

Bella Liu '07
August 30, 2006

I was filled with both awe and doubt one day when I saw the front cover of Newsweek, depicting a glamorous Chinese movie star against a Shanghai skyline and with the title "Is China Next?" How many readers would stop to think that just a 14-hour train ride away from the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai most homes have dirt floors and the nearest hospital is a day's bicycle ride away? Today, China is a rising superpower, a country experiencing unrivaled economic growth and modernization. Yet there is a tremendous socio-economic difference between a wealthy urban China known to the Western world and a poor rural China still covering most of the country's territory. I happened to have worked with one particular community of rural China that has suffered from the socio-economic difference; they are thousands of poor peasant families hit hard by AIDS in the 1990s in the wake of a blood-selling disaster that swept several central provinces, notably Henan.

The Chinese government has since begun to offer free medical treatment to the country's HIV/AIDS patients, including the peasants in rural China who were infected when, to alleviate their poverty, they sold their blood to tainted blood collecting stations. However, while medicine is now available and the infection rate has been curbed there, the difficulty remains of helping the affected families deal with the deepening poverty and stigma in their communities. In an area where a large portion of a working-age generation has succumbed to HIV/AIDS, the blood-selling disaster represents today a deeply rooted socio-economic problem.

This socio-economic problem is in particular reflected in the situation of a growing number of central China children orphaned and affected by the epidemic. Most of these children are not HIV-positive themselves. Yet while their parents are sick or dying, the children often lack the funds or motivation to continue in school. Socially isolated, growing up without the love and care of their parents, and having no means to provide for themselves, many of these children run the risk of ending up destitute, illiterate, and alone. Today, extremely few programs are in place in the area to ensure the psychological and long-term well-being of these children.

When I first read about the families of the "AIDS villages" in central China, I hesitated about what I could do to connect with them and help them. In the end, I found a Chinese charity, Chi Heng Foundation, which was one of only a handful of non-governmental groups allowed to operate there at the time. They were sponsoring the education and living costs of the children orphaned and impacted by HIV/AIDS and were also thinking about starting a secondary program to provide the children with psychological support. I teamed up with Chi Heng Foundation and created China Memory Book Project. The goal of the project was to help the children emotionally deal with their stress through the making of memory books, a kind of scrapbook. The memory books were somewhat different from those made by many African AIDS communities. First, they were made by the children themselves rather than by their parents; secondly, they were printed "activity booklets" with guiding prompts rather than blank pages; finally and perhaps most importantly, they focused on the children's future and not just on their past. For instance, the children were not only prompted to describe their parents, their family traditions and any worries, but also to record contact information of relatives,

their progress in school, and their personal achievements and aspirations. Through Chi Heng Foundation, memory books were given to over 3,000 children in Henan and neighboring provinces, along with collected writing and drawing supplies.

As I worked on China Memory Book Project – and read many copies of the completed memory books – I realized how important a connection with society will be for these children when they grow up. Without any guidance, many are left questioning, even doubting their future role in society, whether it is their home village or a faraway place where school or work brings them. I began my Lang Opportunity Scholarship project this summer with that in mind. For the project, I worked with Chinese university students in creating mentorship programs for the Chi Heng Foundation children, with the university students as “big brothers and big sisters”. From this summer on, the mentorship program will take place every summer at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, Tsinghua University in Beijing, Fudan University in Shanghai and possibly other universities eventually. In the end, I hope a relationship with the university student mentors will help the children learn to leave their isolation behind and look forward to the many common grounds they actually share with people different from them.

Together with the Chinese university students, I spent my summer playing and interacting with several dozen children participating in this year’s Big Sister Big Brother mentorship program. While the children were shy, and most remained shy, they really enjoyed pairing up with their mentors and many were inspired to continue on to university. We are now thinking of ways to make the mentorship program more helpful for the children when they return home, for example by having mentors visit the children’s home villages during winter break.

As we wrapped up the mentorship program in Shanghai with a two-day tour of the city, I found myself one night walking with the children along the Bund, a stretch of swanky, touristy waterfront that has come to symbolize the modernization of Shanghai and the prosperity of the Chinese people. While admiring the colorful lights of the skyline across the river, one of the girls asked me hesitantly, “Sister Bella, don’t you think that is a waste of a lot of energy?” I was wondering the same thing at the time. But later this little question has come to represent so many other questions I have about China in the context of my project work. How will China, with the world’s largest population, be able to deal with its population- and resource-related problems, including an AIDS epidemic? And how will China, with the world’s fourth-largest economy, be able to deal with such an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity? Whatever the future brings, I hope at least that these children I’ve been working with will someday be part of the greatness of China.

