INSIDE AND OUTSIDE VIEWS OF CHINA’S MIGRANT CHILDREN

Master of Arts

by

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CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

“I hope I could buy a Benz when I grow up and have money,” said Cancan Gao, 9, in a narrow, 180-square foot room built of corrugated iron sheet walls and furnished with only two beds and a faded table. Cancan is from a rural village in Hubei Province, China, and now lives in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province with his parents who work in clothing factories.

This might explain why I was intrigued with children. I was astounded by how mature they could be. The world in their eyes may be not too different from the one in the adults’ eyes. Their conduct and thoughts may be strongly influenced by the surrounding environment and the society.

In Prof. Keith Greenwood’s class, Photography in Society, I was impressed by a “Shooting Back” project conducted by an American documentary photographer, Jim Hubbard. By giving cameras to homeless children and teaching them the basic skills of taking photos, Hubbard provided opportunities for the children to express their voices and their understanding of the world. I was amazed by those pictures -- they are honest, powerful, creative, and most important, they capture many intimate moments that an outsider hardly would experience.

Hence, when it came to design my master’s project, I decided to conduct a similar Shooting Back project with China’s migrant children, who are originally from rural areas but come with their job seeking parents to urban cities. Cancan is one of the 12 million school-age migrant children living in cities - there are another 22 million children who
are left behind in rural China when their parents work outside, according to a document released by the Ministry of Education of China in 2012.

What appealed me was migrant children’s interpretation of China’s rapid urbanization. I was also curious about how their perceptions and conduct would be influenced by the fast development. So I decided to use photography to explore these issues.

In addition, migrant children are deprived on many levels due to the low household income of their families and a household registration, Hukou, which divides the population into rural and urban residents. When rural residents leave their villages and migrate to cities, they are called “migrant workers” and are often denied access to urban welfare, social services, and urban employment. Their children are not eligible for urban public schools. Thus, I hope that the life of migrant children would be enriched through taking part in this project, and more important, their thoughts could be perceived by many people, especially those from urban areas.

The project included three parts - first, I assembled a group of 10-20 migrant children aged 8-12 and taught them basic knowledge of photography. All of the students lived in the Hua’anli Community, an urban village in Wuhan which were inhabited by more than 120,000 migrant workers. Second, I took my own pictures of migrant children and their families who lived in the Hua’anli Community. Last, I conducted a photo elicitation study with both migrant workers and non-migrant workers to examine whether my photos accurately depict the life of migrant children and their families.
In order to raise funds and awareness for the project, I started a crowd funding campaign on Demohour, a website similar to Kickstarter. The campaign not only provided money for me to arrange an exhibition for the children’s photographs, but also allowed many people to hear their voices, which was exactly what I intended to do. The experience of developing this project from a single idea to successful completion is precious. I learned the importance of having a desire and courage to explore. Also, since I plan to work as an independent documentary photographer or filmmaker in the future, it serves as a jumping off for my career.

Last but foremost, I greatly appreciate the two-year’s studying experience at the Missouri School of Journalism. With the classes that I took at MU and a research assistantship as a videographer, my professional skills of visual storytelling were greatly reinforced. Moreover, I was deeply impressed by the school’s respect for independent thinking and creativity, and a tolerance for diverse thoughts and opinions. This is what motivates me most to conduct this independent project.
CHAPTER 2:

Field Notes

Pre-Project Note, May 12, 2012

[Project-related excerpt from letter sent to Olympus to acquire point-and-shoot cameras]

Let me start by thanking you for taking the time to read this letter. My name is Shengze Zhu. I am a graduate student at the University of Missouri-Columbia with an emphasis in photojournalism. I am preparing a project as the last step to receive my master’s degree, and I hope that Olympus would help me complete this project by lending me twenty point-and-shoot cameras and one PEN System/OM-D System camera.

The Project

I have chosen to conduct a “Shooting Back” project with Lingzhi Elementary School, which was established in 1999, Wuhan, China for migrant children who were originally from rural regions but came with their parents to urban areas seeking jobs. It is also known as the “rooftop school,” because the classrooms are located in a worn down, four-floor apartment building and they use its rooftop as the playground for all 521 students.

Migrant children are deprived on many levels due to the low household income of their families and a discriminatory household registration principle known as “hukou” that is applied to them. So I decided to teach them photography in order to enrich and empower their lives as well as to hear their voices about the world they perceive.
I will approach the project in two ways. First, I will set up a photo class and assemble a group of 20 migrant children aged 10-to-12-year-old. I will teach them basic skills of photography. The central theme is to allow them to use the camera to perceive their surrounding world. There will be no limitation on what they can or cannot shoot, but a series of assignments will be given as guidance.

Second, I will shoot my own pictures to document the lives of these migrant children and their families. I will photograph the whole community at first, but gradually, I will focus on one or two families and follow them in order to present a deeper story.

The project will culminate as a joint exhibition of both the children’s and my work at a local gallery or school, or I will build a website to exhibit the children’s photographs on-line.

How Olympus Could Be Involved

David Rees and Rita Reed at the Journalism School of MU mentioned that Olympus has digital cameras that would be suitable for this project, and gave me your contact.

To successfully complete the project, I need twenty point-and-shoot cameras, such as Olympus VG-160 or VR-340 from July, 2012 to January, 2013. Migrant Children will use them to shoot their lives. When I am done with the project, I will donate the 20 cameras to Lingzhi Elementary School.

As for myself, although I have already had a DSLR camera, I also would like to use an Olympus PEN System camera or an OM-D system camera because of its
portability. I will use it to shoot both still photos and videos to document the lives of migrant children and their families, and I will donate it to the Journalism School of MU after I complete the project.

In exchange for letting me borrow equipment, I would welcome Olympus’s use of my photographs and videos and the children’s photographs (parental consent will be provided) for advertising or educational purposes. In addition, I will post the work in progress of the project at least 3 times per week on “Chinese Twitter”, Sina Weibo (www.weibo.com), which is one of the most prevailing social media platforms in the mainland of China.

Furthermore, I will credit Olympus as a sponsor for my project at the final exhibition, which will be viewed by many other Chinese photographers. I will also credit Olympus in my project summary, which will be consulted by many other MU photojournalism students as well. My example would encourage others to consider buying Olympus cameras as a viable, cost-effective means of shooting both their projects and their professional work.

I would greatly appreciate your help in executing my project, as I think it will contribute to the lives of the children who participate in it. I am including my resume to give you more of an idea of who I am and what I do. Thank you for your time and consideration. I realize I am asking for a lot, but I think the arrangement could benefit both of us. If you have any other question, please let me know.
June 04, 2012

Dear Committee,

I hope everything is going well with all of you. Sorry it has been taken me a little while to reconnect with you. I have been on a one-week break in Hong Kong and just came back to Wuhan last Monday.

Once I returned, I immediately contacted the principal of Lingzhi Elementary School and the other sources I knew. I hoped to participate in the Children’s Day activity on June 1st, because in China it is an important festival for children. However, maybe because the request was too sudden, at first the principal was unwilling to let me attend the activity. But then the principal told me that I could attend it, only if I give her some pictures of the activity. I thought it was fine so I made the “deal”.

So I visited the school and the community. I have to say the whole community (its name is Hua’anli Community) is in chaos - all the streets and alleys are narrow and crowded with garbage on it, and all the buildings are torn and shabby. It is surrounded by several trash sites and constructing sites (not sure whether they were building subways or light trail transit) but the smell was very bad. Overall the living conditions there were poor.

But I haven’t got a chance to photograph the environment of the community, because I felt like my entrance was abrupt, so taking out the bulky camera was a bit dangerous. Many residents looked at me when I was walking on the street. I think that was because the community was small, the residents would easily know if one was an
outsider. Also it’s like a tradition that I usually don’t take any photographs at the first visit. I just observe the subject and the environment by using my eyes and ears.

In addition, there are several communities near to the Hua’anli Community, but all of them are in much better conditions. So the contrast is obvious. When I entered into Hua’anli, I felt like entering into another world. It’s like a slum, and 90% residents are non-native residents of Wuhan. In other words, they are all migrant workers coming from other parts of the country. I had to admit that I had never been to a place like this before. So I guess it would take a little while for me to be familiar with it.

The children’s day’s activity was held in a park, which is about 1 kilometer (about 0.6 mile) away from the community. The park is new and under very good conditions. The Lingzhi Elementary School has built a small stage for performance. But unfortunately, all the students attending the activity are from the first grade or second grade (aged at 4-7), so they probably wouldn’t become the participants of my project in the future (I hope the participants are at least in grade 3, so they are able to interpret images and answer some questions). But all of them are migrant children. So I took many pictures of them. I’ve attached three photos to the email, so please download them and have a look. Also I found out that I’m able to use Flicker when I stay in the mainland of China. So in the future I could upload more photos to a Flicker account, then you could see the photos and give me some advice. How does it sound to you? Will it be more convenient for you? Please let me know.

I have to say the activity is in chaos too - it’s just too crowded and noisy, and the kids are very young, some of them kept crying during the whole activity.
An interesting thing is that I saw some parents (about 10) were using point-and-shoot cameras to take photos for their kids. I even saw a dad using a Canon 60D DSLR to take photos. So I wonder maybe some of the migrant workers families actually have cameras and they don’t need me to find a camera for their children. Anyway, I will ask the principal about it on this Tuesday. The principal was busy during the event because she had to manage the whole activity. So I haven’t discussed my project with her in detail, but I have scheduled a meeting with her on Tuesday.

Overall I have a basic understanding about what I am going to shoot after attending the activity and visiting the community. I have to say it’s more complicated than I thought, but I also think it’s a better choice than the NGO, because after the first glance, I’ve felt the drama and conflict existing there. Thus, after meeting with the principal this Tuesday, I probably will make a decision about the partnership.

Then for the cameras, at present I think Olympus is still the one who is interested in my project most. I’ve contacted with An Guangxi and his friend who is the head of a local newspaper, but none of them have a good source/access for cameras. Mr. Leone from Olympus asked me to fill an enthusiast request form with a much smaller camera request and more of a focus on what I can deliver to Olympus, then they’ll reconsider my request. I’ve completed the form and planned to send it to him today.

I am asking for 10 point-and-shoot cameras this time - one is about $100 on B&H, so in total it will be $1000 at most. At first I plan to ask for 5 cameras, but it’s just not enough for setting up a photo class. Also because Olympus is asking something for return, I need to give them some pictures and even a video, and post the work in progress
on China’s Twitter and Facebook every week - so I think 10 cameras is the proper amount.

If it didn’t work out, then I probably would ask my friends and relatives in order to borrow some cameras from them. My parents have two point-and-shoot cameras that seldom used, my boyfriend has two, and my cousin has one. I’m pretty sure I will find more cameras if I ask them for help. So if Olympus are not able to lend me the cameras, I’ll borrow them from my friends and relatives. But then I’ll have to consider the security issue - what if the kids break some cameras? Because I don’t think my friends and relatives would donate the camera to my project.

Overall I think it’s a fair beginning of the project. Nothing is confirmed but everything is keeping going forward.

Thanks again and hope all is well with you.

Best,

Shengze

June 07, 2012

Hello Rita and David,

I got some feedback from Olympus about the cameras. Unfortunately, Olympus cannot lend me the cameras because they thought my proposal appears to benefit the business unit in China more. So they recommended my project to Olympus China, but until now I haven’t received any feedback from them.
Also, they suggested that if I want to re-propose, I should focus on what I can deliver to the North America market, and think about only use Olympus cameras to shoot the project. It seems like that Olympus prefers to lend me two or three their feature products, rather than 10 cheap point-and-shoot cameras.

Here is what they replied to me: “I think you need to take a look at what cameras would the folks that would be interested in your story and your exhibit be interested in and what marketing value can you bring Olympus for their investment. I can assure you that the people attending photo exhibits like yours or reading a blog like this are not really buying our $99 point and shoots. They are more interested in PEN, OM-D and maybe our premium point-and-shoots.

If I were you I’d re-propose a project in which you leave your DSLR at home. Shoot the entire project using mirrorless and teach a class using two higher end cameras working in groups with the students and passing the camera around as you teach them photography. Perhaps you even use the small form factor of some of the faster street shooting lenses to get your camera into places that you couldn’t walk into in China with a cumbersome DSLR.”

His suggestion is helpful and makes sense, but it requires me to rearrange the photo class. Also I think that two cameras for 20 students are definitely not enough.

But I’m worry about the quality of cheap point-and-shoot cameras as well. So I think that, maybe I give the children some cheap point-and-shoot cameras to practice first (I will borrow them from my friends or buy some pre-owned cameras in China), and then pass the expensive Olympus cameras around them. In this way, each of them can use
Olympus once or twice, but at the other time, they still can shoot pictures by using cheap point-and-shoot cameras.

