

**International Symposium on Poverty Alleviation
Through Distance Education and Summer Service Learning**
Tsinghua University, Beijing
November 14-16, 2007

Opening Speech by Madam Wu Qidi, China's Vice Minister of Education

Honorable Guests, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good morning! I am happy to welcome you to this inaugural symposium on poverty alleviation, distance education and service learning. On behalf of China's Ministry of Education, I extend our hearty congratulations for this timely symposium; and I offer my sincere greetings to all the participants, those who come from many parts of China and those who come from all over the world.

Today's symposium focuses on two topics and their relationship to each other: "Poverty Alleviation through Distance Education" and "College Students' Service Learning Program."

First, I would like to discuss how to develop a program on distance education applicable to China's educational needs. And I hope, through mutual cooperation and united efforts, we can find a way for distance education to strengthen higher education's social services function by providing an effective model for people in our poverty stricken areas to harmoniously share the best of China's educational resources.

Like many other countries, China's distance education has evolved through three phases, i.e., correspondence education, radio/TV education, and Internet education. It has experienced several big developments that yielded large advances in educational outcomes. With the recent increases in of internet usage, the scale of Chinese distance education has grown significantly and the results are quite impressive. It has not only created a powerful impact on the rapid development of advanced educational technologies, but it has also popularized education for many people in new areas. China's domestic education is quietly undergoing transformational changes because distance education is changing its direction: from simply getting higher education degrees toward developing lifelong learning systems and for a lifelong learning society. The education content and levels are becoming more multi-purposed: while education techniques are becoming more academicl and practical, education administration is becoming more standardized.

The Chinese government places high importance on the strategic development of distance education. The recently concluded 17th People's Congress of the Chinese Communist Party precisely pointed out that we must further develop distance education and continuing education, to construct plans for building lifelong learning systems for the entire population, and to develop a learning-based society.

China's Ministry of Education has always actively explored innovative ways to develop accessible distance learning models that benefit the whole society. We have carried out "Higher Education with Modern Distance Learning Pilot Projects", "Farming Communities Middle and Elementary Schools Modernized Distance Education", "Coalition of Farming Techniques and Education Network", "Farming Party Members' Modernized Distance Education" and "One Village, One College Student Plan". We obtained great results through each of these projects.

Today, we are very happy to see that new innovative programs are advancing China's distance education capabilities. Tsinghua University's current "Distance Education for Poverty Alleviation", and "Distance Education for Business Training", which is not discussed in this symposium, offer the most promising beneficial results for exploration and experiment.

Tsinghua is my alma mater, and it is China's first and foremost university to develop modernized distance education. As a result, it has accumulated lots of experience. During the past 5 years, Tsinghua's distance education programs have not only deeply penetrated into urban communities, businesses, schools, militaries, and homes, but they have also entered into a broad range of rural farming villages. Using the combined advantages in its educational expertise and its technology strength, Tsinghua is reaching new poverty stricken areas and developing distance education systems for poverty alleviation work. Tsinghua is exploring a methodology for poverty alleviation through distance education that is large scaled, sustainable, with practical results, and easily replicable.

Tsinghua not only delivers its high quality education training resources directly to the most needy populations in the poorest areas, it also sets the pace for an excellent trend among China's higher education institutions by demonstrating the collegial spirit of caring for society and raising the awareness of social responsibility to alleviate poverty. In only four and half years, Tsinghua provided more than 200+ modern distance education receiving facilities to China's poorest counties for their free usage. During the same time, Tsinghua provided free training courses for the local middle and elementary schools teachers and students, county officials, farming technicians, medical and health staff, as well as ordinary farmers. So far more than 450,000 people have directly benefited. This importance work will be continued by the expansion of in-depth content materials, as well as expanding the coverage of more e-learning locations.

Tsinghua is continuously working to establish an easy, accessible and convenient learning platform that provides an information highway for Tsinghua to share its educational resources with China's poorest people living in rural areas. Working toward the fundamental objective of alleviating material poverty, Tsinghua is developing educational poverty alleviation methods to improve the quality of life for poor people, to strengthen their abilities for self-development and sustainability. I think these explorations are a fundamentally great ways to improve the entire Chinese population. Tsinghua's exploration is the brightest spot of China's distance education, and a most important developing direction.

