A deeper look at history
HUANG NAILI
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sarah Giddens vividly remembers walking into a so-called "rotten leg village" in Yiwu, China, where a headman led her group of Canadian teachers to the temple to meet people still suffering from the Japanese occupation of more than 60 years ago.

"As many people as possible squeezed into the temple to watch and bear witness. The victims sat at the front and gave us their testimony and showed their wounds," said Giddens. "In every case, all the villagers came out to listen and support their elders."

The never-healing wounds in their legs are believed to be the hideous after-effects of anthrax, a biological weapon unleashed by the Japanese occupiers as part of a series of atrocities all but forgotten in the West. Often, as they recorded the victims' stories — with pen and paper, tape recorders and video cameras — the 24 teachers found themselves crying along with the people they interviewed.

They came back determined to bring a more balanced view to how history is taught in Canadian high schools, and in September, Ontario's curriculum will reflect that — the first jurisdiction in the Western world to make the Asian experience in World War II part of a compulsory course, according to Joseph Wong.

What happened in Asia in the years 1931-1945 has never been part of the standard Canadian curriculum, said Wong, a Toronto physician and Canadian co-founder of ALPHA (Association for Learning and Preserving the History of World War II in Asia).

The change may owe something to Wong's organization, which raised money to send the history and social science teachers from Ontario and British Columbia on the "peace and reconciliation study tour" last summer.

"I can't believe anyone who isn't interested in it, because it's such a fascinating part of history that has not yet been explored in the English-speaking world," said Giddens, who teaches at Toronto's Jarvis Collegiate Institute.

The teachers visited Shanghai, where many residents died in Japanese bombings. They went to Nanking, then China's capital, where it's believed more than 360,000 people were massacred. They talked to survivors, all 70 to 90 years old, in three villages in Yiwu, a region in Zhejiang Province in eastern China. They also interviewed activists and lawyers who have worked to gain
redress for the victims.

It was "astonishing" to gain first-hand, eyewitness experience from survivors of the wartime events and bring that back to students in Toronto, Giddens said. She believes the teachers may have been the first people from the West ever to listen to the survivors' stories.

"The victims were so delighted that somebody was listening to them," Giddens said. "If you could imagine having a 13-inch-long open wound for 60 years and actually having some foreigners come listening to your story and believing you, and taking that testimony back and going on teaching it ..."

Back in Canada, the teachers wrote to the curriculum branch of the Ministry of Education, urging that the neglected history be included in a planned revision of the history and social studies curriculum, which sets out general guidelines for what students should learn in each course. A spokesperson for the ministry declined to comment on the effect of teachers' lobbying on the revision.

The teachers went on to share what they had learned at professional development seminars, to help colleagues become more confident about teaching the subject. They also compiled a resource guide and a website. With money raised by Toronto ALPHA, about 2,000 copies of the guide will be ready this month for use by history, social studies and law teachers in the province's secondary schools.

`The victims were so delighted that somebody was listening to them.'
Sarah Giddens, Toronto high school teacher

"Grade 10 history is compulsory, but the teachers have a big area to cover. So if the teachers themselves don't understand (it), they would not teach," Wong said. "What we are trying to do is to reach out to as many teachers as possible."

ALPHA, with help from teachers and volunteers, is also raising funds to send books and other materials to school libraries.

Wong's association, founded in 1997, works with nearly 30 like-minded groups around the world that are demanding a public and official apology from the Japanese government to aggrieved nations, and compensation for victims. Japan has been accused of distorting and whitewashing its war history. A recent controversy over the content of Japanese history textbooks led to widespread protests in China.

Wong said Ontario's curriculum category dubbed Canadian and World Studies has actually been more like "Canadian and Western World Studies.' In it, there was very little about the Eastern world, very little about Asia," despite the growing number of Canadians who are of Asian
Patricia O'Reilly, a former education officer with the Ministry of Education and now a volunteer for Toronto ALPHA, said that when she attended high school in the early '70s, Grade 9 history concentrated on Great Britain. "Canada was originally a British colony and people tend to understand what they are familiar with."

The curriculum underwent significant changes in the 1990s, but "there was no voice to have the Asian view," O'Reilly said. "We had a Eurocentric view of the war."

O'Reilly, vice principal of Senator O'Connor College School, has been teaching students about human rights for 17 years and said it's important to study issues affecting various cultures to prevent abuses in the future.

"We study (the Holocaust) because it affects us all. If it (the Japanese atrocities) is only a Chinese issue, it won't benefit everybody to learn from it."

O'Reilly feels it's incumbent on educators to teach the Asian side of the story, because "we are a multicultural society and students (in diverse groups) need to see themselves reflected."

The new curriculum will broaden students' perspective and introduce them to human rights abuses around the world during and after WWII.

"Hopefully they will learn to apply that knowledge to human rights abuse situations happening today in the world, and ultimately to become better and responsible citizens nationally and globally."

For Wong's association, the curriculum revision has significance beyond education: "It serves to restore justice by telling the historical truth."

ALPHA plans to subsidize more study tours. The second group of about 20 teachers is on its way to China July 9.

"Seeing is believing," said Wong.

"These field trips will inspire the teachers to come back to teach more effectively."

http://www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs/ContentServer?pagename=thestar/Layout/Article_Type1&call_pageid=971358637177&c=Article&cid=1118182512103