

# *A Story of Walking with the Migrant Workers*

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One fine evening in the early summer of 2005, I had dinner with a few friends at a restaurant in Shanghai. Some of them were, like me, managers assigned to China by international companies. Some educators were among us too. Although we had different professions, we had some things in common. First of all, we were all foreigners. (Author's note: I am 100% Chinese, but I call myself a foreigner because I was born and raised in Hong Kong.) Secondly, we shared a common faith. Finally, we all shared a sense of insecurity, not because of the pressures we faced in our families or work, but because of the injustice we saw in society. We felt uncomfortable about this, and we wanted to make the world somewhat of a better place in which to live.

Some economists predicted that the 21st century would be an age of Chinese dominance in the world. Indeed, China has attracted many renowned international enterprises to set up their businesses there, and these have benefited from the low cost of production in China. China has hosted some major international events too, such as the Olympic Games and the World Trade Exhibition. These events helped to accelerate the expansion of infrastructure in China. Moreover, those who have become affluent after the economic reforms in the 1980s, emigrants who have returned to China and the foreign staffs of international companies have generated the demand for services suitable to their lifestyle. Job opportunities have attracted farmers to leave their home villages to go to work in the wealthier cities, with the hope that they could have a better income. In China, the term *mingong* ("migrant workers") is used to refer to those recent arrivals from the countryside to the big cities.

According to a Shanghai Statistics Bureau report, published in *Wen Wei Po* in May 2004, Shanghai had 3.7 million migrant workers, constituting 39.5% of the working population there. These migrant workers were all around us: construction workers, factory workers, waiters and waitresses in restaurants, massagers, maids and drivers. However, they often suffered from discrimination in their work environment because they were not permanent residents of Shanghai. This discrimination took various forms: lack of a valid employment contract, long working hours and low wages, which were often paid late. In addition, the work environment of the migrant workers was often poorly equipped. Their safety was not guaranteed, and they developed all sorts of job-related illnesses. There were no efficient channels for them to voice their grievances and to protect their rights. In view of this, we decided that we would try to serve these brothers and sisters living in the lowest stratum of society.

Through conversations with the migrant workers in our own companies, we came to understand more about their difficulties. Besides the unfair treatment they experienced, their most urgent need was for an improvement in the education chances for their children. From our observation, almost 400,000 children moved into Shanghai with their parents in 2005. Many of them studied in poorly-equipped schools, and the quality of teaching was not very good. Most importantly, they could only study in private schools, run by outsiders for the migrant workers' children, but not subsidized by the government. I have personally visited several of these private schools, but most of the staff refused to be interviewed. Fortunately, I had the chance of meeting with some more open-minded principals, who were willing to share their opinions with us. We discovered that the classrooms of these schools were overcrowded. The proportion of teachers to students was a way out of balance. The curriculum covered only a few basic subjects, which was certainly not enough for the development of the whole person of the students.

After these interviews, we decided to start with the improvement of the facilities (e.g. playground, library, audio-visual equipment) in the private schools for the migrant workers' children. We provided some subsidies for employing good English teachers

and narrowing the teacher-student ratios in these schools. We also arranged for some university students to teach English in these schools on weekends. In addition, we organized exchange programs with some international schools in Shanghai. Through various sport and art contests, students from the international schools would interact with the migrant children. We set up channels for student interaction in both Chinese and English. We also organized Christmas parties, picnics and summer camps for the students. This was how we began our journey of companionship with the migrant workers.

Having gained some experience in serving the migrant workers, we were eager to share our understanding of their situation with our friends. Since then, more and more people joined our team. At the same time, we realized the need to demonstrate our identity more clearly, so that people might know who we are. After much discussion, we came up with the slogan “Walking with the Migrant Workers.” To put it in more concrete terms, our mission was to raise the awareness of society about the situation of the migrant workers, and to pool resources to support their families. We called our infant community You Dao (“Anxious about the Truth”), a name inspired by Confucius’ teaching: “The Master said, ‘The object of the superior man is truth. Food is not his object. There is plowing;--even in that there is sometimes want. So with learning;--emolument may be found in it. The superior man is anxious lest he should not get [the] truth; he is not anxious lest poverty should come upon him.’”<sup>1</sup>

The year 2008 was a turning point for You Dao. It was a year filled with challenges and opportunities.

First of all, the government became aware of the problem of providing education for the children of migrant workers. They could now enjoy free education and, just like the children studying in government schools, their tuition fees were remitted. After a careful assessment, the government combined several private migrant schools with existing public schools, or provided subsidies for the private schools to become public schools. All this was done

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<sup>1</sup> James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects*, vol. 1 of *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 303.

so that the children of the migrant workers may enjoy a 9-year compulsory education program. This was undoubtedly a great step forward, but it posed a problem for You Dao. The private schools had just made some progress in their work with the help of You Dao. How could they adapt now to the new policies of the government?

