Hearts Poured Out —
Two Stories from China

by Dawn Yutzy Showalter

The Girls Are Crying in the Dorm

It was late evening and less than an hour remained until we needed to leave for the train station. The journey from our inland city of Luoyang to the coast would wind through eighteen hours of Chinese countryside. I reached into the kitchen cupboard for some bags of roasted nuts and seeds to munch as we traveled. After a night of sleep on our berths, hard-boiled eggs and crackers would stave off hunger for my sister and me until we could get lunch at our destination in Shanghai. Moving through my mental packing list, I selected several fresh blouses from the wardrobe shelf in our bedroom, found a sweater for the cool April evening, and prepared to change into my traveling clothes.

Someone knocked on the metal front door of our sixth floor apartment. “Dawn, some of your students are here to see you,” my husband, Jon, said in a low tone at the bedroom door, breaking into my focus on trip preparations. “Can you come out and talk to them?”

I gathered my bags and deposited them in the corner of the living room where two of my junior students sat waiting. Their faces were downcast, their mood subdued. I greeted them and, without much prompting, Maria and Eva began talking, apologizing that they had pulled me away from packing. “We are feeling terrible,” they said, “and the girls are crying in the dorm. Everyone is so worried about their exams but too exhausted to study. They are afraid they will not do well.”

It was an intense academic week in the English Department at the large university in central China where Jon and I were teaching. Many of our sophomores and juniors were preparing for a national exam required of English majors. Some of them had taken it the previous year but ended short of the required score. The daily grind of a full schedule of classes, homework assignments, and domestic chores in the dorm, in addition to studying for the exam, had taken its physical and emotional toll. The girls’ spirits were crumbling.

I talked with Maria and Eva about what they were facing and tried to understand its impact on them. Maria was the pride and joy of her parents, a serious student who had gone to great lengths to succeed academically. Even though the university required her to live in the dorm, she had secretly rented a room elsewhere in the city where she could study undisturbed, much to the chagrin of her classmates. When she was in high school, her older sister disappeared following a family conflict, and Maria and her parents lived for the next three years with the gnawing uncertainty of her sister’s status. Maria wanted desperately to please her parents by doing graduate studies and getting a respectable job. As was the case for so many of our stu-

Dawn’s classes often practiced speaking English in small groups. Here, Dawn answers questions on the finer points of the spoken language.
bring our weariness to him and find rest. I read the words of Psalm 62 which speak of God as a refuge and a fortress; we’re invited to pour out our hearts to him, cast off our heaviness, and rest! I requested their permission to pray, and kneeling between them, asked God to grant them and their distraught classmates his peace and calm.

**Looking up from prayer**, I caught Jon’s urgent signal from across the room. “Dawn, you really need to go or you’ll miss the train!”

I quickly hugged Maria and Eva, and they agreed to try to get some sleep, their lives seeming less dismal than when they had come. My sister and I grabbed our bags and dragged them down the six flights of stairs with the help of a friend who was waiting to accompany us to the train station. The past hour had been a whirlwind of packing and intense conversation. I sank into the back seat of the waiting taxi and stared numbly out the window into the night of our neighborhood. As we sped through the streets of Luoyang to meet our train, the plain-tive words of the students I had just left reverberated through my mind: “The girls are crying in the dorm...” I breathed another prayer as my heart reached out to them across the chilly April night.

**Who Will Listen?**

At the end of spring semester, I asked my junior English majors to write about their lives. In her autobiography, Maria described the painful memories surrounding her older sister’s disappearance from home. That stress, coupled with her father’s health problems and the national college entrance examination which loomed on the horizon during her senior year in high school, nearly drove her to emotional collapse. Four years later as a junior in the university, she still described herself as fragile when under pressure, but her thoughts were turning upward. “I’ve been struggling to get rid of the shadow,” she penned. “Now I believe in God. I know I’m still on the way.”

Days before we left China, Maria and Eva accepted my invitation to sit down and discuss what they had written. Maria described her desire to understand more about God and what it means to have a relationship with him. She had met an engineering student who was a believer and he had encouraged her to consider Jesus in her search for serenity. Another Christian had prayed for the insomnia and headaches which bothered her from time to time. She was open to what God might want to do in her life.

After Eva listened to her friend’s reflections, she added her own. Her parents had become believers in Jesus when a relative received physical healing through the prayers of Christians in her village. Eva had never really made a decision to personalize her parents’ choice, and now in her college years she was weighing the cost. She was interested in becoming a member of the Communist Party because of the vocational advantages that would give her. An informational meeting that she had attended on campus the previous week, however, had given her pause. A speaker there had declared that it was essential for Party members to believe in only one thing – the Party. Must she choose between being a follower of Jesus and a Party member? Maybe she could be both if she kept the believer part secret, she mused. She thought she knew of others in her village who had made that choice.

As we sat and talked, the night wore on. It was time to give Maria and Eva a blessing and to tell them a final good-bye. I embraced them both at the same time and they laid their weary heads on my shoulders. Their tears flowed. They had begun to trust me with their thoughts and feelings and now I would no longer be there. They couldn’t tell these things to their Chinese teachers, they said. “Who will we talk to? Who will listen?”

With an ache in my heart and tears in my own eyes, I could only trust that He who had begun a good work in them would bring it to completion.

Dawn Yutzy Showalter lived in Henan, the most populous province of China, with her husband, Jon, and their four children from August 2004 to July 2005. The names of the students in these stories have been changed.