And for myself, I’d like to use the portable Olympus camera especially after seeing the whole environment of the community. Taking out a cumbersome DSLR is dangerous. But in some safer situations, like at migrant workers’ homes, I’d like to use my Nikon.

Thus, what should I tell them if I’d like to re-propose? I’m thinking of telling them my thoughts straightforwardly, because at present it seems like that buying some pre-owned cameras by myself is inevitable. But I’d like to try again, because having two Olympus is better than getting nothing. And due to the quality of images, I’d like to use those only shot by Olympus cameras for exhibition. But if it fails again, it’ll be fine and I’ll buy the cameras by myself.

Sorry to bother you again for the camera problem. It’s more complicated than I thought. Also I hope to hear your advice on it.

Thanks a lot.

Shengze
July 03, 2012

Dear Committee,

Sorry it has been taken me a while to contact with you, because I’d like to wait until there is something new to talk about.

I’ve decided to partner with the Linzhi Elementary School. As I told you before, Linzhi is located in a community which is under much worse living conditions. The children studying at Linzhi may need the photo class more than those taking part in the programs of the NGO in Beijing. The NGO has 80 cameras and many volunteers, and it has offered photo classes before. Also it offers many other kinds of after-school classes for migrant children. In contrast, Linzhi doesn’t have money, resources, and facilities to do these. So I feel like that the children at Linzhi need the photo class more, because they seldom have an opportunity to express their thoughts.

In addition, there are so many things in the community and Lingzhi that are photographically interesting. After the first visit, I’ve felt the drama and conflict existing there. Also I believe the shabby houses and trash sites are more visually appealing. So I think it is more proper for me to conduct the photo story with Linzhi.

I designed a poster to introduce the class and myself to the children and their parents, and I’ve sent it to the principal last week. She will help me to post it in the school. I am not sure whether the kids are interested in my class or not, because now it’s the end of the spring semester and they are busy preparing the exams. But I’ll ask the principal about their reactions to the photo class tomorrow or this Wednesday. The class will start in July, 18. Then I will teach them three times per week, and 2 hours each time.
We will have about four weeks’ classes this summer, then both the children and me will have a break. Then from September, I’ll teach them (the same group of students) once per week until the late October or early November. Then I will use one month to edit all the photos, and we’ll hold the exhibition from the late December to early January, as a way to celebrate the New Year.

As for the cameras, I’ve figured out a new way to solve this issue: I posted a message on China’s twitter, Weibo, in the early of June, after I got a bad news from Olympus North America and got nothing from Olympus China. The key point of the message was to ask people to recycle their “waste camera” - give it to migrant children and help them to learn photography.

Beyond my expectations, many people responded enthusiastically. Now I have nine cameras, and one of them is even from a stranger. She had a point-and-shoot camera that she rarely used, so she decided to give it to others who need it most. Then she lent the camera to me, and I promised her that I will send her a poster card which is made of a photo taken by a kid who will use her camera to learn photography.

So I stopped working on my proposal for Olympus North America. At first I planned to re-proposal, because they indeed gave me useful and detailed suggestions. But since people reacted to my project enthusiastically (far beyond my expectation, to be honest), I think that might be a better approach to collect cameras. Because in this way I will be able to use any kinds of gears I want to use (In contrast, if I accept the sponsorship from Olympus, I would have to use only Olympus cameras).
I may still buy three or four pre-owned cameras by myself because I am worry about that nine cameras are not enough for the class (the class should have 10-15 children). I’ve found some cheap pre-owned cameras online, which is about $50 each and in fair condition. So I guess I don’t need to worry about the cameras’ issue any more. And I am almost ready to start the project - just wait the kids to finish their exams. :) 

That's what happened in this month and I promise you that I'll write the field note regularly in July after the class begins. Hope you are all doing well and look forward to hearing your thoughts. Thank you!

Best,

Shengze

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**July 22, 2012**

Dear Committee,

I can’t wait to write this letter, because finally the photo class begins!

I’ve had two classes with them this week, and each lasted for 2 hours. The main content of the first class was to let them and me know each other. So first I introduced myself and the photo class, then I asked them to introduce themselves one by one, and passed around one point-and-shoot camera and took pictures for each other. There are 23 kids in the class, and most of them had never used a camera before (only one or two did). So they were curious about taking photos, but some of them are a little shy and nervous at
first. For instance, I asked who wanted to be the first to use the camera, nobody raised hands. They just looked at me quietly. So I had to start from those sitting in the front row, and asked them to pass the camera around. However, some students even didn’t want to be photographed at first. I encouraged them, and after all of them have tried once and knew which button was the shutter, I asked them to shoot the classroom and find the thing he/she like most. At this time they became more brave, many kids said “yes, I wanna have a try”. Some picked the blackboard, while some chose a Santa Claus picture on the wall.

I also taught them the importance of choosing different angles to shoot a subject. I asked someone to stand on a table to photograph the classroom, while asked others to get down and take a photo of it from a low angle. I also asked them to photograph someone closely, while asked others to photograph the one from a distance. Then I put all of these photos together, and asked them to find the differences. In this way, I tried to emphasize the importance of using different angles to shoot a same subject.

Then at the end of the first class, I grouped the children as ten teams. Although I have 12 cameras at present, I think it’s better to use 10 cameras first, just in case some cameras would be damaged or lost. Each team has 2 or 3 kids. Also, I put elder kids and younger ones together as a team, so the elder can look after the younger and the camera during the shooting process.

Then in the second class, I mainly taught them how to use the camera. Because all the cameras are different, I had to teach them group by group. So I brought some magazines with beautiful photos inside to the class (some are photo magazines, some are
tourism magazines, and the others are geographic magazines). In this way, when I taught a team to use the camera, the others can look those pictures. Because we didn’t have a projector, I think reading a magazine (NOT the text, Only the picture) might be an effective method for the kids to learn from others’ work.

Then, after all of them have learned how to use the cameras and read the magazines, I asked them to take a portrait for each other. I encouraged them to try different angles and different backgrounds. The kids were very exited - there were two little boys who even fought with each other, because both of them wanted to use the camera first.

At the end of the second class, I gave them an assignment. I asked them three questions - a. where do you live; b. what do you like most about the place; c. who lives in it - and required them to answer those questions only through pictures.

I also asked them to bring a letter to their parents, which was written by me earlier this week. In that letter, I emphasized the importance of taking care of the cameras, such as don’t drop the camera, don’t let it be splashed by water or rain, and the like. I also illustrated that I need their permission so that I can use and edit the children’s pictures in the future.

I have to say there are too many children in the class, so sometimes I feel like that I don’t know how to teach them together. Also because of this, I don’t have much time to take my own pictures during the class. But I did enjoy it a lot, and I’ve found some kids that I might want to focus on. Like the two boys I mentioned above, they are very naughty but smart. There is another boy who is quiet and rarely talks, but he listened to
my classes carefully and seemed like it a lot. I will pay more attention to them in the coming several weeks, and I hope I could find someone that I want to focus on before the summer class ends.

Another problem is that some of them seemed not understand what I mean during the class. I’ve tried to avoid all the professional terms, such as “aperture”, “focus”, or “overexposed”. Since those are young kids who never see or use a camera before, I think it’s too early to teach knowledge like these. I plan to let them to shoot pictures first. After they have a basic understanding about cameras and photography, I’ll go back to tell them what is aperture and shutter speed.

But I did mentioned the importance of shooting angles, because I saw all of them just stay at a same spot and click the shutter button. So I encouraged them to move and find a different angle to photograph the subject.

Tomorrow I’ll get their first assignment. I feel very exited, and a little worried. Hope all the cameras are still in a good shape. :)

I also attached several pictures. The first was shot by the kids while the second and third were shot by me. It is the first photo for most children, so many shots are unfocused. And I definitely will shoot more pictures in the future!

Thank you and hope all is well with you!

Best,

Shengze
Photos:

photos taken by migrant children themselves during the first photo class
A boy works on his maths assignment.

Hongfeng Sun, principal of the Lingzhi Elementary School gives a lecture to students.
July 30, 2012

Dear Committee,

Time passes much faster after the class begins. I’ve had four more classes with the children (three classes in the last week, and one class today), and I am so glad to see their improvements.

The main task of these four classes was to critique the photos taken by them, but we also went out together and took some pictures. The principal helped me to find a projector, so now it’s more convenient for me to show them some examples. But it’s difficult to keep their attentions when discussing the photos. They were very exited to see themselves on the big screen (although some girls felt a little embarrassed), and they liked it a lot, but their “love” could only last for 15 minutes or so at most. Then they became abstracted - some talked with each other, some played games, and some even fought with each other. So the lecture was limited to 40 minutes at most. Then we went out and took pictures together.

They really like taking pictures. Now, when I said “does anyone want to use the camera”, everybody shouted “yes”. But the temperature was very high outside. For instance, today is 98.4 F degree or even higher. So when we went to the rooftop of the building, which is also the playground of the school, everyone was exposed to the sunlight and kept sweating. I was afraid that some of them would get sunstroke. But luckily, everyone was fine and the kids enjoyed it a lot. I didn’t allow them to stay outside for a long time. Like today we just went out for 30 minutes.
I also tried to group them so we could go out as teams. Last Monday I separated them as four teams (each has four or five kids), and each went out for 15 or 20 minutes. And we went to the streets to take pictures for the community. However, in this way, I felt very tired, because I didn’t have time to take a break. Also when one team went out to take pictures, the others had to stay in the classroom and had nothing to do. So I only did like this once. Last Friday and today all of us just went to the rooftop so we could shoot pictures together.

I talked with other teachers and the principal about this problem, and they said they could help me next time. We may go to a nearby park together when the weather becomes cooler.

In the lecture part of these four classes, I focused on reviewing their photos. I gave all of them positive comments, and pointed out the advantages, because they just started to learn photography. I also gave them some advice. For example, when taking photos for home, a girl only photographed toys, some paintings on the wall, and a lamp in a corner. She only included a single subject in one picture. So after I gave her positive comments, I asked her, “what if you stay a little far away and include more subjects at a time? I’d like to see your lovely toy and the beautiful painting, but I still have no idea what your bedroom looks like. So when you take a picture for the toy lying on your bed, maybe you can try to take a picture for the toy and the bed together, rather than just photograph the toy alone. In this way I can see their relation and the whole environment of your room.”
I tried to tell them the difference between “close-up” and “wide-shot”, although I never mentioned these two professional terms. I also hope that they could understand there is no right and wrong when choosing “close-up” and “wide-shot”, and taking pictures does not like answering a maths question. It’s a personal choice and subjective preference, but they have to know the differences between different choices first. That’s why I made that suggestion, because I hope the girl could try different angles and know the different results between close-up and wide-shot first.

I also taught them some knowledge about colors and light, because I think these two elements are of great importance for taking pictures. Nothing profound - no professional terms and no theories. I taught them the importance of shadows first. I asked them to take pictures of shadows (that was the assignment of today), and find out the difference between a shadow at noon and a shadow in the late afternoon. Actually most of them knew it when I asked the question in today’s class, but I still asked them to take pictures.

Besides, I asked them what color will easily catch their eyes? Two pictures about a boy and his mother reminded me this question. In the first one, the boy, wearing a red T-shirt, stood in front of a tree, and in the second picture, his mother wore a white dress and stood in front of the same tree as well. The two photos are in similar composition, but the boy’s picture is easier to catch the attention. So last Friday I showed them the pictures in order to let them feel the difference, then asked them to observe people walking on the street during the weekend in order to find out the answer. And today I was so happy to
hear the right answer - red and yellow. I further taught them the concept of “warm color” and “cool color” today, and showed them many photos with a warm tone or a cool tone.

So far the class goes on well. They like taking pictures. And the camera is like a toy for them. But I am not sure whether their love of cameras would last for a long time or not. So I always tried to make my class as interesting as possible, and as easy-understand as possible. This Wednesday and Friday I will go to some kids’ home and take portraits for them. Those are children I am interested in making a deeper story, so I hope to know more information about their family.

Below is the link of some pictures taken by the kids. At first I planned to post them on Flickr, but it turned out that I couldn’t upload them! I haven’t found out the reason, so now I have to use a Chinese blog to post pictures. Please ignore all the Chinese words and just look at the photos. If you cannot open the website or the speed is very slow, please let me know, and I will find another approach to post pictures.

http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_7edb3a8f010183z3.html

Thank you and hope you are all doing well!

Best,

Shengze
August 7, 2012

Dear Committee,

Another short week has passed, and as of this moment, I have one more week with the children until the summer holiday. As always I have greatly enjoyed this week of teaching but I have also been very tired - every class-day I had to get up at 6:00am and drove 1 hour (at least) to the school, then spent 3 or 4 hours with the kids in a room of 98°F degree or higher without air conditioning, then drove 1 hour back to home. Thus, even though I really enjoyed it, I have to say I start to feel exhausted.

