

Xin Xiang

I grew up in Guangzhou, a city in Southeastern China. I share this city with 20 million people. More than 1/3 of them are migrants. These migrant families left their homes in rural area or small towns to sell their labors in cities, for a better living. A little card that says “temporary resident permit” allows their existence in this modern city, or more specifically, in the migrant neighborhoods where a meal doesn’t cost as much as their day wage.

I want to tell you a story that happened in this city. After graduating from a prestigious high school, a few friends and I organized a summer camp for fifty migrant children. We were 18, and they were 13. A girl named Wei was the most active child in the project. Her parents, who were struggling to run the small family business, had little time for Wei. They moved to Guangzhou when she was young, but she’d barely left the migrant neighborhood that they lived in. Besides us, she did not know anyone who’d had any education beyond middle school.

My friends and I designed courses and activities, hoping to share with Wei and her classmates what inspired and mattered to us. We also hang out together, at lunch breaks, after classes. We became good friends, and promised to return.

Then my friends and I went to different parts of the world for college, but we did go back again, again, and again, hoping to share our exciting adventures with underprivileged teenagers like Wei. Last year our little project became one of the first grassroot nonprofits recognized by the Chinese government. By then, like most of the other children in our first summercamp, Wei had been sent back to her hometown in another province, where she lived with her schoolmate. Education in the city was too expensive, and her “temporary resident permit” limited her school choices. But she would hang out with us whenever her parents brought her to Guangzhou during breaks. She wants to go to college, and I had always been proud for playing a part in inspiring and supporting this dream.

But that was just my account of the story. I saw Wei’s two months ago, in a post on her blog. The title was ‘Everything is different’.

‘Maybe this was just a mistake, after all... I was so excited, and thought that if I tried hard, I could be successful like Elaine, Xin, Yue... But we are only becoming more different. I met them again this summer, but everything felt different. They talked about things that I couldn’t understand. I felt like we didn’t even speak the same language...

‘I can already imagine what it would be like when we meet a few more years later. They would be CEOs, professors, engineers. I would be a waitress in a restaurant. What can we possibly talk about? I was too naïve, too stupid to think that I could be like them. It was just, a dream.’

I did not know what to say.

Of course we loved Wei and did not mean for her to feel inadequate. But I also remembered the awkward moments when we were trying to find topics of mutual

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interest. My friends and I were listening to Lady Gaga and Mozart while Wei and her friends watched soup opera with grandma. We debated philosophy and studied neuro-imaging, something they never even heard of. I asked them questions about their lives to keep the conversation going, but when they told me about how their teacher did not care about teaching at all and how their parents wanted them to drop out of middle school to help support the family, I didn't know how to respond.

Consciously or unconsciously, I'd been ignoring the fact that I was losing my ability to truly connect to a lot of people. I can talk about education, equality, and human nature for hours with ease, in a language that only works with a group of people who call themselves 'intellectuals'. When was the last time that I had a conversation with Wei, or even my own grandpa who's been a farmer all his life, beyond 'How's your day' and 'How is family'? I can't even remember. In the past three years of college, the world that I reflect and reason about has expanded, but the world that I keep in touch with has shrunk.

So I came to doubt: what had I got from this prestigious liberal arts education? It taught me how to study the world, through many different lenses, treating it like a specimen under microscope. But how often have I stepped outside my circle of friends? Have I tried to feel what it's like to live through the life of poverty and inequality that I read and write about? Have I ever tried to share with Wei my reflections, doubts and ambitious plans for changing the world that she also lives in?

I don't have an answer. I have a question.