Chinese plane crash victims were student leaders

DIDI TANG & GILLIAN WONG, Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The two 16-year-old girls killed in the San Francisco plane crash were close friends and top students who were on Asiana Flight 214 for the same reason: to get a taste of American education and possibly brighten their futures.

Wang Linjia showed talent in physics and calligraphy; Ye Mengyuan was a champion gymnast who excelled in literature. Both were part of a trend among affluent Chinese families willing to spend thousands of dollars to send their children to the U.S. for a few weeks in the summer to practice English and hopefully boost their chances of attending a U.S. college — considered better than China's alternatives by many Chinese families.

Wang's family was staying at a hotel when they learned that the daughter was one of the two people killed when the Boeing 777 crash-landed Saturday at San Francisco International Airport. Officials said 182 people were taken to area hospitals.

When visited by a state media reporter, Wang's mother sat on a bed, crying silently and her father sat in a chair with a blank expression, said the Youth Times, an official newspaper in the girls' home province of Zhejiang, in eastern China.

Wang's next-door neighbor, a woman surnamed Xia, described Wang as quiet, courteous and diligent.

"She was very keen to learn. Every time she came home she would be studying. Very rarely did she go out and play," Xia was quoted as saying. She said Wang's father proudly displayed her calligraphy and art pieces on the walls of his office.

Wang and Ye's parents and other relatives, along with the relatives of four injured students, boarded a flight to San Francisco in Shanghai on Monday after picking up their visas at the U.S. consulate, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. They were accompanied by two teachers from the girls' school and four representatives of the local government, Xinhua said.

Wang and Ye were part among 29 students from the city of Jiangshan who were on board to attend a summer camp, sightsee and visit several U.S. universities in California. Parents have told Chinese state media that the 15-day trip cost each student about $5,000.

An additional 30 students from two middle schools in the central Chinese city of Taiyuan planned to visit Columbia and Harvard universities, the University of California, Berkeley, and Hollywood, Times Square and the Lincoln Memorial during their two-week, coast-to-coast itinerary.

Nearly 200,000 of Chinese students studied in the U.S. in 2011-2012, more than any other country and accounting for more than a quarter of the United States' international student population.

The number is expected to grow, and Chinese families hoping to have their children attend American colleges see such summer trips as another way to gain an edge in applications and to help with the cultural and linguistic acclimation expected of the young students once they are abroad.

The popularity of these summer programs has grown significantly over the past five years, according to Alex Abrahams, the general manager of Shanghai-based Blue Sky Study, which consults families who want to send students abroad.

"It's a significant cost for someone who's earning an average salary in China," Abrahams said.

An American education has become desirable among China's growing number of middle-class families, who believe it can better prepare their children in a globalized economy, and who are less willing to put their children — often their only child — through China's cruelly competitive education system.

Yan Jiaqi, a Beijing-based education consultant who helps Chinese students apply to U.S. schools, said the summer tours mix having fun with preparing for college.

"Those kids sooner or later will go to U.S. schools, and the trip is an opportunity for

them to get to know the U.S. and help them choose a university later," he said.

While there are no firm figures available on how many students take these trips, the English-language China Daily reported in 2011 that more than 60,000 Chinese students planned to go to summer camps in the U.S., and the number probably has increased substantially in the past two years, according to industry insiders.

Wang and Ye were classmates at a Jiangshan school known for its students' high academic caliber, the Youth Times said. Wang was class monitor for three years, and teachers and schoolmates described her as excelling in physics and being good at calligraphy and drawing, according to the paper.

Ye also was a top student who excelled in literature, playing the piano, singing, and gymnastics. The Youth Times said Ye recently won a national gymnastics competition and routinely received honors at the school's annual speech contests.

The two girls were classmates from four years ago and became close friends, the paper said.

The girls posted their last messages on their microblog accounts Thursday and Friday. "Perhaps time can dilute the coffee in the cup, and can polish the outlines of memory," Wang wrote on her microblog Friday.

Her final message was simply the word "go."

Of the 291 passengers onboard, 141 were Chinese. At least 70 Chinese students and teachers were on the plane heading to summer camps, according to education authorities in China.

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