Chinese universities are rapidly moving toward modernization. While they all attempt to advance the dual functions of "teaching and research", Chinese universities must also emphasize "life-long service" as a third function of their mission. Tsinghua is working hard toward establishing a first rate world-class university that is "accessible, comprehensive and research based". At the same time, it is actively using modern distance education methods to alleviate poverty. High quality education and training resources from Tsinghua are now widely available to China's poorest areas, and the weaker groups in our society are learning to share them in harmonious ways. These important social achievements give new meaning to the term "education serves society". I sincerely hope more universities will adopt similar efforts and contribute to the "life long service" mission at their institutions.

Today's second topic is "Chinese College Students joining hands with American Students in Summer Service Learning Programs". When I was a student at Tsinghua, I greatly benefited from social service activities organized by Tsinghua and my life was greatly enriched by these experiences. Today, I am happy to see students at Tsinghua, my young and energetic brothers and sisters, enjoy broader opportunities and more wonderful programs. A university is a place for nurturing young talents. We must not only educate students to possess knowledge and skills, we must, first and foremost, help students understand how to be a good person; and a good person must understand how to contribute to society. This is why Summer Service Learning is such an important educational link for this purpose. Tsinghua pays great attention to students' service learning and Tsinghua successfully organizes and guides students to the rural area, to better understand the local society, to understand the perspectives and needs of poor farmers, and to provide appropriate educational resources.

This work is very meaningful. We can see why Tsinghua connected “distance education” and “summer services learning” together. In addition, they also connected Young Faculties Social Services, Students’ Work Organization, Teachers’ Union, Continuing Education College, International Coordination Office, and many other Tsinghua organizations. The wonderful result of these collaborations was the uniting of a whole university toward one common goal, and this achievement gained our leaders high approval.

Teachers and students participating in this social service program have gained training, developed abilities, entered society, served our country and mankind. Tsinghua’s education/poverty alleviation work, from the angle of “training students and strengthening teachers” has received very good results. Several Tsinghua’s teachers and students who have participated in these programs will share with you their harvest of thoughts during this symposium. I believe you will all see some special qualities of Chinese higher education reflected in their remarks.

I am also happy to see that Tsinghua’s Poverty Alleviation through Education program has built bridges of international communication and cooperation between Chinese and American colleges. More than 15 American colleges have participated through the support of Wang Foundation and the meticulous organization of Tsinghua. Already more than 150 American teachers and students, together with more than 700 Tsinghua’s teachers and students, have worked hand-in-hand in the rural areas in China.

During their service learning projects, Chinese and American teachers and students developed deep friendship and built a foundation for further cooperation. In the 2007 program they also included “Chinese Poverty Stricken Rural Area Population Problem Survey”. They not only studied the needs of the local societies, but also made many valuable suggestions to meet those needs. This method is very good and worthwhile to review and deepen. I believe the discoveries and thoughts of the Chinese and American are an extremely important contribution toward the analysis of the state of China and its decisions in making national policies. Their wisdom and hard work is a precious treasure of ours.

Today’s world is an open and interconnected world. China’s development cannot be separated from the rest of the world. Global development also needs China’s rapid progress. We have built, one after another, roads of communication and bridges of friendship throughout the world. Whether it is poverty alleviation through distance education and service learning, every university must broaden their world vision and strengthen international cooperation. Tsinghua’s poverty alleviation and work in distance education has already proven to be a most beneficial experiment. I truly hope this road traveled by Tsinghua will become even broader.

Here, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, I would like to thank Wang Foundation for their strategic plan, in collaboration with Tsinghua University, to engage American college students in this important endeavor, and for sponsoring this Symposium. Thanks to all the American colleges, international education organizations and friends, for actively participating and supporting this work and the Symposium. I also sincerely thank the Party Secretaries of Chinese State Council’s Poverty Alleviation Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Culture, Communist Party Youth Corp, and all domestic friends and Chinese Government Agencies for sharing our ideology, and for your support of China’s Ministry of Education.

This Symposium is very timely, very meaningful. Let us hope together that humankind will soon have a better, more harmonious world.

Lastly, may this Symposium be successful. I wish all our friends to enjoy good health during your Beijing stay. Happy work. Thank you.