This week I mainly taught them the knowledge about light and shadow. Still, no profound knowledge or professional theories. I just asked them to observe light and shadow from their daily lives. For instance, I asked them to consider the different colors of lights, such as tungsten light, fluorescent light and sunlight, and tell me which one makes the picture warmer (I’ve taught them “warm” color and “cool” color last week). Besides, I taught them how to use shadows to make photos more interesting, and showed them examples from Lee Friedlander and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Because the assignment of this week was to find what they like on the street, I think Friedlander’s and Bresson’s street photography will provide ideas and thoughts for them. At first I was afraid that some of them are too young to understand the photos, but it turned out that they liked them a lot, especially Friedlander’s photos in which shadow of figures (usually Friedlander himself) and other subjects overlap in the photographic image.

In addition, since I mentioned Bresson, I also mentioned “decisive moment” in the class.
But I only explained the term in a simple, superficial way. I tried to let them know that photography is an art about moment, and the camera is able to capture 1/100 second or 1/1000 second of life. I asked them to blink their eyes and to feel how short one second could be. In this way I tried to let them understand “moment” first, and in the future, after they get to know photography more, I will go back to “decisive moment” and explain the term to them in detail.

I realized that teaching them also is a self-teaching process, because I must consider what I’ve learned and gained first, then find an effective, straightforward way to teach them what I know. It’s difficult, because I have no experience for teaching kids. But it’s enjoyable, because I get to know them and they get to know me. We are more like friends rather than teacher and students. and I am fairly sure that they’ve learned a few things about photography. I gained confidence and I greatly enjoyed teaching those interesting and inspiring (sometimes naughty) children.

However, a problem was that some of the kids have to go back to their home villages to continue their study in the fall, so they can’t take part in the photo class next semester. The reasons, in fact, are quite simple – some kids’ parents can’t find a job in the fall so they have to go back home; some kids’ parents can no longer afford their living expense in the city so they have to go back home; and some kids’ parents don’t have time to look after them because they have to work for long hours, then the kids have to go back home. It just like their “name” - migrant children - most of them migrate from one place to another to earn a living, and “migrating” is common for them.
Thus, some new students may take part in the photo class next semester (I also will keep those who have participated in the class in the summer and will stay in the fall). Furthermore, after I made home visits to seven students in the summer class last weekend, I haven’t found a kid that I hope to make a deeper story about him/her (as I proposed). There are three or four “candidates”, but none of their stories were exactly as what I want. I will further illustrate this issue in next field note because I still have three kids whom I will visit tomorrow after the class. Thus I think it’s fine to have new students taking the class. In this way, I will be able to know more migrant children.

Among those kids who will go back home in the fall, actually there are one or two that I really like. They took good photos and they are very open to me. However, I just can’t follow them to their hometown for a very long time because of the photo class here and also because of the traveling fees. I can visit their hometowns and photograph them once or twice, but I can’t stay there for a very long time.

So far the photo class went well, and most kids like taking photographs very much. My main worry is how to find the one or two kids that I hope to make a deeper story. And I will tell you the details of the children in the next field note, after I complete all the home visiting.

Here is the link of the kids’ photos from their second assignment - what do you like on the street. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_7edb3a8f01018h5b.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_7edb3a8f01018h5b.html)

Please, ENJOY!
If you cannot open the website or if the speed is very slow, please let me know. Thank you and hope you are all doing well! I miss Mizzou - although Wuhan is my hometown, I don’t know many photographers here, and it’s not easy to get on Facebook, so I have to admit that I feel lonely sometimes...

Best,

Shengze

August 13, 2012

Dear Committee,

As I write this, the summer session of the photo class has completed. Hope you all have a wonderful summer as well. While I really enjoy the job as a teacher, I have been looking forward to have a bit of a rest, since I have become increasingly tired recently. So my plan for the next ten days includes waking up without alarms and a trip to Hong Kong.

Well, of course I will also work on the editing part of photos and the preparation for the fall session and the research component.

I’ve enjoyed this last week at work as any other, but the main work was not to teach, but to visit the students’ families and talk with them in person. I also took environmental portraits for most of them. There is only one kid’s parents who did not
allow me to photograph in their apartment, because they thought their apartment was too shabby.

As I told you before, there were more than twenty students in the photo class. But some of them never showed up after the first or second class, and some of them are just too young to communicate with. Also, based on the kids’ photographs and performance during the class, finally I selected 10 kids and visited their homes.

So here are the details about the home visits, and the environmental portraits I took for them.

1. **Lijuan Wu, 12.**

Lijuan is smart, out-going, and sentimental. When I asked her to tell me a story between her and her mother, she cried. The story actually is common (I mean, it would happen in many Chinese families). It’s about that, after working for long hours, her mother still have to cook dinners and washes dishes. Lijuan felt sad when she saw the skin of her mother’s hands become rough and crack.

To be honest, I was surprised and perturbed when I saw her crying, since it was beyond my expectation. I thought she would tell me a funny story! But I did understand her. After all, I was a little girl before. There was a time that I was sentimental and would cry easily. Anyway, I changed the topic after she told me the story, because I didn’t want our first conversation become too oppressive.
She also told me that she likes singing and hope to be a pop star or a scientist in the future. She didn’t want to become a star but she is afraid that she would have no privacy. And she likes science, so she thought being a scientist might be a better choice.

So far I like Lijuan and her stories most, and she is one of the children that I hope to follow and make a deeper story. I’ve told her my plan and she agreed. But I need to talk with her parents and get the permission. I might meet with her parents around the 22th, August, since her parents are very busy recently.

Another issue is that Lijuan just graduated from the Lingzhi Elementary school, and will further her study in a boarding school this fall. The boarding school actually is not far away from the community. But because her parents doesn’t have time to take care of her, it’s more convenient for her to live in the school.
I guess it’s fine for me to make a story about her, even though she no longer is a student of Lingzhi. Because her family still live in the community, which is the subject (in a broad way) that I intend to shoot. So I will give her a camera when the semester begins, so she can take photos at school, but my shooting will mainly focus on her family, especially her relation with her mother.

2. Qin Xu, 12.

Qin is easy-going and likes to be photographed. She has a baby brother and a younger sister. Although China has the one-child policy, most families in the rural areas have multiple kids. Because they need more people to farm, and most importantly, they want a boy to inherit the family’s blood. Well, I am not sure the exact reason why Qin’s family have three kids, but these two are common sense among Chinese and may explain it. I’ll figure it out when I get to know her and her family better.

Qin’s family only rent a room in Wuhan, so six people - her grandma, her parents, little sister and baby brother, and her share the room. The walls are dingy and the furniture are huddled together. Outside of the apartment building are railroads, and trains roar past every ten minutes or so.
Qin is another child that I hope to make a story. I am interested in the living conditions of the whole family. I’ve got permission from her. Although I haven’t got permission from her parents, I’ve met with her mom and grandma, and took photos for them (actually it was them that asked me to take a photo). So I don’t think it would be a problem for me to get the permission.

But Qin also will go to the boarding school to further her study. I am not sure whether can I have two graduates of Lingzhi as the subjects, since what I proposed is to photograph Lingzhi and its students and the whole community. If I mainly focus on three children, I don’t mind one of them has graduated from Lingzhi, but two seems to be not
appropriate. Hope to hear your suggestions about this problem. But I’ll follow both Qin and Lijuan first in order to get to know them better.

3. **Kai Xiao, 8.**

Kai is one of the naughty boys in the class. And he is very smart and out-going. Maybe because he is younger than the others, he always spoke freely in front of me, and also acted freely. Unlike the other girls and boys who said nothing when I asked questions, he liked to interact with me. And he always got the point, just as the idiom illustrates: “children and fools tell the truth”!
But the only problem is that sometimes we can’t “communicate” with each other. For instance, I asked every child about his/her dream, but Kai can’t answer this question. Because he is too young to think about it. So although Kai always gave me funny, innocent, and candid feedback, I don’t think these were his thoughts - his just said these unconsciously.

Thus, although I like him very much, I like his frankness and innocence (and also the instinctive photographs shot by him), I am not sure whether should I follow him. He is on the list, but I’d like to know him and his family better first.

Cancan just came to Wuhan this summer. The photo class was one of the first several classes he took in Wuhan. He likes playing soccer, but he thinks he doesn’t good at it.

His mother doesn’t have time to take care of him because she has to work 12 hours every day in a nearby clothing factory. His father doesn’t live with them now because he works and lives in a construction site which is a bit far away from the community. So Cancan has to take care of himself.

5. Zilong Xiong, 12
Both Zilong and Zhekai seemed to be reluctant to talk to me. No matter what I asked, their answers were short and ambiguous. Maybe because they were shy. Also, both of them will go back to their hometowns to continue the study, so it’s impossible for me to follow them. Thus, after the short conversation, I just took a portrait for them.

So far I think Cancan is the boy that I may follow and make a deeper story. There is another boy, Jiaming Wu whom I really like, and we have very good interaction, but his parents didn’t even want me to shoot a photo in their apartment (I mentioned it in the beginning of this field note). I talked with his father twice, but he still didn’t like my idea. Also his mom said that Jiaming might go back to home next semester. So I had no choice.
In addition, there is a boy, Runlin Zhao who forget the appointment twice, so I haven’t made the home visit with him. I told his father the time and location, but Runlin didn’t showed up. So I thought maybe they didn’t want me to photograph as well. So Cancan seemed to be the boy fitting my long-term shooting most (Kai is just too young).

However, since new students will take part in the photo class in the fall, I may find the right person as the project goes on.

7. Shiyuan Tang, 12
Ying will go back to her hometown in the fall, while Shiyuan will transfer to another school. Also, they are too shy. So I don’t think I’ll keep photographing them.

That’s all! I spent four afternoons to visit them one by one. I have to say I was shocked when I saw the conditions of some apartments, because they are just too dingy and shabby. No air conditioning (the temperature is over 100F at noon!) and even no appliances (Oh, except the fan and the bulb). The interior walls are damaged and the floors are full of dirts. Can’t imagine they live there.

Another thing is that, to be honest, it’s not easy to communicate with children. Or maybe I should say I don’t know how to communicate with them. Teaching them in the class is different than meeting with them in person. Sometimes I don’t know what to talk
about. I don’t want to always ask them questions (like in the class), but if I don’t ask, some of them wouldn’t say anything.

So I have to tell myself, take it easy and be patient, because these were our first meeting outside of the class. I also used an instant film camera (mine is a Fuji) to take photo for them. The point-and-shoot cameras only allow them to shoot but don’t give them any photos But by using the instant film camera, they are able to own a picture immediately. They really liked it. And I hope that in this way, they also will like me better.

Overall I greatly enjoyed this summer. It’s different and challenging! And I hope in the fall both the kids and me will shoot amazing photographs.

Thank you so much for reading this long, long letter. And hope you are doing well!

Best,
Shengze

August 28, 2012

Dear Committee:

I guess you probably are busy preparing for the new semester. Hope everything goes well with all of you. I have been really relishing waking up without alarms in the
past fifteen days, but I also feel excited about the coming new semester. Besides, except for enjoying the holidays, I’ve done some work for my project.

First, in order to raise money for my project, especially for the exhibition part, I posted my project on a website, Demohour (www.demohour.com). Actually Demohour is a Chinese version of Kickstarter (www.kickstarter.com), a crowd funding platform for creative projects. I spent two weeks working on it, and they just published my project on the website yesterday.

Here is a screenshot of the front page! I knew you can’t read Chinese, but I really hope to share it with you!

As same as Kickstarter, Demohour uses a crowd funding method, which means that a project relies on the collective efforts of individuals to conduct. Most times, supporters/backers donate money to a project. In my case, people who like my project donate money to it, and I will give them something for return (I plan to make postcards, burn DVDs, and even print books as the awards for supporters).

My goal is to raise a minimum of 5000RMB (about 800 dollars) within one month. Now I’ve got 1880RMB in two days, and I have 29 days left to raise the rest of the money. If I couldn’t receive 5000 before Sept. 26, then I would get nothing, and Demohour would give the money back to the supporters. But if I could get more than 5000 before the deadline, I would get 90% of the total amount (no max limitation), and Demohour would get 10% as the service fee.
Well, I am not sure whether the project would succeed or not on Demohour, but I think it’s an effective way to let more people know my project. Lots of people tweeted my project in these two days, and I’ve got lots of messages/replies/questions. Some also expressed their insights: for instance, one asked me why I label the kids as “migrant children” in the title, because she thought I should not label them; others questioned what can I bring to the kids in a long term, especially after the project completed.

