

Icafes in China

by Celia Hatton

The Internet has become a fact of daily life in so much of the world, that it is easy to forget many people have yet to become familiar with its uses. In rural China, where 70 percent of Chinese people live, many have never used a computer, much less accessed the Internet. Celia Hatton visited a tiny town where a local Internet cafe is introducing residents to the on-line world, one person at a time.

The remote town of Yuwang in Central China's Ningxia province is more than 550 kilometers from the bright lights of Beijing. This Muslim town has no major industry to speak of. Most people here are farmers, although dwindling water resources in the region are making that job harder each passing year.

The town has just two roads that intersect at the local mosque. At the center of that crossroad is something wholly unexpected: an Internet cafe.

On a Sunday night, this tiny room with eight computers is perhaps the busiest place in Yuwang. People are crouched on stools at each of the computers, but they take a lot of breaks to smoke and munch sunflower seeds, because the Internet connection here is slow. All eight of the cafe's computers are running on a single, shared phone line.

Owner Yang Xiuping opened the cafe a year ago with help from his brother, who works as a math teacher at the nearby school. He knows that he is unlikely to make much money from the cafe, but he seems to continue in the blind hope that the town's fortunes will eventually improve.

In the middle of the day, the establishment is nearly empty, but Mr. Yang says that as soon as school is out for the day, curious kids will begin to stop by.

"Kids are really interested in the computers here, but the concept is still spreading slowly," he said. "Most of my customers just want to play computer games, but at least the games are helping them to become more and more comfortable with computers."

Six-thousand families live in Yuwang, but Mr. Yang says that only three of those families have personal computers. Most of the people here are struggling just to afford the basics: food, heat and, in a desert area like this, clean water.

Even though it is a central part of his business, Mr. Yang is quick to admit that computers are not a priority in Yuwang.

"Most students can't afford to come here. After all, people here are poor," he said. "They have difficulty paying basic fees, so how can they have extra money to surf the Internet and play games?"

China's government is wary of the Internet. It censors web sites that are considered politically dangerous - such as ones that advocate democracy for the country, and ones it considers socially inappropriate - such as pornography sites.

Still, Beijing sees educational value in the Internet, and hopes that if computers can be made more accessible, people can use the Net as an economic tool.

Bai Qiyun directs the Chinese government's Rural Science and Technology Popularization Project in Beijing. The program encourages farmers in rural areas to log on to the Internet, often for the first time.

He says it is natural for people to be suspicious at first, but that soon changes once they realize that computers and the Internet can have practical applications.

"If you just bring computers into rural villages and leave them there, of course they are useless," he said. "But we have teams of people to demonstrate what they're for, to make the computers serve the families' demands. When they see how their practical problems can be solved, the Internet becomes very useful to them."

Video games are a popular pastime in Yuwang's small cafe, but development experts like Mr. Bai believe the Internet will not become a necessity in rural China until farmers grasp its practical uses.

They hope to teach farmers to surf the Web for vital information, including weather forecasts and the latest prices for agricultural products.

Experts in the field hope that eventually, the Internet will help rural farmers become wealthy enough that their children can use computers to send e-mail and play video games on a daily basis - just like children in China's rich coastal cities.