

Speaking With People in Our Profession

An interview with Dr. Mengli Zhao

Mengli Zhao is a professor of rangeland management at the Inner Mongolian Agricultural University in Hohhot, China. Mengli is a member of the International Rangeland Congress Organizing Committee, and one of the hosts for the 2008 Congress to be held in Hohhot. She teaches classes in range management, mentors graduates students in range science, conducts research at experimental sites across Inner Mongolia, and her work as an extension agent for both China and foreign nongovernmental organizations operating in this region is highly respected and valued. Mengli has spent time in North America working with range science colleagues in both Canada and the United States. She found a few moments to answer questions while traveling by Land Cruiser across Inner Mongolia.



Dr. Mengli Zhou surrounded by flowering irises (*Iris lactus*) in a desert region of Inner Mongolia.

A Witness to Remarkable Changes

Question: You've experienced tremendous economic and political changes in China over the last few decades. What are the most remarkable elements for you of these changes?

Answer: Economic development is happening incredibly fast in our country. My generation experienced starvation several decades ago, and now we are seeing this countrywide development and abundance. It is hard for us to adapt to the pace of changes associated with this development.

Even more than the political changes?

Yes, the political reform is even behind the economic development.

How do you think foreigners visiting China for the first time today will react to what they see?

They won't know that China is as developed as it is. They might think they understand how China has changed and grown in recent years, but they really won't understand the rate of these developments until they see it for themselves. They will also be impressed by the extent of natural grasslands, especially those in Inner Mongolia. They will also find out about Chinese culture and Chinese food. They really don't have a good understanding of these cultural things from their experiences in their own countries.

What are the range management problems facing China today?

Certainly, overgrazing is the most serious problem, especially seasonal overgrazing in the spring. The grasslands are not ready for livestock use in the early spring. Some problems also are created by certain policies. Many of the herders do not have land ownership, and so they are not able

to treat the land as their own, which would be better treated. The herders have a lot of knowledge, and they know how to manage their uses.

How are you trying to address these problems?

The government is trying to implement policies such as the Grassland Law where the herders are under contract for a long period of time, up to 30 years, that allows them to treat the land more like their own. Some areas have now been set aside and grazing is forbidden for certain seasonal periods, although these grazing control policies still need to be modified to allow for appropriate uses. There are also a number of national programs that influence management practices. In addition, we have more science and technology that is being conducted and developed, which influences the amount of information available for making decisions. Finally, there are more extension programs that demonstrate proper practices.

What opportunities are available to students graduating from your range management programs in Chinese universities?

Some will become teachers, some will become scientists, some will be extension specialists, some will become land managers, some will work for private business with interests such as land reclamation, or some will be directly involved in farming.

They don't have trouble finding work?

About 80% of them will find work in their field. Some will prefer to stay in the urban areas after school and not return to the field.

Could a non-Chinese-speaking student attend university in China, and, if so, what might it cost?

Yes, we have people from other countries in Asia, such as Japan and Mongolia, and these are often part of exchange programs. These are quite inexpensive—less than \$250 per month. We have not yet had many students from North America take advantage of these programs.

In your travels to other countries, do you find things very different from China, and do you find that some things are the same everywhere?

The food in other countries is quite different, and is one of the general things that always is different for me.

Also, there is a long cultural history in China. For example, I am used to a situation where a 500-year history of something in China is actually fairly new. For many other countries something 500 years old would seem quite ancient. Another difference is land ownership. Land in China can only be bought by Chinese, and can be bought from the government.

A key similarity is that the people involved in range management around the world have a lot in common, and they are quite similar. It doesn't seem to matter where a person is from; if they care about rangelands they have similar interests. Also, the grasslands in other parts of the world that I have seen also seem quite similar to those in China. It is easy to feel at home in other grassland areas outside of China.

For people thinking about attending the International Rangeland Congress in Hohhot in 2008, what would you recommend they do and see in China during their visit?

They should experience Chinese and Mongolian cultures as much as possible; these are cultures with long histories and are very different from anything they would have ever experienced. For Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia, these are cultures with long histories, and those histories are based on grasslands.

What's harder to learn—English or Mandarin?

Mandarin is more difficult, but the hardest part is to write the characters. The speaking part of Mandarin is actually easier than English. A person could learn several hundred words and sounds in Mandarin, and get around OK in China. And, I think, my English is a little bit better than your Chinese!

Interview by Susan R. McGuire, a pen name used by the author of this article. Her interviews with members of our profession are a regular contribution to Rangelands. All costs of publishing these interviews are sponsored by a research unit of the Agricultural Research Service, the in-house research agency of the United States Department of Agriculture, whose rangeland scientists are a segment of our Society.