I’ve explained my thoughts to them in detail (tried my best, and definitely be patient ). I think these questions at least made me to rethink many issues, such as why I intend to do it and what I’ll bring to the kids.

Also, the crowd funding campaign requires me to arrange the timing of the project, because I need to tell the supporters the exact time that they’ll receive the awards. So now I feel that people’s attentions and supports, working as a driving force, motivate me to complete all the tasks one by one.

The only problem of doing this kind of promotion work is that it really cost time and energy! I’ve felt very tired after staring at the laptop screen for the whole day and kept answering various questions and replying to different people. But since I plan to do freelance and independent work in the future, this crowd funding campaign seemsto be an useful experience for me. At least I learned a new approach to raise money.

However, I did feel that I need to focus on the project itself more, such as preparing for the class, the shooting, and the research part. So I politely refused the help from some friends at local newspapers. They saw my project on China’s twitter and asked whether they can report my project, but I think it’s not the proper timing to do it.
It’s just too early to do so, because I am still at the beginning stage of the project, and also because I don’t have any time and energy to deal with the media and interviews. So I told them maybe November (after I complete the photo class part) is a good time to do it. Overall I think I really need to concentrate on the project itself (especially the shooting and the research part) and cut down other distractions. I know there is a conflict: on the one hand, I hope more people know the project and support it so that I will have more money to do it and the project will be known by others; but on the other hand, getting more attentions means getting more distractions. Like today, at first I planned to look at those footages, but then it turned out that I spent the whole day working on Demohour. I felt happy to see I’ve got 1880RMB but I also felt upset because I haven’t look any footage yet.

Maybe this is the dilemma that every beginner would face when using the crowd funding method. I don’t know others, but I’ll embrace the attempt as a positive learning experience.

An effective way to let me focus on the project, rather than the promotion work is to schedule some shooting assignments. So I arranged a busy weekend for myself. From this Thursday to next Monday, I’ll have three shooting assignments. I’ve got full permission from one family, Qin Xu (her information was presented in last field note), so this Thursday and Saturday I will photograph her packing her luggage and going to the boarding school (for the first time of her life).
Also, I’ll go to the Lingzhi Elementary School to photograph the first day of the fall semester. But I’m still not sure whether the class begins on Sept 1st or Sept 3rd, because the principal asked me to call her on August 30th to confirm the date.

Another thing is that, last week I gave two kids cameras and asked them to shoot whatever they want. These two are the ones that I may make a deeper story. But still, I didn’t get permission from their parents (only the kids agreed), and also, I’m not sure whether they are the “right” subject for the project. So I need to spend more time with them to make the decision.

So that’s it! I’ll get back to you next week and hopefully, with some good photos.

Hope you all have an amazing new semester!

Best,
Shengze

September 17, 2012

Dear Committee,

Sorry it has been taken me a little while to report the update. I have been very busy over the past few weeks - each week I shot twice at least, and taught the kids once, also I was busy working on the crowd-funding campaign. I haven’t made great progress on any of them, but I see everything goes on the right direction. Now I’d like to share with you what I’ve done in the last few weeks.
1. Funds Raising and the Exhibition

I’ve got 3820 RMB on Demohour, which means I’ve completed 76% of the goal. Now I have 9 days left, so I think I would successfully raise enough money for the exhibition.

Besides, another two media organizations (one local and one national) contacted with me, but I politely refused their interview request. One of them also said that they would like to publish the kids’ photographs, but I think it’s still too early to do that. One thing for sure is that I would not give them the photos for free.

In addition, an art and design school of a local university sent me an email and told me that they hope to “cooperate” with me to complete the project together. So I asked them how would they like to “cooperate”. It took them ten days to reply my email (they explained that they were very busy because it was the beginning of a new semester), and they told me that, on one hand, some of their students who learn photography at school can help me to teach the kids; and on the other hand, they might provide a place for me to hold the exhibition. They also illustrated that they hope to keep the photo class as a long-term project.

Well, I haven’t replied them yet, because I was too busy recently as well, also I’d like to hear your suggestions about it. At first I thought they might provide great help for the exhibition, but now since I probably would get enough money to do it, I prefer not to “cooperate”. Because I am afraid that the “cooperation” may make the project too complicated, you know, let too many people get involved. I’m worried about that I may lose the control of the whole project if I partner with them. After all, in the first place the
project should be my master’s project at MU. It’s not a public welfare program or a philanthropy project. So the goal is not to let more kids get involved, and I don’t plan to run it in a long-term, which, I suppose, differs from the motive of the school. Thus, I prefer to rely on my friends to find a location for the exhibition and complete the project on my own, because I think the “cooperation” would cost me a lot of time and energy. If I cooperate with them, I would spend much time on bargaining the details with them. But if I ask my friends (and my friends’ friends) for help, I might just need to buy them a beer.

Thus, personally, I prefer not to cooperate with them. But I’ll make the final decision after visiting my friend’s friend’s gallery and studio this week.

2. Photo Class and Shooting

You probably remember that I said new students will be added to the photo class, but it turned out that too many students will be added. The principal of Lingzhi didn’t set up a photo class for me. Instead, she asked me to go to every class beyond 3 grade to give lecture. I definitely don’t like the idea! I’ve clearly told her my plan and goals several times - each time she said sure, but she never follow the plan! I understand that she wants more students to get involved, but again, that’s not my goal. Thus, to be honest, I don’t want to give lecture to the students any more. Because there are three or four classes (around 60 students in total) that she wants me to teach, but I definitely can’t do it.

But in the last few weeks, I still go to the school and teach the classes (only once per week, but each lasted half day). Each time I met with different kids so I really don’t
like this kind of teaching. The only reason that I did it was that I need to photograph the school, especially the flag-raising ceremony (you’ll see the photos in the attachment). But after I get what I want, I probably wouldn’t go to the school and teach the kids any more. However, I still will give students the camera and meet with them every week. But there will be no regular photo class. Without the help of the school, it’s really hard for me to set up a meeting with all the kids at one time. So I have to meet with them one by one.

Also, as what I proposed, I think it’s time for me to change the concentration of the project from the photo class to my own shooting. I’ve got plenty of photos shot by the kids, so I think it’s time for me to focus on the kids. Now I’ve picked four kids, and I’ll let each of them take a camera. Every week I’ll meet with them and copy the photos. Also I’ll give them my advice. Then I’ll photograph two of them and their family. I’ve started to photograph a girl, Qin Xu, and you’ll see many photos in the attachment. Another character is a boy, Cancan Gao, and I probably will begin to photograph him and his family in the end of the September.

Qin Xu, 12, has a little sister (3-year-old) and a little brother (9-month-old). Her mum doesn’t have a job, because she has to look after the two kids. Her father is a carrier of a market, while her grandma picks plastic bottles from trash sites and sell them to recycle sites to earn some money. The six live in a same room, which functions as their bedroom, living room, and dinning room. Now Qin furthers her study in a boarding school because her parents don’t have time to look after her, and also because that middle-school provides fee-waiver for the accommodation.
That’s the basic information about this family, which is typical and representative for migrant families.

As for Cancan Gao, 9, he just moved from the countryside to Wuhan this July. His parents both work for clothing factory. They only have one-day break for half of the month, and everyday they have to work from 8am to 9:00pm or 10:00pm. So most time, Cancan has to do everything by himself - he goes to school alone, goes back home alone, stays at home alone, and has dinner alone.

I haven’t took any pictures at his home (except the portrait), because I haven’t found a time to talk with his parents in person. I’ve met with them before, but at that time I haven’t decided if I would photograph Cancan. It seems like that his mother will have no problem about the shooting, but I am not sure about his father. But since most time Cancan has to do everything by himself, I think I still can take some photos. That’s why I have to wait a bit, because I hope to visit his parents in person before start the shooting.

So now I mainly focus on Qin and her family. The apartment is very small and cramped, so I don’t have many spaces and angles for the shooting. The room has great window light (except in the early morning and late afternoon), but the kitchen is too dark. Her little sister is very naughty, acting like a boy. She likes to be photographed a lot, but sometimes she wants to touch my lens or wants me to play with her. I’ve told her many many times that please don’t touch my camera, and I have to take photo first, but it just doesn’t work out well. I’ve photographed them four times but she still acted like that. I really don’t know how to deal with little kid because I can’t reason with her. Hope to hear your advice on it.
Except for this, I really enjoy shooting Qin and her family. They are very friendly and also very open to my shooting.

3. Research

Since I’ve started to shoot my own photographs, I’m also preparing for the research component. As what I proposed, I’ll pick ten pictures shot by me for the interview. But now I don’t think I have ten pictures to show. So I’d like to wait until the late of September to start it.

That’s it! Overall the last few weeks is a bit intense but I really enjoy it because I get the permission and start to shoot my own photographs. I have to say, I do like shooting better than teaching... :) Hope you are all doing well and enjoy the photographs. I am looking forward to hearing your advice!

MANY THANKS.

Shengze
PHOTOS:

(UP) Qin, 12, and her little sister, Mengqi, 3, dressed up at 6:30am of the first day of the school.
(Down) A shattered mirror and broken comb that they use.
(UP) Qin was texting her friend. She said she can’t live without the cellphone. Even using cellphone is strictly forbidden at school, she still took it.
(DOWN) Qin and her father waited for blood test in a clinic at 7:30am. The school requires every student to have physical check-up before the class begins in order to ensure nobody takes infectious diseases such as Hepatitis B Virus (HBV)
(UP) Two students prepared for the flag-raising ceremony at 7:30am, which is a patriotic routine at every Chinese school. During the ceremony, students and teachers hold the flag and sing the anthem together. However, Lingzhi Elementary School doesn’t have a mast right now, so they have to glue the flag onto the wall.

(DOWN) The half-hour school routine takes place on the rooftop every first day of the week. The students were asked to stand firm and stay focused.
September 29, 2012

Dear Committee,

I plan to write this field note last Sunday, but it turned out that I got a really bad cold, and I slept for two days. I’m sorry for the delay, now I feel much better and I would like to share the updates with you.

1. Fund-Raising and Exhibition

Yes, I got the money! After 30-days’ campaign, I got 5120 RMB (about 800 dollars) for the project. The money will be mainly used for the exhibition, including
photo printing, photo mounting, postcard making and the like. I also met with an owner of a local café last week. The café is not large, but it’s cozy and spacious. It’s more like a saloon, because it holds weekly activities for people to watch films together, or read books together. Overall I think it’s a good place to hold the exhibition. So I probably will partner with the café to hold an exhibition in January, 2013. But I will meet with the owner in October to confirm the details.

2. Photo Class and Shooting

I taught the kids once this week, but I don’t think I will teach any photo classes any more. What I wrote in the last field note is one of the reasons, but the most important one is that the Lingzhi Elementary school now faces a severe problem the district government attempted to shut it down. The principal received a closure notice on Sept. 21, which said that the school’s building have security, fire safety and electrical violations, and it is not certified to operate as a school according to education regulations. The district government will relocate students to other government-owned schools to ensure they can continue their studies.

It’s true that the school is decaying and shabby. However, the whole community actually has security, fire safety and electrical violations. If that is the reason to close the school, the whole community should be shut down as well. Another problem is that the most close government-owned school is more than 10 bus-stops away from the community. It’s just too far away for the children to continue their study there. Also, the tuition and fees at government-owned school is much higher than those of the Lingzhi
Elementary school, so many migrant workers families can’t afford it. And the most ironic thing is that, Lingzhi was established in 1999 and it has all the license and certifications to operate the school.

The principal is still negotiating with the district government about the closure. For me, personally, I definitely hope the school wouldn’t be shut down. But even if the school is closed, I think I am still able to complete the project. First, I’ve established good relationships with some kids and their parents. Thus, even if the school is closed, I still can meet with some of them and teach them photography. Second, I’ve collected enough photographs to hold the exhibition. As what I wrote in last field note, my current concentration is to shoot one or two kids and their family. So the closure of the school would not have much negative impacts on my projects.

Another thing is that, I’ll go to Qin Xu’s hometown next Monday and Tuesday with her, her parents and her little brother (YEAH!). Next week is National Day’s Holidays, and Qin Xu’s family plan to go back to their hometown to attend her grand-uncle’s birthday party. I think it’s a precious opportunity for me to take good photos! Her hometown is not too far away, it’s about two hours’ driving. And I am so exited about it!

Cancan Gao and his parents will go back to their hometown next week as well. But I chose Qin Xu because I have a better relation with her and her parents than Cancan’s family. But I’ll give Cancan a camera so that he can take some photos.

