

XVI



When Liu leaves Zhanjiang to take a special course in Beijing, I try to find someone to take his place.

I occasionally travel to Long Wan alone, but I still need someone who speaks Cantonese and the local dialect to help me with the longer interviews.

I ask an English student from a nearby Zhanjiang college to serve as my interpreter. At first he seems wary but eventually agrees to help me because he thinks it will help him improve his English.

But I soon realize he may not be the right person to help me. On our second trip to the village, he complains when I start to take photos inside the village school.

The school is very poor and dilapidated, he says. People outside China shouldn't see it. What will foreigners think of Chinese people if they see a school like this? How will it reflect on China?

He tells the teacher not to let me take any more photos. I am surprised he would say this to him and I tell him to stop. I ask him why it bothers him so much to have foreigners see these children attending the village school.

I try to show people what is happening in the village, I say. I don't make anything up, why should you be afraid to let others know the truth?

You shouldn't be showing foreigners how poor China is, he says. I don't want to be part of this.

We ride into Zhanjiang in silence. My face is sunburned. I feel worn-out by the long day under the sun.

I tell him that if he wants to help me he has to do what I ask him to do. If he can't do this I will find someone else.

He says he will not go out to the village with me again, and I agree that this is the best solution for both of us.

I eventually find a new interpreter to go to the village with me. He approached me in a Zhanjiang teahouse and asked me to help him with his English. He works in the city's education department and is studying for an English exam to qualify for a promotion.

He agrees to travel to the village with me but I soon encounter the same problem with him that I had with the previous interpreter. He too feels the need to censor what the villagers tell me in their interviews, translating only selective parts of their answers.

The Village School

Most of the older people in Long Wan have little or no education and can neither read nor write.

Some attended school for a short time, completing just a few years of primary school; some made it to middle school - grades seven to twelve - but failed to finish.

In China students start school at about the age of seven and attend five years of primary school. After that they move on to middle school, which is divided into two parts. The first part - junior middle school - is three years; the second part - senior middle school, or high school - is another three years.

To graduate from junior to senior middle school a student must pass a test.

Those who cannot pass the test are not allowed to continue their education. College works the same way: those who pass the college entrance exam at the end of senior middle school are allowed to move on to college.

In recent years the majority of Long Wan children have been able to finish junior middle school, but only a few do well enough to graduate to senior middle school.

In China, education is competitive. Students must be dedicated and smart to continue their education. Only the best students can go on to college.

The Village Teachers

The school's senior teacher uses a long rod to point to words he has written on the blackboard. His students sit quietly at battered wooden desks, their ragged language books open in front of them as he lectures.

The teacher is a tall, gaunt-faced man with eyeglasses and stooped shoulders. He has the bronze complexion and sinewy arms of someone who has spent much of his life working under the sun.

Today he is teaching the students pin yin, the romanized form of Chinese used to teach students Mandarin, the national language. Two dialects ¾ Cantonese and Lei Zhou Hua ¼ are spoken in the village, but Cantonese is the primary language spoken in the area.

The village school ¼ a dilapidated one-story structure with a dirt floor and rows of aged wooden desks ¼ lies at the edge of Long Wan. The schoolroom is dark, lit only by natural light streaming through the windows. There are no electric lights turned on in the classroom.

The village children attend this school for two years before moving on to a larger primary school in nearby Mao village.

The teacher says education is becoming increasingly important to Long Wan parents.

In the past, many parents thought that education would be of little use to their children, concluding that they would have little chance to use much of it as farmers in the village.

But in recent years that attitude has begun to change. The parents think that in today's world it's important for young people to know more about science and technology, says the teacher. The parents often come to visit me to discuss their children's progress and behavior in the classroom.

Although the senior teacher still enjoys teaching children and values what he does for them, he is disturbed by the poor treatment he receives from the education authorities.

For 31 years, he has been teaching children in the countryside without having been formally appointed a teacher. The authorities have refused to promote him because they say he didn't attend college.

But the teacher says this isn't the real reason he hasn't been given formal status: he says the real reason is that he doesn't have strong enough ties to the local leaders.

Obtaining formal status as a teacher would allow him to receive benefits such as a rice allowance and a pension when he retires.

