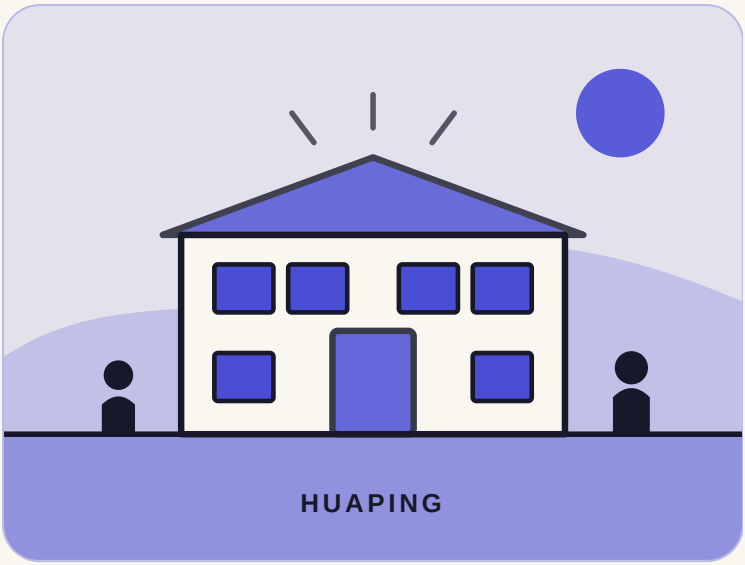

CHINA

The principal who switched on the lights

In a poor mountain county of China, Zhang Guimei built a free school for girls. Over 1,800 reached university.

WHERE	Huaping
WHO	Zhang Guimei, a teacher who founded a free high school for girls in Huaping, Yunnan
WHEN	1996 to 2020

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Zhang Guimei taught in Huaping, a poor mountain county in Yunnan, China. She kept noticing empty desks. Girls were vanishing from her school before they finished. When she asked why, she learned that some were forced to work and others were married young.

On one home visit, she met a 13-year-old girl by the road. The girl cried, “I want to study, I don’t want to marry.” Her parents wanted her to marry for a dowry of 30,000 yuan. Zhang offered to pay for her schooling. The girl’s mother threatened her, and Zhang gave up. She never saw the girl again.

> **A girl can influence the next three generations.**
>
> ZHANG GUIMEI, QUOTED BY CGTN

A school with no fees

Zhang decided to build a free high school for girls. Between 2002 and 2007, she asked for donations, but many people refused. She raised only about 10,000 yuan.

In 2007, a reporter at a national meeting in Beijing noticed her worn clothes and asked about her story. The news spread. Local governments gave her one

million yuan. In 2008, Huaping High School for Girls opened, with no tuition or housing fees.

1,804

girls from poor areas entered universities in 12 years, Xinhua reports

110,000

kilometres Zhang travelled to visit students' homes, reports say

100%

of the first graduating class passed the college entrance exam in 2011

Lights on at five

The school had 16 teachers and 90 students in its first year. It set no minimum grades. Any girl who wanted to study was welcome. The conditions were hard, and nine teachers quit within six months. Zhang and the others stayed.

Zhang is unwell, with arthritis and weak bones, CGTN reports. Still, she gets up around 5 a.m. to switch on the lights in the school. "Many girls are timid," she said. With the lights on, they feel safer coming to read.

One graduate, Zhou Yunli, became a teacher. When she heard her old school needed a maths teacher, she quit her job and came back. "Without the school, I would be nobody," she said.

How it unfolded

- **1996** Zhang begins teaching in Huaping County.
- **2007** A reporter hears her story. Local governments give her one million yuan.
- **2008** Huaping High School for Girls opens, free of charge.
- **2011** All of the first graduating class pass the college entrance exam.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

The school set no minimum grades. It started from the girl, not from her test scores.

Nearly all of the first graduates had failed the entrance exam the year before. Teaching and care made the difference.

OUR TAKE

Zhang Guimei refused to let poverty decide which girls stayed in school.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Turn regret into action

She could not save the 13-year-old girl, and she decided to build a school.

Try this: Think of one regret. Ask what you could build so it happens less.

2 Keep asking, even after “no”

She asked for donations for years and raised only about 10,000 yuan.

Try this: Make one more request this week for something you believe in.

3 Welcome people as they are

The school set no minimum grades. Any girl who wished to study was welcome.

Try this: Remove one barrier that keeps people from joining your group.

4 Small acts of care matter

She switched on the lights early so shy girls would feel safe.

Try this: Do one small thing today that helps someone feel safe.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Switching on a light early can tell a girl that she belongs.

Sources

CGTN (Xinhua feature)
Teacher helps 1,084 girls change their destiny (2020)

The World of Chinese
Education for Hope (2020)

Wikipedia
Zhang Guimei

Fact-check note: Most of what is written about Zhang Guimei in English comes from Chinese state media (Xinhua, CCTV, CGTN, China Daily) or repeats it, so the details could not be checked against independent reporting; the South China Morning Post page could not be opened (403). The three sources opened agree on the main story: a free girls' high school in Huaping founded by Zhang in 2008. Graduates: CGTN says 1,804 girls entered universities in the school's first 12 years (the same figure is in Wikipedia); The World of Chinese, in July 2020, says over 1,600; the story uses 1,804 and attributes it to Xinhua. Home visits: CGTN says she travelled more than 110,000 kilometres, helping at least 1,500 students; The World of Chinese says 110,000 kilometres to visit over 1,300 students; the story uses only the distance. The 13-year-old girl, the dowry of 30,000 yuan, the mother's threat and "I want to study, I don't want to marry" are from CGTN only. The collection of about 10,000 yuan between 2002 and 2007 is in Wikipedia and The World of Chinese. The 2007 meeting in Beijing: The World of Chinese says she had been elected to the National People's Congress, while Wikipedia says she was a delegate to a Communist Party congress; the story says only "a national meeting". The reporter who noticed her worn clothes, and the one million yuan from Lijiang and Huaping County, are in The World of Chinese (citing Xinhua) and Wikipedia. The opening year (16 teachers, 90 students, no minimum grades, nine teachers quitting within six months) is from The World of Chinese. The 100 percent pass rate of the first graduating class in 2011, and that nearly all of them had failed the exam the year before, are from CGTN. Her illness: CGTN names rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis; Wikipedia says 23 illnesses; the story says "arthritis and weak bones". Getting up at 5 a.m. to turn on the lights, and her words about timid girls, are from CGTN. Zhou Yunli's story and quote are from CGTN. The quote "A girl can influence the next three generations" is in CGTN and Wikipedia. We did not check later developments after 2020. The pin shows Huaping. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.