Well, Cancan just lost a camera last Sunday. He left it at a bistro, and his parents spent the whole afternoon looking for it, but they found nothing. Luckily, the camera is a second-hand camera that I bought online, so it’s not expensive. I am just worry about that
Cancan would lose another camera when going back to his home village. But I decide to trust him one more time, because he loves taking pictures. Also, I would like to see how does the home village look like in his eyes. Besides, I’ll give another girl, Lijuan Wu a camera during the National Day’s holidays as well.

Here are some photos that I shot this week. Because of the cold, I didn’t have time to select and tone the photos. So here are just a small amount of them without post editing. I will share more pictures with you after the holiday.

3. the Research Component

Since I got to shoot more and more photos, I’ll start the research part after the break!

So, that's it! Hope everything goes well with all of you. Thanks.

Best,

Shengze
Photos:

(UP) Having breakfast.

(DOWN) In break.
(UP) A bubble made by balloon glue.

(DOWN) The way Can Can Gao’s parents use to dry up the clothes.
(UP) Qin Xu’s little sister, Manqin Xu.

(DOWN) During the half-hour flag-raising ceremony, students are required to stand firm and stay focused. However, it’s hard for some kids to follow the rule.
(UP) A view from classroom window.

(DOWN) Exposed wires in the Hua’anli Community.
October 22, 2012

Dear committee,

I just realized that it’s been a bit of a time since my last update, but that’s because I’ve been very busy lately. I’m working on my own shooting, the exhibition, and the research component. Since I didn’t write for a long time, I do have a lot of things to share with you. I’ll mainly talk about my own shooting in this email, and I’ll send you another one tomorrow or the day after tomorrow to talk about the exhibition and the research part.

First, you can download the attachment to see more pictures. I’ve visited Qin Xu’s hometown, Zhandian village during the national day’s holiday. But I only stayed there for one day (I left home at 5:30am, and picked them up at 7am, and arrived at the village at 9am, then I left at 5pm, right before the darkness), because there was no room for me to sleep. They only have one bedroom and one bed. I didn’t want to bother their relatives, and also, Qin didn’t want to stay overnight. So we went back together. It’s a quiet and small village, everyone knows each other. The population should be around 100, but now only seniors live there. No internet, very bad phone signal, so the only “contemporary” entertainment for them is television. It’s an isolated village, even though it’s not far away from Wuhan (only need to drive 1 hour and half).

I also shot video interviews with Qin, Qin’s mother, and Qin’s father. So now I know them very well. I also shot her father’s work. But I only took a clip of video. Her father, Jiasong is a carrier - he has a tricycle with a motor on it, and he drives the tricycle to transport products from a construction materials market. In fact he is not an employee of that market, he just stays at the front door and waits people who need help. When
people buy products inside, they will call her father and other carriers to take the products to another place.

The market definitely doesn’t allow me to take pictures. There are many security guards, and when I took out my camera, one immediately asked me what I do... At that time I was still out of the market, so I told him I just photographed the street. I think I should ask the manager or someone for permission first, but then it’ll be very complicated. Also, Jiasong is very busy everyday. He works from 7am to 7pm, and 7 days per day, because he has to raise his mom, wife, and three children. I would feel very bad if my shooting influence his work or even worse, make him lose his job.

You know Chinese are very nervous about cameras. Most Chinese don’t want to be photographed. Like when I photographed Jiasong, other carriers persuaded him not to do that. Luckily, Jiasong thought it was fine, he said we were not doing something wrong, like steal or rob. But I can feel he was still nervous.

So finally we figured an idea. I asked him to use his tricycle to drive me around, and I only photographed in the tricycle. Since it ran fast, most people haven’t got a chance to ask me what I do. Also, I picked the early morning (before 8am) as the shooting time, since there were not so many people and trucks around the market. I chose to shoot video, because we can see he was riding a tricycle, like he is carrying something from one place to another (that’s his job), and we can also see the environment of his working place. I think the video is good, but I really hope I can shoot more. Unfortunately, I am not sure whether can I shoot this situation any more.
Besides, I had dinner with Cancan Gao’s mother - his mother insisted to pay the bill because Cancan lost a camera. We talked a lot and now I know Cancan’s family well, too. Their living conditions are much better than other migrant families, because they have worked in Shanghai for 8 years (since 2000), and they only had one child, so they got to save some money. They’ve bought an apartment in their hometown, and also bought a mini van. They moved back to Wuhan 3 years ago, because it’s closer to Cancan. And this July, they took Cancan to Wuhan for the first time and sent him to the Lingzhi Elementary school. So actually my photo class was Cancan’s first class in Wuhan. Cancan really likes to take pictures. He wants to photograph everyday. But after he lost a camera, his father spanked him and didn’t allow him to take picture alone. Actually I think it’s fine - I mean, Cancan is only 9 years old, I don’t want to blame him for lose that cheap camera, and I would like to give him another one. But his parents still felt guilty, then we had that dinner. But thank to that camera, I got to know them better.

From July to now, I only met with his father and mother once (except the dinner), and we just talked 5 minutes, because his parents are really really busy. Both of them are working for clothing factories, and sometimes they have to work from 8am to 11pm. And they only have 1 day break every half of a month. So Cancan is always alone. Sometimes he goes to his best friend, Shi Yang’s home to do homework or have dinner. So I haven’t got a chance to photograph Cancan with his parents, because hardly could I meet with them.

But Cancan told me many stories about his family. He even told me some secrets. For instance, he told me that his family was very poor in the past - his grandma has 6
kids, but she didn’t have money to raise all the kids, so she dropped the youngest one to the septic tank after he was born. I shot this conversation in video, but I am not sure whether I can use it. Cancan said that it was his father told him this secret, but I am not sure whether should I ask his father to prove it. Because it’s like a taboo, I’m afraid that his father would blame him again. I believed that in China, similar stories did happened in the past, but in this specific case, I am not sure if it was true. Maybe it is just a kid’s innocent saying (but we also know that sometimes, kids tells the truth).

I think this is a tough ethical issue that I confronted with so far. Another one is about my relation with migrant workers. It’s really hard but important to establish a stable and reliable relation with the subject. Conducting a long term project is totally different than shooting a one-day assignment, because you can’t meet them, shoot the pictures, and just leave; because you’ll meet them again and again and again. So I have to know them, and they need to know me, then we are able to establish a reliable relation, and most important, we become to trust each other. I realizes that my shooting influenced their life, and their story also influenced me. In other words, I believe that after the project is completed, both of us have an impact in each other’s life.

Another thing is that when I went to Qin Xu’s home and photograph them for a whole day, her mother always asked me to have dinner with them, or asked me to eat fruits and drink water. I tried not to do so, but there would be once or twice that I had to have dinner with them. It would be rude If I didn’t accept the invitation. Also, Qin asked me to help her to do the homework, so I always spent one hour or so working on that. I just can’t say no. It’s not because that I want to please her to get more stories, it’s because
that she treated me like her elder sister, and she needed a sister to help her. So in that situation, I can’t say no - I can’t say, hey, I’m just shooting my pictures and I can’t help you to do your homework.

I mean, when you spent many of your time with your subject, when they told you their secrets and cried in front of you, you couldn’t say, hey, I’m just a photographer and I just try to document your life, and please pretend that I am not here.

Of course I clearly remember my task and my job, but I can’t be a photographer all the time. So maybe after I finish my shooting, I will just bring some fruits and milks to visit them, and we’ll just talk, or have dinner together, and there’ll be no camera involved.

Another thing is that both Cancan’s family and Qin’s family likes my pictures very much. I printed many pictures, and they were so happy to see them!

So, that’s it! I’ll send you another email later to detailedly illustrate my thoughts about the exhibition and the research part.

Time just runs so fast, and I hope everything goes well with you. Rita, hope you are getting better when you see this email, and I wish you a speedy recovery!

Many Thanks,

Shengze
(UP) Qin’s father, Jiason Xu, 40, is a carrier. He rides a tricycle to transport products in a construction materials market. He works from 7am to 7pm, 7 days per week because he has to raise his mother, his wife, and three children.

(DOWN) Qin looks at the old pictures of the family. She lives in Zhandian with her grandma until she was 9.
(UP) A water pump. Since Qin's family haven't lived in Zhedian for a very long time, there is no electricity and tap water supply.

(DOWN) Qin's mother, Yanhong is making the bed.
(UP and DOWN) When Qin was 9, she went to Wuhan to visit her parents for the first time. She stayed in Wuhan for 20 days and she didn't want to go home, "I don't want to live in that decrepit house any more!" She cried and yelled at her parents. Also the only elementary school in Zhanda was shut down. So they had to let her stay in Wuhan with them. Now, almost 5 years passed. Qin had a strong aversion to her hometown. She didn't want to stay there overnight. And she kept playing with her cellphone alone during the daytime. "There is nothing fun here. And the signal is so bad." She complained.
(UP) the neighborhood

(DOWN), since the signal of the cellphone is bad, Qin has to watch TV to kill time.
Qin’s little sister, Manqin, is looking for her clothes after taking a nap in a Saturday afternoon.

Manqin, 3, never goes back to Zhanhuan, because she was “illegally” born and her birth hasn’t been registered. Some rural areas, including Zhanhuan, allow people to have a second child if the first was a girl; however, having three children is still strictly forbidden.

Jieqiong, like many other people from rural areas, had a strong preference for sons due to cultural and economic reasons. So he chose to raise a third child, and luckily, it was a boy. Then he decided to register the boy’s birth first, rather than Manqin’s. Non-registered children cannot go to elementary schools. But to register Manqin’s birth, the family need to pay 30,000 RMB penalty.
(UP) Mangin loves her little brother and tries to kiss him.

(UCW16) Although Qiqi lives in a boarding school and only go back to home during the weekend, she considers her little brother and sister as too annoying. “I even can’t do my homework. Everyday I said I would do my homework, Mangin said she would, too. But she only knows how to write 1.” So qiqi usually goes to the rooftop of the building to “take a break.”
(UP and DOWN) Cancean Gao’s best friend in Wuhan, Shi Yang, plays with himself on the street. He was waiting for Cancean. They usually went back to home together and have dinner together.
(UP) A underpass in the Hu'ai ni Community

(DOWN) Since the streets are too narrow, motorbikes are the most popular transportation tool in the Hu'ai ni Community
(UP) A typical cloth-washing-and-drying method. (I just like the light of this picture!)

(DOWN) In the front door of the community, there is a large advertisement of a Chinese sportswear brand. Thousands of migrant workers will pass through it everyday. (I just like the contrast between the pop stars and migrant workers.)
(UP) In the Haoranli community, cables and wires are hanging loosely in a narrow passage between buildings.

(DOWN) Trash is simply dumped in the narrow passage between buildings in the Haoranli Community.
October 25, 2012

Dear Committee,

Here is my first detailed update about the research component.

Regarding the proposal, I need to interview 12 person in total (6 migrant workers and 6 non-migrant workers), and I’ll show them ten pictures shot by me.

So, here are the ten pictures that I chose. It’s really hard to choose ten from hundreds of photos, but one general principle that I followed was to include as many aspects as I can.

Also, I don’t plan to focus on one person or one family. I picked 6 individual photos (each reflects a different perspective) and 4 pictures about Qin Xu and her family. But there is no story in Qin Xu’s pictures. They are still ten separate pictures.

Besides, some of the pictures are not “good”, in other words, they won’t be included in the final selection of photos. But I think all of them are appropriate examples to evoke discussions for the research.

01- It’s like an opening. It’s an overall introduction of migrant children. You saw the whole environment, and you saw the contrast between the rooftop in the foreground and the high buildings in the background. Also, since most schools in China won’t use a rooftop as the playground to hold the flag-raising ceremony, viewers should know the school is kind of special and different.
02- Since there is no playground, students have to do exercise inside of the building. Also, you see nothing on the ground - no wood flooring, no ceramic tiles, no carpet, and no plastic flooring. You may also notice how dirty the walls are. So viewers should know the school is under poor conditions.
03- first, the kid is alone on the street. This hardly would happen in mid-class families, because the parents would consider it as too dangerous. Second, from those advertisements painted on the wall, viewers may be aware of a fact that the district is under poor conditions. Also, the kids’ face was dirty, but a kid from a mid-class family seldom would have a dirty face, because his/her parents would clean it as soon as possible.

04- the first time when I visited the Hua’anli community, I was frightened by the wires and cables. It’s just too dangerous! Especially in a rainy day! So I walked very carefully, but I still didn’t feel safe. But I noticed that nobody pay attention to it except me. Even a little kid was get used to it. So I think it’s a perfect method to distinguish outsiders and insiders.
05- A common (and usually “only”) entertainment for most migrant children - watching TV. Even though the television was out of date and it only had four or five channels, the kid enjoyed it. Also, there is no bed and no air conditioning in the room.
06- the bed was in a mess. and the newspapers were torn. But what’s interesting is that, the kids seemed didn’t care about that. He looked happy in the picture.

