

Be the Man Who Plants Trees

—Acceptance Speech at the Ceremony of the IBBY-iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award

Distinguished Congress President and Dear Friends:

I am very honored that IBBY has presented me with the first IBBY-iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award. I would like to extend my gratitude to IBBY, all the jury members of the Award and the iRead Foundation.

At such a moment, I am reminded of many things in the past, and many people. They are my teachers and relatives who led me to reading, and teachers, parents and children whose lives were changed because of reading. Because our time is limited, I will only share one story of a child with you.

In 2012, China Central Television (CCTV) held a contest called “Top Ten Teen Readers” to which I was invited. While I was in the lounge, the host introduced me a 12-year-old contestant whose name was Saifuding from Kuytun city, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China.

The host asked Saifuding, “Do you know this teacher?” The boy stared at me and said, “He is Mr. Zhu Yongxin.” I was very surprised because I had never seen him before. How could he know me?

The host was also very surprised so she asked Saifuding how he knew me. Although this was the first time he had come to Beijing, and standing in front of the cameras of China’s biggest TV station and a group of adults, Saifuding did not show a trace of stage fright. He said, “My school is a New Education Experiment school where many of Mr. Zhu's words about reading are quoted on posters with his photos on the walls. My parents are both illiterate. I couldn't speak Mandarin when I was at primary school. However, the ‘building a campus full of the fragrance of books’ campaign launched in my school requires and encourages us to read extensively and read good books. Therefore, I have read a lot of books and remembered the name of Mr. Zhu. Without reading, I would never have the chance to come to Beijing and become who I am today.”

In front of everyone, Saifuding said to me, “Mr. Zhu, you said that the history of a person’s spiritual development is reflected in one’s reading history. And I want to say that my reading history will change the history of my family and my country.”

That year, Saifuding from Xinjiang was awarded China's Top Ten Teen Reader. He is now a student who continues reading at Tianjin University of Finance and Economics in China.

The story of Saifuding is just one of many stories in more than 5,600 New Education Experiment schools in the past 20 years. In 2000, I launched the New Education Experiment. By “building a campus full of the fragrance of books”, and through the actions of promoting reading, we have made transformational changes to teachers and students across different regions.

Why did I launch the New Education Experiment? It was also because of a book I read.

When I served as Director of the Office of Academic Affairs at Soochow University in 1993, a time long before the New Education Experiment was launched, I started the Must-Read Books Program of Soochow University. In 1995, I organized a group of experts and scholars to curate China's first book list for primary and secondary school students.

However, it was not until 1999 when I read *The World According to Peter Drucker* that the idea of New Education Experiment came to mind. One day, when Drucker visited his teacher Schumpeter with his son, Schumpeter said to them, “At my age, I know that to have my name remembered by future generations, my books and theories alone are insufficient. They are of no significance unless they can change people’s lives.” Drucker as the author and I as the reader were both deeply overwhelmed by Schumpeter's words. That's why I launched the New Education Experiment and became deeply engaged in basic education and involved in the lives of more children, parents, and teachers.

I believe stories like these are happening in China as well as all over the world. I am sure many people must have read *The Man Who Planted Trees* by the renowned French author Jean Giono. The story took place in a desert in Provence. There was a middle-aged man who sowed one hundred carefully chosen seeds every day. In one year he planted more than 30,000 trees, and from these, one-tenth survived. Just like this, he planted trees for 30 years, from a middle-aged man to an old man, and finally the desert had turned into an oasis. People said that he had done something that only God can do.

Isn't reading like planting trees in one's mind? By planting beautiful books in our heart, our mind is nourished. In this way, even when we encounter setbacks and misfortunes like crossing a desert, we will have the power to become an oasis again.

Aren't reading promoters like people who plant trees for the mind? Let us plant good books in people's hearts. Even if only 10 percent of them survive, as long as we don't give up, we will eventually create a spiritual oasis.

Moreover, no one is alone on the road of reading promotion. In China, in IBBY and across the globe, there are countless reading promoters. Just like the man who planted trees, we keep sowing the seeds of good books and cultivating the seeds of reading.

We sow not only seeds, but also hope, strength, happiness and a future. Together with all of you, I would like to plant trees, plant books and work my very best in this field.

Zhu Yongxin

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