

Seeing Through A New Lens Together: With The Left-Behind Generation in China

Background: In China, because of educational inequality, migrants' children are discriminated against in public education. Every year, millions of young migrants swarm to big cities for better jobs only to find themselves working in assembly lines, construction sites, and restaurants. This cycle of poor employment is caused by educational inequality and institutional exclusion. In cities like Shanghai, public high schools and universities only admit local students, not migrant children. Consequently, many migrant parents leave their children behind in their rural hometowns in relatives' homes so they can attend schools that will accept them.

Those young children are the **left-behind generation**. Since some of the parents are illiterate or only have a middle school diploma, their parents cannot be role models; the children who stay in the villages by themselves don't want to go to school anymore. They lack motivation and confidence to change themselves. When they reach age 15-16, most of them go to the city to work. In China, migrant workers tend to be young, with over 71% between the ages 15 and 29. As a result, these children miss the most valuable time to learn and develop their potential for a better future.

The foundation of **peace** is education. With education, individuals attain self-worth. Through photography, creative writing, and language learning, we will give left-behind children a reason for learning and give them hope for changing their futures. Being inquisitive and creative will bring them confidence because they will think independently and explore life through a lens of their own. The children should realize that *regardless of birthplace or economic background*, they deserve a better future. With this positive mindset, the kids will influence the perspectives of other children and their families.

Project Description: We will focus on the left-behind children in Guoyang, China (Haimeng's rural hometown) and offer a 6-week summer program that combines photography, creative writing workshops and English classes. The program will take place at the village's secondary school during the school's summer break. We will recruit around 25 students from the village and give each of them a camera. First, we will show how to use a camera and introduce the art of photography. Each week, we will give them homework, such as portraits of their neighbors, family, and peers, a piece of nature, a day in the village and so on. Photography is a new lens to look at their life, their village, and neighbors. Their photographs represent who they are and what they appreciate. We want the children to develop a sense of value and self-awareness. We will also read and write poetry and short stories. Writing is a self-reflective and powerful tool that incites the children to think for themselves. For the English classes, since the traditional English education in China is grammar-based, we will emphasize speaking and culture. As part of the culture learning, we will share our own stories with the children about our own experiences immersed in different cultures.

Through this program, we will interact and form a close relationship with the children. They will realize that there are not left-behind, that a lot of people care about them and that they are important. In the end, the children will help select photographs and writing pieces to be showcased in two exhibitions--one in the village and another in Shanghai. We will take four children for a trip to Shanghai to share with the public and Jiuqian Center, our community partner, their creative works. We will all visit museums, see theatre plays, and

tour Shanghai together. Once the children come together with UWC alumni living in Shanghai, they will see with their own eyes that there are so many ways of living and different people to meet.

Community Support: We contacted the principal of the local secondary school, and he will provide a classroom for our program. Haimeng has benefited from our community partner, Jiuqian Center, as the child of migrants in Shanghai since 2009. Jiuqian Center is an NGO which provides migrants' children in Shanghai free opportunities to learn while advocating a better educational system in China. Since Jiuqian Center has never reached out to her hometown in Guoyang, this will be a new connection. In addition, Jiuqian Center is excited to learn more about the photography and creative writing aspects of our program to enrich their own teaching curriculum. We will recruit volunteers from Jiuqian Center when we arrive in May. When we go to Guoyang village, we will stay with Haimeng's relatives.

Project Goals: **1)** teach the Guoyang village children to empower themselves with confidence and bigger dreams; **2)** encourage the left-behind children to express themselves through their own artwork; **3)** build a connection between the left-behind children in Guoyang village and Jiuqian Center; **4)** raise awareness in Shanghai for the left-behind children phenomenon; **5)** utilize social media to share the children's artworks around the world, including a physical presentation at Macalester College.

Relevant Experience: Haimeng taught painting, English conversation, singing, and even how to flashmob to children in rural schools for Jiuqian since 2012. In UWC Mostar, she made kids laugh with her Clowning Club and organized a children's festival. At Macalester, Haimeng participates in Lives of Commitment, a leadership program which facilitates meaningful discussions with other students dedicated to social change. Every week, she helps Latino children improve their English literacy skills at a community center in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Lianna participated in Macalester's Ametrica program, which bridged the gap between domestic U.S. and international students by holding cultural discussions. She is also involved in Macalester's Embody the Change program, which holds student-facilitated weekly discussion circles for self-improvement. Lianna also spent 10 months in China as a high school exchange student while learning Chinese and sharing American culture with students and Chinese families. In 2014, she taught a music and art-based beginners' Chinese class for kids ages 5 to 12 years old in California. Haimeng is a native speaker and Lianna is fluent in conversational Chinese.

Sustainability: Educational inequality cannot be resolved instantly. Rural people keep migrating to big cities to take advantage of urban economic growth, but the migrants' children still face educational disadvantages. The project will help the left-behind children gain confidence and the desire to change themselves, their families and eventually society. Knowing that we can only stay for one summer, we will sustain the impact of this project through the following ways: **1)** initiate a mentor-mentee program to pair up the left-behind children with UWC alumni living in Shanghai who can maintain a bond through email; **2)** create a detailed outline of our lesson plans and notes (what worked, what didn't work) for future volunteers to take the essence of our project to other communities all over the world.