![Image of a boy standing in a messy room]

07- the girl was doing her homework on a bed, which would never happen in a mid-class family. Also, few chipboards was lying on the bed. And there was a cellphone as well.

![Image of a girl doing homework on the floor]
Picture 05, 06, 07 - I try to illustrate the daily life of migrant children from different aspects - what they do in their spare time, how do they write their homework, and how does their bedroom look like. And I picked three typical images (in my opinion) as examples.

08- I deliberately did not choose close-up pictures for the interview, because I think wide-shot pictures with a deeper depth-of-field may tell more information. But after included 7 pictures like that, I would like to put a closer picture so that viewers can see the face clearly. Also, in this picture, the girl was eating a bag of milk powders, and I would like to let the viewers to see it clearly. A kid from a mid-class family definitely would not eat it like this. But in this picture, the girl seemed enjoy it a lot..

09- first, you see two little kids in this picture, and a girl, and a woman looked like their mother. So you probably will guess that they are a family. In China, most
families, especially those from urban areas, are able to have only one child. However, having multiple kids is common among migrant workers families. Because in many rural areas, a family can have two kids if the first is a girl, and most of the families have a strong preference for sons. Second, the picture tells a relation between the four and it’s not difficult to guess what happened. Three, the girl on the right didn’t wear shoes, and the conditions of the room looked bad.

I just think that there is too much information included in this picture, so I chose it without hesitation.

10- from the bright area on the left, viewers should notice the bricks and the tiles, which rarely would be seen in cities. Also, from the arrangement of the room, such as the door and the wall, it’s not difficult to find out that the picture was not photographed in
cities. The whole environment was “rural”, but the girl’s behavior was “urban” - she was playing with her cellphone. I saw a conflict in this picture and I would like to hear thoughts from viewers.

So, I’ve listed the reasons why I chose those images. I admitted that the selection was based on my own knowledge and understanding, so it was a very subjective procedure. For instance, as a girl from a mid-class family, I know a kid from a non-migrant worker’s family would dress neatly, and he/she would not play on the street alone. Thus, according to my own knowledge, those then pictures became “my” ten typical images to represent migrant children’s life.

At first I worried about that the selection was too subjective, but then I realized that, it was exactly what I plan to prove/examine - I depict the migrant children’s life
based on my own knowledge and understanding, then I ask other people to judge whether my photographs are an accurate/fair representation of them.

Another problem is that, since most migrant workers are illiterate (some even haven’t completed the elementary school), I’m afraid that some of them cannot provide reasonable responses for me. I think the only method to deal with this problem is to interview more migrant workers, and pick up the 6 best answers from them.

Another thing is about the order of the ten pictures. At first I plan to tell the interviewees that there is no particular order among the pictures. But then I remembered the third meaning effect. Since combine two individual pictures may create a third meaning, I think I should create a sequence for those pictures. Also, each interviewee should look at the pictures in a same order.

Thus, I ordered the pictures as 1 to 10 (as what listed above). However, there is no storyline, and the sequence was made with no particular meaning or intention. I made it to ensure everyone see the photos in a same order.

I’ve interviewed three migrant workers this week. In fact I asked 6-7 people, but only 3 would like to do it. I think overall the result was fine, but since I haven’t transcribed them yet, I have to tell you the detailed results later.

As for the exhibition, the date and location has been confirmed. The exhibition will begin at Jan.10th (Thur.), and end at Jan.13(Sunday). It will be held in a coffee shop. I probably will start the post-editing part next week. Now my only problem is how to print those pictures! I still haven’t found any printers that is good and cheap. I really miss those in the photo lab!!
November 17, 2012

Dear committee,

After almost 20 days’ post-editing work, I’ve done the toning of the kids’ pictures and the selecting of my own pictures. I also completed the design of post cards and bookmarks, which I will use as rewards for people supporting my project.

It was a nightmare to tone tons of photos shot by point-and-shoot cameras (and most important, by children!). Hardly could I find a photo having an accurate exposure and white balance. At first, I thought about turning all the pictures to black-and-white, but color also is a very important element - it tells more information and helps viewers to recognize the thing in an image, it points out a tone and arouse certain feelings and emotions surround each color - so it affected the message that I intend to send. Thus, I decided to keep all the photos color.. and edited them one by one.

Here are the results of post cards (and toned kids’ pictures).
I included two or three words to introduce each photo, such as who shot it and what is it about. I don’t write long caption because most kids can not tell a detailed reason why he/she took that photo. So if I use long sentence to describe each image, it would be my explanation. So I chose to use a short term to introduce each picture - no adjective and adverb, only noun and verb.

There is one or two picture that is very difficult to tone. Like the one I labeled via black arrow. The name of that picture is “Dad and Mom”. It is a bit unfocused and underexposed, having lots of color noises and using a direct flash light, and its white balance is weird. I have to say, technically, it has all the problems that a “good” picture should NOT have. But I really like it because of that wedding picture of the parents.

Also I like it including the surrounding environment of the bedroom. Thus, I decided to use it. Since it’s a picture photographed by a little girl, I think I should not use professional standards to judge it. After all, this is not a project about training professional photographers. I’d like to include some unprofessional but creative images. I even would like to keep some technical flaws (if there was something intriguing me in that image), because that is the thing to distinguish an innocent kid’s photo and a professional photographer’s photo.

Here are more toned pictures for the exhibition. Because of the low resolution of most photos, I chose 6*8 inches and 8*10 inches (without the frame) as the size to print them. These pictures are presented as groups (3 photos are a group). I also designed a photo wall which will contains about 30 4*6 inches photos. But two leading pictures will
be in A3 size or even larger. Sorry I have to present the thumbnails, because there are so many photos!
I also designed a flyer via using the close-up pictures of kids’ faces. I’ll design another poster to present all the supporters’ names.

I’ve made the test print of the post cards and chose the paper and asked the design studio to make the final print. But I am still looking for shops that are able to provide good quality printers. I’ve tried two different shops, but both of them gave me photos with serious chromatic aberration (one gave me photos with a pink tone and the other gave me green). I really miss the printers in the photo lab.

The selecting and editing process enables me to reconsider what I intend to tell in this project. Although I only include kids’ photos in the exhibition, I realize that it’s not only an exhibition about kids and their perceptions, but also my perception and interpretation of them. They gave me hundreds of photos, then I picked up those intrigued me and put them in a neat arrangement.
In addition, the preparation of the exhibition contains lots of trivial works. There are many details that need me to work on. For instance, it took almost a week for me to confirm the size of pictures. First, I used a ruler to measure the length, width, and height of the walls. Then I compared the prices of printing different sizes of photos, and also the prices of different sizes of frames. Then I had to reconsider the scale of the walls, and found a result that has a reasonable budget while also allows me to present photos as large as possible. Also I needed to consider the resolution of each selected photos, since the kids used different cameras to shoot them. In addition I needed to consider about the color of the walls, the color of the light source, and what kind of frames are convenient to hang on the wall, and the like. I have to do to all these work by myself, so the preparation progressed at a slow pace.

I’m glad that I chose to graduate next May so I have enough time to deal with everything. Now the time schedule of the project is:

**Nov. - mid Dec.** : I mainly prepare for the exhibition, including editing photos, designing posters and flyers, printing the pictures and framing them. I also will work on the research part (I’ll talk about it later). I still will visit the two migrant workers’ family (Qin Xu and Cancan Gao) but that is not the main task of these two months.

I used to photographed them twice per week in Sept. and Oct., so now I’d like to organize a pile of photographs first to see what I have had and what I’ll need.

**Late Dec. - mid Feb.:** The exhibition begins at 1.10, and lasts till 1.13. Then I need to send out all the gifts before 1.15. Before and after, I’ll shoot more pictures because we’ll have new year, Chinese new year(early Feb), and also it is the end of the
fall semester. I probably will visit and shoot their hometowns during the new year’s holidays.

**Late Feb or early March:** I’ll come back to Columbia.

**March:** I’ll work on the research paper and other paper work, and complete the post-editing of all the pictures.

**April:** DEFEND (no later than the mid-April). How does it sound? If you have any questions, please let me know.

Then, go back to the research part, I’ve interviewed 8 migrant workers. In fact I asked more than 10 person to help me to do the research, but only 8 of them agreed. I interviewed someone at their 60s, and also someone at their 20s or 30s. Although as what you advised, I only need to include 6 person in each group, I found out that some migrant workers cannot provide a reasonable and detailed response for me. That’s why I decided to interview more than 6 people. But I’ll only pick up 6 interviews to do the research.

For instance, I decided to include an interviewee whose kid was my shooting subject, because I think his/her feedback can help me better understand my work. But when I asked Qin Xu’s mom to make comments about those pictures, she always said, good, this one looks good. Then I asked her what is good or why she thought it was good, she gave me feedback like, because you included three kids in this picture, and they looks good.... I tried to let her know what I need for the research part (such as I don’t need her to judge the technical part of the photo and the like), and I tried to explained that I just hope to hear her thoughts because her children was my subject and I think her response
can help me to break down inaccurate description of them, but she still gave me short answers such as this one looks good, my daughter looks good.

Thus, I had to ask Cancan Gao’s mom to take part in the research. I didn’t included any Cancan’s photos in the research part. But she knew my project and the task. Luckily, she provided detailed responses based on her own experience and backgrounds.

So I may use Cancan Gao’s mom’s response, rather than Qin Xu’s mom’s. In this way, certain personal bias or judgements would be eliminated, because all the interviewees (both migrant workers and non-migrant workers) won’t have a direct connection with those I photographed. But some of them have a better understanding about the subjects, some of them even knew one or two kids I photographed (such as a young man interviewee is the neighbor of a kid).

That’s the update about the research. Please check another attachment then you’ll see photos that I shot recently. Thank you and have a wonderful thanks giving!

Best,

Shengze
A few more photos of Qin Xu’s family. Her mother, Yanhong Wang, 39, currently is unemployed because she has to stay at home and look after Qin’s little brother, Kangyi, who is almost 1-year-old.

Qin’s little sister, Manqin, 3, goes to a nearby kindergarden everyday. Yanhong complained that Manqin can only write number 1, even though she has studied in the kindergarden for almost 1 year. “The little girl who lives downstairs knows how to write 1 to 10, and she is even younger than Manqin”, said Yanhong.

Compared to study, Manqin seems to be more interested in eating snacks and playing downstairs. Everyday after school, she buys chicken BBQ, bread, or milk to eat. “Everyday I have to spend 10 yuan (less than 2 dollars) buying snacks for her”, complained by Yanhong.
**December 17, 2012**

Dear committee,

I had two short trips in the past twenty days - one went to Beijing to help my parents to get a visa to visit the U.S. and one went to the southern China to help my friends to shoot a fiction film, so I haven’t got a chance to write the update of my project. But I was working on it all the time. Now the preparation of the exhibition is completed, and the research interview with migrant workers also is done.

Most parts of the preparation are completed via the Internet. I found an online shop that provides Epson printers and luster photo papers with a relatively cheap price. I made two test prints first and I was satisfied with the result - although the prints are a little dark and pink, that is the best within a price range that I can afford. So I made 21 large prints and 30 small prints. The large ones will be presented with frames (I also bought the wood frames online), and the small ones will be pasted on the wall directly.

Also, the printing of postcards, flyers, bookmarks, posters, and display boards were done. I’ve got all of them. Please check the attachment to see them. :)

It’s very excited to see a physical, printed photograph. I guess I am a little bored to see my work displayed on the monitor. But since those photos were shot by point-and-shoot cameras, obviously, the printing quality is not as good as those shot by DSLR cameras. I am pretty sure that one or two picture is lacking the DPI to really go any larger than 28*21cm (that is the size of large prints), but I’d like to include those photos because I think they illustrate the insights of both the kids and me. Also I’d like to make large prints because there is still something special about printed photographs.
I think I am done with the kids’ photographs but I’ll keep working on my own shooting. I’ve bought the flight ticket and I’ll come back to Columbia on March, 5th. So I have two more months for my own shooting. I’ll mainly focus on Qin Xu’s family and Cancan Gao’s family in order to present a deeper story. However, I still have no idea how should I put all these photographs together...This issue puzzles me recently, because I haven’t figured out a storyline. Now I have plenty of pictures, and some of them have a same topic, such as the community, the school, and the hometown, but I don’t know how to transit from one to the other, and I also don’t know the sequence of putting them together...

One thing for sure is that I’ll present my work (both my photos and the kids’ photos) through magazine/photo book layout. I’d like to print a book to present the project, or post a digital book online.

Actually I also shot lots of videos about the kids and their family, but I don’t plan to make a multimedia piece (also I didn’t propose to make it). One important reason is that this project is not about a person, a family, or an event, so it’s really difficult to include all the information that I plan to express in a short multimedia piece. But I’d like to edit a three minute video piece, like a film trailer, to present the project if I have time to edit it.