We recognized that flexibility and adaptability were the prerequisites for quality service. The new policies forced us out of our comfort zones, and forced us to find new ways to serve the migrant workers. We walked through the areas where the migrant workers lived, and we saw that many kids were leaving school for economic reasons. The cause of the problem was that, in the government policy, pre-school education was not included in the 9-year compulsory education system. Realizing the importance of pre-school education, we proposed to the principals of private kindergartens that we would be willing to provide financial support for poor families, so that their children could go to kindergartens and receive pre-school education. At the same time, we subsidized the private kindergartens to improve their facilities, teaching staff and in organizing extra-curricular activities. We stressed the value of visitations in the process. For the members of You Dao, interviews with migrant workers' families were not merely for an assessment of their wealth, but a chance to make friends with them. Through such visits, we sought to understand more deeply their circumstances, their difficulties and their hopes. We wanted them to understand more about us too. Throughout this period of time, we insisted on visiting the families once a month, providing them with the basic necessities of life. In 2009, the first year after the change of our direction, we subsidized several dozens of children. During the last academic year, the number of children receiving financial support from You Dao exceeded 100.

As we continued to expand our scope of service, we needed more resources and manpower for our work. We thought that You Dao needed more systematization in our administration and greater transparency in our financial status. We wanted to make You Dao a "reliable" charitable organization. Unfortunately, the Chinese government has been very strict in its supervision of non-profit organizations. It was basically impossible for a non-profit

organization run by foreigners to be registered in China. The Chinese government has great distrust of foreign charitable organizations. (The legislation on charitable services in China has been delayed since the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008, and it is still not enacted today.) We considered working with the local Chinese organizations so as to get ourselves registered, but this would mean a drastic reduction in our scope of service. The nature and mission of You Dao might also be changed if supervision of it were taken over by our partners. (Such cases are numerous in China.) Therefore, we took the alternative of registering in Hong Kong, which we did in 2008. We became a public charitable organization recognized by the Hong Kong government. However, this “license” did not help to solve some of the practical problems *You Dao* faced in the interior (e.g. employing local workers, booking venues and facilities, fund raising), whose service was conducted in the Mainland. Although we did not figure out a perfect solution to all these problems, we could always find some practicable ways to handle them, especially when we were gifted with the support of our friends who helped us with their professional knowledge and experience in business administration. *You Dao* is still not officially registered in the Mainland, but it has already gained the appreciation of some international enterprises and sports associations through its achievement and reputation for integrity. Besides our own projects, we made annual plans with our strategic collaborators and continued to find new areas for service.

The history of *You Dao* can be divided into three phases. In the first stage, we worked with private schools; in the second stage, we entered the migrant communities, and worked with the families. The third stage was established upon the foundation of the first and second stages: we set up “family centers” for the migrant workers, and provided various kinds of assistance to their families.

After more than 6 months of preparation and a careful choice of locations, the first family centre was established in 2010. The centre provided different kinds of activities for parents and children, such as weekend courses on handicrafts, film viewing, drama workshops, health talks, free consultation by Chinese medical practitioners and cake baking classes. There is a library in the family centre too. There was a large variety of activities for the

people to choose from. The number of participants and visitors continued to increase. You Dao established itself as a reliable organization for migrant workers, and they began telling us about their difficulties. Once we got a phone call from a family reporting that their mother had disappeared. They hoped that we could help to look for her. At another time, I got a phone call in the middle of the night, saying that two youngsters, whose parents were divorced, were wandering along the street, looking for a safe place to live. There were many similar calls for help too. We, of course, could not solve all these problems; but we still feel satisfied with our work because these cases showed that we had become reliable friends of the migrants' families.

Our reputation, however, also caused problems. Within two years of its inauguration, the Chinese government demanded the closure of our family centre, because we did not have the relevant permission and license to run it. In order to clear their minds of doubt, I paid several visits to the concerned government officials, explaining to them the background and object of You Dao, as well as the services it provided. However, the government officials said that the services provided by the family centre were similar to education, and education was a political mission--it served the purpose of training the next generation of youngsters to love the Party and the motherland. Our contact with the children of the migrant workers caused the officials to suspect that we were "contaminating" their thoughts. After this, the government official told me that he understood our sincerity in providing charitable services. What he demanded of us was to leave the place he was in charge of, or to invest our resources on "less risky" groups, such as the handicapped and the elderly.

We obeyed the instructions of the government. We took away the banner of the family centre and closed its door with heavy hearts. In spite of this, our zeal for serving the migrant families did not die down. Within a few months, we were able to set up a new centre in another place. Learning from our past experience, we kept a low profile about the inauguration of the new centre. We did not have an opening ceremony; did not hang a banner outside the building, and we did not invite any of our friends in society to join us in organizing activities.

According to the statistics of the Shanghai Statistics Bureau in the fall of 2012, the total population in Shanghai numbered 24 million, with 9.6 million being transient residents. 70% of them were migrant workers, and the number of children moving into Shanghai with their migrant parents exceeded 500,000. Compared to the figures for 2005, the number of migrant workers in Shanghai has doubled. Under the government's new policies and the efforts of all sectors of society, the most life-threatening problems of low wages, the lack of social security, and the educational needs of the migrants' children have to a great extent been alleviated. The migrant workers themselves have experienced many changes too. For example, the new generation of migrant workers has become core members of their communities. They differed from their fathers in their age, level of education, self-identity and ambitions. They now identify themselves as part of the population in the city, and they desire to have a more stable life there. They face new problems, and hence their needs are different from those of their fathers. All these give *You Dao* some hints about what opportunities and challenges it will face in the future.

Such is our story of "walking with the migrant workers." During these years, we have witnessed many migrant workers working without complaint. We witnessed their perseverance and their silent contributions to society. We heard many touching stories about them too. For all the friends who have participated in the work of *You Dao*, I believe that these experiences give us the opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of life, and should arouse feelings of thanksgiving in our hearts.