Winter 2010