I shot the videos because I plan to make a documentary film about the project in the future. This is not in my proposal, it’s just an extra “bonus”... It might be a long-term project, and I’ll keep shooting it after I graduate from MU.
As for the research part, the interviews with migrant workers are completed. I’ve wrote transcripts in Chinese, and I’m working on the translation….I won’t translate all the interviews, because I’ve interviewed 9 people. I’ll only translate the ones I’ll use in the research part. Then I’ll start to work on the interviews with non-migrant workers. I think the exhibition might be a good chance for me to interview two or three people.

So that’s it! I’m very exited about the exhibition, although there is still 20 days left. Hope everything is going well with all of you, and have a wonderful winter break!

Thank you.

Best regards,

Shengze
portable display board
(it will be presented at the front door)
post cards

ten different designs as a set

an extra large post card design as an overall introduction of the exhibition

bookmarks

3 different designs of bookmarks

large luster paper prints with wood frames

small prints will be pasted on the wall directly
January 10, 2013

Dear committee,

So, finally tomorrow is the big day. The exhibition will be held in a local cafe and it will last for four days. I was busy working on the set-up and the awards for the crowdfunding campaign recently. But I also shot some photos with the two families. I’d like to share them with you before the exhibition.

While most families enjoyed the new year’s holiday at home with their family members, Cancan Gao’s parents still had to work in the clothing factory. So Cancan, along with his best friend, Shi Yang, had to spent the last day of 2012 by themselves.

On that day, they went to school in the morning, because there was a celebrating party on campus. Then they had to go homes by themselves, while many students were picked up by their parents. I took them to had a dinner because I felt like I had to do something... Then they went back home and spent the whole afternoon watching cartoons.

Another thing is that, the Lingzhi elementary school was shut down one week after I went to the southern China.. Cancan and other students were transferred to another school, which has a playground and provides better studying conditions for students.
(below is the school.)
Then, as about Qin Xu’s family, her little brother, Kangyi was 1-year-old on January 2nd. The whole family had a birthday dinner together on that day. And I took a birthday cake as a gift. Her mother also asked me to take a family photo for them, but Qin didn’t like this idea. So below, in a picture, you will see five smile faces and an unhappy one.

Her mother was busy preparing for the dinner. They had lamb and pork on that day. I had never seen so much meat on their dinner table... Her little sister, Manqin was rushing to eat while meal was just on the table... Qin thought it was impolite and felt angry...
before the dinner, Qin was busy texting with her friends while Manqin was playing with a toy gun. Then Manqin found a new toy, her mother’s high heel shoes.
Qin sat on the bed and ate the birthday cake while others all sat around the table.

So, that’s it! Sorry I didn’t got enough time to write a detailed update. But I’ll write another one after the exhibition. And I’ll shoot more photos!

Thank you and happy (belated) new year!

Best,

Shengze
January 23, 2013

Dear committee,

I was glad to tell you that the exhibition has been successfully held in Wuhan last week. The exhibition has been extended for eight days, because I’d like to let more people see it. As I told you before, the exhibition was held in a cafe, which was not a spacious venue like a gallery and didn’t have professional lighting, but I like the cozy atmosphere there.

Besides, some local media outlets reported the event. In fact in the first day of the exhibition, most visitors were journalists. I did two interviews with two different local newspapers, one interview with a local TV channel, one with a local magazine, and one with a school website, which was from the university that I received my bachelor’s degree. Then on last Sunday I was invited to attend a talk show at a local radio channel.

I really felt exhausted, but I was glad that with the help of media, more and more people became aware of the exhibition and the kids’ pictures. And that was one of the purposes of the project -- to let more people see the world from a kid’s insight, and hear the voices from migrant children.

Some people told me that they didn’t believe that those pictures were photographed by kids and by point-and-shoot cameras, because they thought those pictures were really professional. I felt happy about the review, but I also told them the truth -- that was because those photos were selected - I probably selected 1 photo from 50 photos or even 1 from 100 photos. So what they didn’t see were tons of “messed-up” pictures.
You can see the photos of the exhibition from the attachment, and you can find some of the news reports from the links below. But they are all in Chinese.

http://news.ycwb.com/2013-01/11/content_4231552.htm

http://wenhua.cjn.cn/rd/201211/t2137878.htm


At the meanwhile, I continued working on my own shooting. Finally I found a spot that I could take an overall picture of the Hua’anli community. It was a balcony of a small motel. The manager, a young lady, was very friendly and allowed me to take picture from the balcony.

The Hua’anli community is a 1.2 square kilometer area, and has a registered population of 3,000 people, but the actual residents are about 120,000 (More than
Columbia, am I right? Then you could imagine how packed it is). Ninety percent of the residents are migrant workers.

The upper picture was taken in the late afternoon (about 4pm), so I can use a slow shutter speed to present the movement of crowd. It was just too cold outside and I’m afraid that the manager would be mad if I waited till dark. But I’d like to come back to the motel in a early night and take another picture.

I also took another picture at another spot in an early morning (about 7am). It was on a pedestrian bridge, and I could photograph the front gate of the community. Most residents passed by the gate in the early morning to go out for work; that’s why I chose the spot. But, unfortunately, I didn’t have a long lens. I attempted to take a photo with lots of heads compressed together, so a long lens definitely would help me to create a compressed feeling. But I only have a 105mm lens, which is the longest one I have now. So I don’t like the picture much, but at least I tried. I really miss the days that I could easily checked out various lenses from the photo lab.
In the early morning, I also found something else to shoot.
After the Lingzhi Elementary school was shut down, all the students were transferred to other schools. Luckily, Cancan Gao went to a nearby school and didn’t need to get up early, but many other students had to attend a school, which was about 15 bus stops far away from the community. So they had to take a bus at 6:30 am. Only in this way they were able to arrive at the school around 7:30 or 8 am.

Those kids had to get up early, and walked in the dark alone. I think it’s very dangerous to do so, but it seemed like that most kids have already gotten used to it.

Next, I’d like to share some photos of Qin’s family with you. Now Qin studies at a boarding school. Her father has to work for 12 hours every day. So most time there are only her mother, grandmother, little sister and baby brother staying at home. They don’t have much work to do, the only job for her mother and grandmother is to look after the two little kids. Qin’s sister, Manqin is very naughty. She can’t stay quiet for one minute. So she kept looking for something/someone to play with. Cashes, books, her brother, snacks, and her mother’s high heels (in last field note) are all her toys.
There are two more photos about the community. I shot them on the balcony as well. Not sure which composition is better. I cannot use slow shutter speed when I use a vertical composition, because my tripod is using a video head.

But I think a vertical composition will present the perspective of the road better. Also, in the upper right picture, I’d like to see the contrast between the high buildings in the background and the torn houses in the front.

That’s it! I’ll shoot more pictures this week and also work on the research part. I’ve interviewed three non-migrant workers who were born and raised in Wuhan, and they gave me wonderful feedback. I have to say, interviewing them is much easier than interviewing migrant workers.

Hope you are all doing well and have an amazing new semester. How time flies. I will come back to Columbia in the early March, and I’ve already felt exited about it!

Thank you!

Best,

Shengze
February 10, 2013

Dear Committee,

I’d like to send you my best wishes for health and prosperity because today is the first day of year of the “Snake” according to the Chinese lunar Calendar.

I also would like to share more photos of Qin’s family with you. In the past two weeks, I photographed Qin’s family three times in order to document their life before the Chinese spring festival. I no longer photographed Cancan Gao’s family because when I called Cancan’s mother, she told me that they’ve already went back to their hometown. Cancan’s maternal grandmother got colon cancer and had an operation last year. She was already at the terminal-stage of the cancer and went back to the hospital in the late of January. So Cancan and his parents went back to their hometown immediately. Later I met with Cancan’s mother in Wuhan because she came back to pick up their baggage for the spring festival. However, this time she didn’t mentioned the invitation any more - she had invited me to visit their hometown several times in the past, and I already told her that the spring festival would be a good time for it. When she told me that she never had a good picture with her mother, I asked her whether she needed me to take some pictures for them. But she said that she didn’t need it, and Cancan had a camera to take the picture. So I thought that she was reluctant to let me visit their hometown, even though we had made a promise before. It might be because of the cancer. And she might think that I would disturb her mother with the camera.

Thus, I had to give up the shooting plan. I didn’t push her too much because I thought it would be too impolite. We are still in a good relationship, and they called me
today to send their wishes to me. Also we’ve known each other for a while, and they knew my project and how eager I hope to photograph their hometown. So I think that they must feel they had to break the promise, otherwise they wouldn’t do so. And I should respect their decision and not push them too hard.

Thus, I’ll only photograph Qin’s family during the spring festival. I plan to visit them the day after tomorrow. Also, I’ve shot some pictures to document their preparation for the festival.

Qin’s first semester at the No.75 middle school was finished and she had to pack the baggage and went back to home. During the semester, she lived in a classroom as the dormitory with 13 girls.
Well, I definitely didn’t get a permission for the shooting, so I had to hide my camera in the bag and only took it out when no one was there. I also photographed several pictures with my iPhone 4. But the quality was not good because it was a low light situation.

Those were Qin’s assignments before the final exam week. She didn’t want to take them home, “I spent a lot time working on those exam papers and now, finally, I don’t need them anymore,” she said.
The first thing Qin did after she went back to home was to charge her cellphone. Cellphone-use was strictly forbidden at school because the school thought it would have negative impacts on student’s study. 
outside VS Inside... I thought the contrast was interesting.
Qin’s father didn’t have to work recently because the market was closed for the spring festival. So he stayed at home and took care of Qin’s little brother, Kangyi.
An important entertainment for the whole family was to watch TV.
(UP & DOWN) Manqin, 3, likes trains a lot. She always looks at them from the window. She also likes those toys picked by her grandmother from a trash site downstairs.
In China, it’s customary to get a hair cut and new clothes for the new year. Chinese people consider purchasing new clothing, shoes, and receiving a hair-cut as a symbol of a fresh start. Especially for children, new clothes must be bought. However, Qin’s family were unable to afford new clothes for three kids. Qin asked her mother many times to buy her some new clothes, but her mother refused to do so, “You had lots already. You can’t eat those clothes, can you?” said her mother.

Lastly, Qin’s father gave her 30 yuan (about 5 dollars) to get a hair-cut. Qin went to a small barber shop for the first time of her life and had a hair wash and a bang trim. She spent 25 yuan enjoying the service, even though she knew that the non-holiday price would be 15 yuan. “I just need something new - either some new clothes or a new hair style,” she said.
That’s it! I also interviewed 5 non-migrant workers in the past two weeks, so now I only need to make one more interview. :) I’ve done with the transcript of the migrant workers’ interviews, and I am worrying about the translation. It’s just too difficult to translate those slangs and idioms. Hardly could I find an English word to explain a Chinese idiom accurately. So I thought maybe I should use several words or even a sentence to explain some of it. Anyway, I am learning and I’ll keep working on that part.

Thank you, and again, happy year of the snake!

best,
Shengze

March 1, 2013
Dear committee,

I’m excited to write this field note because it probably is the last field note I write in China, which also means that I’ve finished the shooting part and I’ll come back to the U.S. shortly.

Based on Rita’s suggestions, I tried to figure out a visual way to illustrate Qin’s future (what she sees in the city and how she feels in the digital world) before I left Wuhan. In fact I made an interview last October to ask her to describe what she usually do online. She told me that she just chatted with other people. Sometimes she played games online - her favorite game is a musical dancing game in which a player can dance
with dynamic music and fashionable costumes, and most important, partner with other players and even “marry” one of them. Qin obviously was fascinated by the romantic experience provided by this game. I recorded a conversation between her friend and her in which they were discussing their “husbands” in that world.

However, this time when I tried to start an in-depth conversation with Qin about her life in the digital world, she was unwilling to provide the details. No matter what I asked, she only gave several words or a sentence as an answer.

In fact, when I looked through all the video interviews or conversations I’ve had with Qin (probably four or five times, some serious and some casual, but each time I would inform her when I started to record), I found out that she became more and more reluctant to talk. In last August, she talked a lot and I didn’t need to ask a question. But recently, she wouldn’t say anything if I didn’t ask.

I think the change was not because of me and the camera. She admitted that she was aware of the changes, and the reason was that she just didn’t want to talk. But obviously she likes to chat online. She told me that the real life is dull and the online world is interesting because she can encounter strangers and talk with different people.

