

Just a small donation can build a small rural library and open kids' minds. In three years the Library Project has built 200 havens for little learners in China. Nancy Zhang checks out the story.



Children indulge themselves in the picture books from the Library Project, a rapidly growing national charity.

## Opening minds, a book at a time

**S**ometimes small steps can make a big impact. The Library Project, a rapidly growing national charity, is putting the small-step approach into action, supporting change through education one book at a time.

With small amounts ranging from 5,000 yuan (US\$732) to 8,000 yuan for each library, the project is building libraries in poor rural schools all over China with funds raised in affluent cities like Shanghai and Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.

Because each project is small and manageable, many libraries can be set up quickly and start making a direct impact straight away. Since humble beginnings in 2006, the charity has built 200 libraries in China, including 15 libraries in Sichuan Province where many schools were destroyed in the earthquake last year.

As the Chinese school term ends, there are plans to build another 30 libraries in the next two months. The project has also branched out to the rest of Asia with eight libraries in Vietnam and one in Pakistan.

"Libraries put children in the driver's seat of their education," says Tom Stader, founder of the Library Project. "Library books are different from textbooks. Kids may be inspired by the teachers in lessons and then explore their interests further in a library. With a library their imagination gets involved."

Many Shanghai companies, schools and organizations have taken up the cause.

This Friday the Maryland School of Business will hold a fund-raising event for the charity.

Increasingly the charity gets



Books are given out to children in poor rural areas thanks to the Library Project.

support from private parties to raise money through wine tastings, golf outings or local bars and restaurants events. Basic donations can buy up to 800 books for each library plus shelves, tables and chairs, and globes to supplement the children's learning. A major attraction, according to Stader, is that donors are linked to a specific library that they can visit, help out and see development through photos and newsletters.

Shanghai donors, for example, support over 20 libraries in neighboring Anhui Province.

As a development worker,

American Stader had traveled all over Asia working in women's issues, health and AIDS prevention, and education. Before settling in China, Stader had lived in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. But it was while working in Dalian, Liaoning Province, in 2006 as a teacher at an orphanage that he realized China was in most need, and stood to gain the most from education initiatives.

At the Dalian Orphanage there were basic facilities but nothing for fun or to stimulate the children's imagination. Stader and the other teachers decided to band together

to raise money for a library from more affluent private schools. From five local international schools they raised money to buy 3,000 books.

Soon friends and family got involved to raise funds for chairs and tables. The response was so good that Stader decided to set up a formal charity to organize and track donations.

Support for the charity, a registered Chinese non-governmental organization, has grown vitally with very little marketing, says Stader, "which is really amazing." Part of the reason is that volunteers and

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donors are all welcome to visit and help out at the schools. There they can witness how small changes and small amounts nevertheless make a very direct difference.

An example is the Si Qing Elementary School near Xi'an. The busy school had a tiny library and no room for expansion though enrollment was increasing. With the help of the Library Project in 2007, the school built bookshelves for each classroom where 500 new books could be kept, providing immediate access to books for the kids for many years to come.

This simple scenario is one that the Library Project is working hard to replicate many times over across the country.