



In large we construct our identities through our ability to choose and our ability to make choices that we consider individual and personal. In life the choices that arise and present themselves to us have much to do with our surroundings; living in North America – in Canada, in Vancouver, or Montreal in my case – leaves us with far more choices, giving us the ability to dream. This is the first week of classes of my last year of university. This situation specifically gives me a wide array of choices: tomorrow I could choose to enroll in a class about

filmmaking or contemporary Chinese art class if I felt so inclined. Compared to the choices available to girls in rural Gansu, we North Americans are blessed with more choices than we will ever be able to make. We are given more opportunities than we will ever be able to make anything of; our minds from birth are nurtured to conceptualize endless possibilities and dream big. The idea of equality and equal opportunities has been ingrained within us. My mother has become the bridge, the catalyst, a sort of angel who has opened up the minds of the girls she works with, daring them to unlatch the door to a new world of opportunity.

Today China pervades world news. Stories of rapid economic as well as social development are published daily, spreading the message that this country is propelling itself to new heights. Deng Xiaoping's adoption of reform and an opening-up policy thirty years ago has held immense benefits for growth in the Chinese economy and consequently the development of the country's social structures. Rapid economic development has led to reforms in education and has held immense benefits for the role of women within family structures as well as in the work place.



In contrast to this positive growth however is the looming question of urban-rural disparity. Despite China's growth numbers, according to China Daily, the country recorded its widest rural-income gap in 2009 since the country launched its reform and opening-up policy in 1978. The urban

per capita net income last year stood at 17,175 yuan (\$2,633 CDN) in contrast to 5,153 yuan (\$790 CDN) in the countryside. In spite of the general upward movement of the country within the global community, China's development remains focused in city centers, leaving the rural periphery to fend for itself. According to economist Michael Lipton, the most important class conflict in the world today is between the urban and rural classes. He discusses the idea that structures within developing countries often lean towards a belief in the 'trickle-down theory' in which wealth concentrated in city centers is seen to have the ability to eventually 'trickle-down' and out towards the periphery. China is a perfect example of the opposite occurring: disparity between urban and rural dwellers being exaggerated as the country's economic situation progresses. It is clear that priorities in state policy-making in China reflect the government's ambitions to advance in the global market first rather than to adopt policies that aim to level the country's vast playing field.



It is from this starting point that I would like to discuss my 2010 trip to Gansu, China. The disparity in China glares at me every time I travel there. Last year we flew in to Hong Kong, this year to Shanghai. We fly in to these highly developed cities full of shopping malls, advanced technological developments, and rife with brand names and fancy cars. And then after a few days we board a plane and travel to the poor rural townships of Gansu. However it is not merely the cities' physical appearances and wealth that contrast so very greatly with the appearances of the towns and villages we visit in Gansu. More importantly it is the difference in how life is looked out and the contrast in outlooks and expectations for life. Within the last few decades, vast amounts of capital has flowed into China's largest cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, as well as medium and smaller sized cities such as Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu. As a direct result of this growth the quality of life has improved throughout these areas dramatically. Not only does concentration of wealth in urban centers lead to improved social institutions and resources for the people of these areas, but it has also led to an irrefutable expansion of ideas surrounding choice. The comfort and security provided by growth in cities has stimulated young people in cities to dare to dream bigger; without having to worry about survival, city-dwellers are able to discover and devote time to aspirations that the majority of impoverished students are not yet able to fathom. It is through

my interactions with various people living in these two types of environments that I have been able to realize this deep-rooted disparity that travels beyond mere capital and luxuries.



World Expo, Shanghai

I'm unsure as to how many people know exactly what goes on these annual trips to Gansu. Of course there are the funds brought to the girls for their next year's university fees or living expenses, but there are also words exchanged that *truly* alter these young women's lives. In order to fully understand the life altering meetings that occur, I would like to tell of the discussions that went on in Yuzhong, the last of the towns that we visited on our 2010 trip.

The atmosphere of the humble classroom in which we met was one of excited, nervous anticipation. The group of fifteen girls sponsored in 2008 sits on wobbly wooden benches in a semi-circle around my mother. They whisper to each other in hushed voices, giggling timidly, awaiting the discussion that is about to start. These girls – all of the sponsored girls in fact– are beyond respectful, humble, and polite. When my mother begins to speak to them the whispering stops instantly and they direct all their attention towards her, attentive eyes lifted and focused upon her. My mother says that she would like to discuss the past year, the trials and tribulations as well as successes experienced by the girls during their 2009/2010 school year. She asks them

not to be shy, to speak up and share with their comrades. The first girl who speaks up is Zhou Huan. She is dressed in a light blue floral top and I know that this must be her nicest shirt. “This year was good! It was difficult but good,” she says. “My discipline (traditional Chinese orthopedics) is dominated by male students and more often than not I don’t feel that I am