He says he has always enjoyed being a teacher but this ongoing dispute with the authorities has changed his attitude toward the work. He used to put a lot of effort into his teaching but lately he has lost some of that earlier enthusiasm.

He says he plans to retire in a few years and return full-time to farming. Over the years he has been working simultaneously as a teacher and a farmer.

Although he feels embittered by the experience, he says he doesn't want me to think that he no longer enjoys being a teacher. It's still important to him despite what the leaders have done to him, he says.

When the morning session is over, the school's junior teacher walks to his family's house just a short distance from the school building.

He sits at a table in the living room and takes out a large bamboo water pipe. He lights the pipe and draws on it as he speaks.

The junior teacher is 25-years-old and a graduate of senior middle school ¼ the equivalent of high school in the United States. He was born in Long Wan and never attended college. Like the senior teacher, he works as a farmer in addition to working as a teacher.

The junior teacher teaches speech, writing, drawing, music, physical education, and moral conduct. The school day begins at 7:50 in the morning and ends at about 4:45 in the afternoon. He is paid about 120 yuan a month for his work.

He says people constantly complain about the quality of education in rural schools like Long Wan's but not much is done to improve it, especially on the primary-school level.

Change depends on the leaders but the leaders only listen to other leaders, he says. They don't listen to people like him who are in a position to observe conditions up close.

Occasionally reforms are instituted but almost nothing changes in the schools. Many improvements would be necessary to have a significant impact on conditions in the countryside, he says.

For one thing, teachers need to be paid more, he says. The 120 yuan he is paid each month is inadequate.

Rural schools also need more equipment. There's almost no equipment in the Long Wan elementary school. He says his teaching would be more interesting for the students if he had access to a tape recorder, a slide projector, and equipment to show films.

The school has none of this equipment, he says. It has the bare essentials for learning: books, writing implements, and paper.

The junior teacher says he was invited to become a teacher after completing middle school about five years ago. He first taught in nearby Mao village but was later transferred to Long Wan.

He says he had always wanted to become a teacher, but now he's not so sure teaching will provide him with a bright future. Being an informal teacher makes his future unpredictable, he says. He was laid off once for about a year when the government cut back on the number of teachers in the countryside. And like the senior teacher, his informal status makes him ineligible to receive benefits.

If the officials appointed him to be a formal teacher, he would at least be able to teach in a town or city school.

He says spending his entire life as a village teacher would not be satisfying

to him. If he lived and worked in a town or city, he could continue his education.

He wants to attend college but worries it won't be possible; he fears he will be trapped in the countryside, with no bright future ahead of him.

A Job in the City

He sits in his family's home watching television on a bright summer afternoon. In a few days he will leave Long Wan to start a new life working in a television factory in Zhanjiang.

He says such jobs are difficult to find if a person isn't well connected or willing to bribe an official. He says a family friend helped him find the job.

One of four young men in Long Wan who recently attended college, he says his family spent 4,000 yuan to send him to the teacher's college in Zhanjiang. If he had scored higher on the college entrance exam the government would have paid his tuition, he says.

If a young person scores within a certain range on the college entrance exam, he can attend college if his family is willing to pay his tuition.

He says when he first went to college he noticed that the school leaders put great effort into trying to control the students. They told them what to do and what not to do; they reminded them constantly of the rules that had to be followed.

There was a rule associated with just about every activity, he says. He realized then that the villagers in some ways have much more freedom than students and workers in the city. At least people in the village don't have others constantly telling them what to do, he says.

But that doesn't mean he wants to stay in the village either. In the end, he believes it will be better to follow the rules and improve his status and living condition.

He says the new life he is about to embark on in the city is preferable to what would have awaited him in Long Wan if he hadn't been educated.

He says he was able to attend college because he always did well in his studies. He wasn't the best student, but he usually did better than the other village students.

He says most village children are not good students. Many don't want to go to school because they believe that school won't be useful to them in the future.

Many people in the village like to say: 'You don't need an education to be a farmer.'

Most of the village young people have difficulty passing the tests required to move from one educational level to the next. Few Long Wan farmers have graduated from middle school, he says. Most village children only complete junior middle school.

He says the other young villagers aren't much different from him: they enjoy listening to music and watching films. Like him, they want to have a better life.

The biggest difference between them is their education. They could probably write a letter if they had to, he says, but they don't have enough education to do much more than that.

