equal to them. My field is very physically demanding, we have to be strong to set bones, and often the girls are made by male students as well as teachers to feel like we can’t do it.” Zhou is very slender with thin arms and a quiet demeanor. Most of the other girls nod in agreement. Another girl pipes up: “I feel the same way at school, there are lots of boys in my classes and even though I work as hard as them I don’t receive the same recognition”. There is

a general consensus that girls in university, especially those girls of the countryside raised in far more traditional family structures, are treated as lesser than their male or city-raised counterparts. My mother responded passionately: "Just go lift weights! Go to the gym and build up muscles and then they will have nothing to say!" The girls and myself all laugh and we know she is right. My mother tells the girls that yes, circumstances are against them, they grew up without even a fraction of the resources that other university students grew up with, they are not accustomed to life in big city universities, that male students will be favoured, but that if they do not believe in themselves then no one can make a difference. The girls all nod their heads absorbing every word she says. More girls relay stories about the gender discrimination they've encountered at university. The discussion even moves towards media portrayal of women, of the 'ideal' propagated in mass media and suggestions for ways of breaking this traditional view of females. These girls are learning. They come from tiny *cunzi* (village) life, from families steeped in traditional structures in which they occupy the subservient role, and yet they are acquiring voices of their own through the education they are receiving.



The term *chi ku* is one that holds a central role in one's ability to lead a dutiful life in Chinese culture. One is said to be able to *chi ku* when able to withstand hardships – to be able to suffer and endure setbacks. The idea is that although in the moment one may be experiencing difficulty, that in the end it makes you a far stronger individual. In the discussions with the Yuzhong girls of 2008 this is a theme that came up numerous times.

The girls discussed at length the difference between city raised children and themselves. They brought up feeling embarrassed and stupid in every day discussions, not knowing popular culture references or things about iPhones and iPads. They found themselves united in experiences of being laughed at by their more privileged classmates. They told stories about being utterly shocked by the rudeness of city kids towards waiters in restaurants or their parents' chauffeurs – things completely out of these girls' realm of understanding. One student felt very disheartened because of her lack of ability and experience with computers and the internet. She felt she lagged behind the rest of her classmates for this reason but my mother replied telling her not to forget that because of the hardships you have had to face in your life you are able to *chi ku*. You are able to put in those extra hours after



class to teach yourself those things that other students may already be able to do. And it's true. These girls, faced with extreme poverty and in many cases ailing family members, are able to work harder and persevere through setbacks *because* of having experienced the feeling of helplessness and being downtrodden; they are able to find strength in themselves because of the circumstances that have

shaped their identities. This group discussion allowed for these fifteen girls to commiserate and to recognize and acknowledge the strength that lies within them.

The idea of *chi ku* relates to another quintessential Chinese idea, the idea of knowing how to or being able to *zuo ren*. Its literal translation is to “be or make a person”, however the meaning lies far deeper than this. According to Shenbai Liao in his article, “Doing Business: An Obscure Notion of the Ethics of Public Associations in Ordinary Chinese”, “being a person seems to be related to affairs in the sphere of private association...to be a good son/daughter, a good brother/sister, a good friend/companion...it is in fact an overall notion which means to *conduct oneself* (*zuo benji*) and *to be a good person* (*zuo hao ren*)”. Now the reason that the concept of *zuo ren* is brought up is because of the emphasis that my mother puts on this concept in every discussion she has with students. It was made clearer to me on this trip how much each and every student



is learning from her, and how much she herself is influencing these girls. Although my mother reviews each student's report card every August she simultaneously places distinct emphasis on the students being able to *zuo ren*. In Yuzhong as well as in the other towns my mother tells the girls that more important than being at the top of one's class is to be a good person – to conduct oneself ethically and to be able to *chi ku* in order to achieve one's goals and dreams. She tells them of their sponsors who donate money in order to see *real* changes and growth in their lives, not just girls going through the motions of attending university. The girls listen raptly and with complete understanding as she says that university is a step in the process of creating big dreams and achieving them. The experience they are having with EGRC – and it really is an experience – is meant not only to give these young women the monetary means to attend university, but also to help them

establish belief in themselves and their own capabilities. The students are inspired. I can see it in their eyes; they understand exactly what she means and I know their goals and dreams are already far bigger than they could've ever imagined.

Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, when my mother was in her teens, she was forced to leave Beijing and lived in Gansu and worked in a factory. She witnessed the extreme poverty and experienced the same desolation, hardship, the hopelessness of an uncertain future, and the lack of resources to realize one's dreams as all the EGRC's girls growing up experienced. The difference is 30 years ago my mother suffered from political discrimination; today the EGRC girls are lacking of financial resources.

It wasn't until this year that I truly understood this bridge between my mother and EGRC's girls: the immense emotional connection that exists because of their shared experiences. It also wasn't until this year that I came to realize what EGRC's efforts are truly achieving. From the other side of the world we are not only able to give these young Chinese women a financial promise, but also the ability to access an entirely new realm of dreaming and of self-worth.

-by Kate Wong
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