I think the change also reflects that she was growing up, from a naive kid to a young girl who is sentimental, and a little rebellious, like many young people world wide. She didn’t have a clear plan for her future, and she was fascinated by a world that she knew from Internet, TV, and experienced outside of her home. For instance, last August she told me that she hoped to be a tourist guide in the future, but last November, she told me that she no longer wanted to be a tourist guide, she didn’t have a dream but her goal
was to go to a university first. Then, last week, she told me that she wanted to be a TV anchor in the future because an anchor would be able to interview celebrities.

But, no matter what her dream was, her thoughts were originated from an electronic world that she experienced via TV and Internet.

So I made a photo that she was chatting with her friends via cellphones on the rooftop of her home. The rooftop is a place that she gets away from her family - there is no screams from her sister and no nagging from her mother. Also, you can see the broken roofs in the foreground and the high buildings in the background. I like the contrast, and I think the distance between the two also reflects the distance between Qin’s reality and her dream.

By the way, Qin finally got new clothes and shoes for the new year. She likes pink, but she also thought she looked childish with those pandas.
A close-up of Qin’s varnished nails. She used her cousin’s nail varnish during the spring festival. But since nail polishing is not allowed at school, she will have to remove all of them before the new semester begins.
A view outside of the Hua’anli community. Few minutes later, the train will pass the window of Qin’s home.

Qin’s mother and little brother went to a nearby park in a warm afternoon (Qin went back to her home village with her father on that day. They didn’t tell me. When I called her father, he told me that they’ve on their way back to the village). The ticket of the carrousel was doubled because of the spring festival. Qin’s mother thought it was too expensive and Kangyi was too young to play it, so they just looked at it.
Another photo shot in the park. Kangyi, 1, was learning to walk under the guidance of his mother.
So that’s it, and I’m done with the shooting part. Well, I definitely hope I can photograph more situations, but because Qin went back to her hometown to visit her relatives and give them new year’s greetings (in Chinese called “bai nian”), I haven’t got a chance to shoot more pictures. I’ve got plenty of photos, but I’m not sure whether I’ve got everything I need.

Now I’m in the southern part of China, and I’ll go to Hong Kong tomorrow and catch a flight on March, 5. Can’t believe ten months have passed. I still remember the feelings when I was on the flight back to China. Anyway, I’m exited and hope to see you soon.

Thank you!

Best,

Shengze
CHAPTER 3:

Self-Evaluation

As a girl who was born and raised in Wuhan, China and has been living here for over 20 years, I had never been to the Hua'anli Community before May 31st, 2012. I still clearly remember the date because what I saw during my first visit was frighteningly impressive - the rapid movement of crowd, the narrow alleys with rubbish and rats, the densely packed apartment buildings with bare concrete walls, and the tangle of electricity, television, phone and internet lines over my head. I was scared.

You can call it a “shanty town”, an “urban village”, a “migrant worker ghetto” or whatever you want, but the fact will not be changed - it’s a 1.2 square kilometer area with over 120,000 residents and more than 3,000 apartment buildings, surrounded by shopping malls, skyscrapers, and the renovated Hankou Railway Station.

Except for worrying about the safety of my equipment and myself, I have to say, there are so many things in the community that are photographically interesting - thinking about those made me nervous. Even more, it’s a part of the “real” China that doesn’t receive much exposure.

However, my excitement disappeared with more and more issues and problems being raised. The first and most urgent one was where to find ten point-and-shoot cameras that could be used by the migrant children who took part in the photo class. Both David and Rita helped me to find sources in the U.S.; however, those America-based companies seemed not to be interested because the whole project would be conducted in China. David also recommended my project to several Chinese sources, but it just didn’t
work out. One of them suggested that I join a one-day activity with China’s migrant
children held by a local media organization, but considered the two-month photo class as
unfeasible.

I had to say I felt really upset at that time. I saw no chance of getting cameras
from companies or organizations. So the last approach was to find the cameras by myself
- either buy the cameras myself or borrow them from friend and relatives. So I posted a
message on the Chinese Twitter, Weibo, and briefly introduced the project and the needs.
Beyond my expectations, many people responded enthusiastically. Even two strangers
agreed to lend me a camera.

In all, ten cameras were collected through Weibo. In case some cameras were
damaged or lost, I bought another three pre-owned cameras from Taobao, an online
shopping marketplace similar to eBay.

On a hot summer day with a temperature of over 100 ° F, the photo class was
finally launched in a shabbily furnished classroom at Lingzhi Elementary School with 23
children aged at 8-12 and without air-conditioning. Nevertheless, there was no exciting
interaction between the children and me. When I asked them, “does anyone want to try
the camera?” nobody raised hands.

One week later, I understood that the students were just shy and embarrassed.
Photography and cameras were fields that they had never known before. They just needed
time to get alone with me and the cameras. And I needed to be patient. Also, I realized
that I should use a kid-friendly language to teach them and avoid using any advanced or
professional terms. For instance, after being familiar with me, a boy asked, “What is a
photo exhibition that you mentioned in our first class? ” I suddenly understood why they rarely had responses when we first met. Thus, I spent more time thinking about the teaching - how can I express my thoughts in a way that is simple, straightforward, and easy-to-understand? Later I found that using examples from the surrounding life was an effective approach. For example, when giving a lecture about light, I asked them to observe shadows at different times of the day. By comparing the lengths and positions of shadows in the morning with those at noon, the students easily grasped the essence.

In addition, I decided to not teach them professional photography, terms such as aperture, shutter speed, and white balance. Instead, I taught them basic knowledge about color, shape, line, perspective, light, and moment. After all, this was a class about “seeing” and “expressing”. Photography was just a tool for those boys and girls to express their voices. It was not about training professional photographers, and it was not about taking well-composed photos with correct exposure. For those children, cameras were their toys; and for me, photography was a way to understand their thoughts.

However, the principal did not think this way. Before further illustrating the problem, first, I had to clarify that I did appreciate her giving me access to approach the children as well as providing class facilities such as the room and the projector. But she considered my photo class as a method to make a profit. Although I taught the children photography for free, I later found out that the principal had charged every child 450 Yuan without informing me. Also, she wanted to keep all the cameras once the project was completed. Besides, even though we had a “good” conversation about the goals and plans of the project, she never followed the agreement. I told her several times that I was
only able to teach the same group of 10-20 migrant children, but she still asked me to
give lecture in all six classes of the school.

After teaching three classes with about 60 students one morning of early
September, 2012, I indeed felt exhausted. But at that time, I still hadn't finished my
photographing of the school yet, so I had to follow the principal’s “suggestions” in order
to obtain a permission to complete my photographic work at the school. But I told myself
that I would no longer teach any classes once my shooting was completed. Also, I began
to establish relationships with three migrant children’s family by myself. I selected three
children from the nine whom I had made home visits during the summer. Then I revisited
their family and explained my project to them in detail as well as took some photos.

In the last week of September, as I completed photographing the school, I learned
that the school would be shut down shortly because of security, fire safety, and electrical
violations, which gave me a perfect excuse to stop the photo class. Meanwhile, I
established a stable relationship with two migrant children’s family, Qin Xu’s and
Cancan Gao’s. It was hard for me, though, because I was perplexed by an ethical issue.
The two families treated me with unexpected hospitality, courtesy, and respect. They
called me “teacher”, instead of my name. Also, they always invited me to join their
dinner. But as a photojournalist, I should not accept any food or drink while visiting in
people’s homes. What’s worse, when I saw that Qin, her mother, little sister and little
brother only shared fried cabbage and rice for dinner, I did feel like that my presence
caued a hardship on them. But on the other hand, it would be rude if I didn’t accept the
food.
Thus, it took me a while to find the baseline within the relationship. Conducting a long-term project was totally different from working on a one-day assignment – I couldn’t shoot the photos and just leave. Establishing a reliable and stable relation between the subject and the photographer was necessary. But once the relation was built, the relation between the two were more likely to be friends. So where was the baseline? I wanted to be closer, but I didn’t want to intrude into their life; I made friends with them, but I also kept a distance in order to maintain the objectivity of the story.

There was once or twice that I truly wanted to buy some food for Qin and her mother and sister. Of course I just kept this thought in my mind. But when Qin’s little brother was going to turn a year old and her mother asked me to take a family photo for them, I did so and bought a birthday cake for him.

It seemed logical that as a photojournalist, I would not bring a cake. In China, however, it would be rude and impolite to attend someone’s birthday without taking any gifts. Also, they invited me to have dinner with them because they considered me as a friend. Hence, rather than to risk offending them, I chose to bring a cake and join their dinner before taking out my camera.

This was just an example how I balanced the role as a photojournalist and the role as a friend. My reactions varied based on different situations. No same solution ever. But there was a same principle for me, that was to know why I was here and what I was doing. As David suggested, my primary responsibility was to do the very best photography that I can and let others fully understand migrant workers’ life. I was here
because I want to share glimpses of stories that others rarely get a chance to see and to know. And I repeated it to myself every time when making a decision.

In addition, I realized that once a solid relation was built between the photographer and the subject, mutual influences between the two seemed to be inevitable. A simple example was that, before the photo class, both Qin and Cancan had no idea about cameras. Now they not only know how to take pictures, but also have lots of photos I took for them.

As a photojournalist, my life was influenced, too. As I mentioned at the beginning, I had never been to the community before and I didn’t know much about migrant workers. I only had a stereotypical image of them as poor, dirty, and uneducated. However, with my shooting continued and my understanding of them went deeper, I realized that “migrant worker” was an oversimplified word - they are strong individuals who deal with a less than ideal situation, but they are not helpless victims. Every migrant worker has his or her own character, emotions, and stories, just as everyone else does.

Thanks to the project, I was able to throw myself into a world that I didn’t know. And thanks to photography, I was able to see the beauty in things that I used to see as ugly and dirty. Thus, I think I should not be afraid of the mutual influences between the photographer and the subject only if they are under control. Also, I have to avoid any unnecessary ones and be aware of the baseline.

Another issue that I wanted to address was the crowd funding campaign that I used to raise money and awareness for my project. It not only provided funding for me to organize an exhibition for the students, but also allowed many other people to hear the
migrant children’s voices, which was exactly what I intended to do. If this was just a project between me and the migrant children, their lives and situations would otherwise go largely unseen. Yet, with the help of the crowd funding campaign and the exhibition, their thoughts and stories were able to be perceived by others.

Although the campaign brought out additional work for me - I spent a lot of time and energy designing awards for the supporters, preparing the exhibition, and dealing with media - it was a valuable experience. The attempt enabled me to know how to raise money and awareness for a small project.

Last, regarding the research process, I had to say, it was frustrating sometimes. For instance, when I tried to find some migrant workers to allow me conduct the interview, I asked fifteen people but only nine of them wanted to participate in it. Then only six provided valid responses - others either did not understand the study at all or gave exceedingly short answers. I thought that was partly because most migrant workers lacked education – many of them only completed primary school education. A “research” or an “interview” were advanced words that they hardly could understand. Also, they shared only what was depicted explicitly in the pictures as well as their direct feelings and impressions. Whereas non-migrant respondents were able to take their responses to another, more abstract level.

However, the findings were interesting due to the obvious differences between the migrant respondents and the non-migrants. Moreover, conducting this photo elicitation research allowed me to see many nuances that I was not previously aware of. By listening to feedback from the migrant respondents, I was able to better understand the subjects
that I photographed, which helped me as continued my work on this project in the future. Meanwhile, the comparison between the responses from migrants and those from non-migrants allowed me to make my coverage more balanced.

Overall, the process of conducting this project was a priceless treasure for me. It not only gave me an opportunity to do what I truly wanted to do, but also helped me to learn how to develop a project from a single idea to successful completion.

Now I realize how naive I was before undertaking the project. And how ideal those plans were. But I was glad that I did it. They who know nothing fear nothing. As a photojournalist, it is important to have the desire and courage to explore. What’s more, I greatly appreciate what the Missouri School of Journalism has taught me. Without the experience and knowledge that I acquired from there, I would have never undertaken this project.
CHAPTER 4:

Physical Evidence

Poster of the Photo Class

(The poster is to let the students know what the class is about and who I am.)

拿起相机，记录世界，发现自己
Let Your Voice Be Heard

怎样拍出漂亮的照片？
怎样捕捉激动人心的瞬间？
怎样发现生活中的美？

这个暑假，我们会教你使用相机，以及基本的摄影技巧。

如果你就读于二年级或以上，如果你暑假在武汉，

如果你对拍照感兴趣，就赶快报名吧!

课程时间：7月中旬－8月中旬，每周一、三、五，早上10：00－12：00
9月－11月，每星期三课，具体时间待定
课程费用：免费，我们会提供课程所需的器材。但如果你有相机，请带上它。

老师介绍：
米声远，就读于美国密苏里大学新闻摄影专业，硕士。本科毕业于武汉华中科技大学。曾在北京晨报、北京电视台实习。

杨正儒，就读于香港浸会大学电影与电视制作专业，硕士。
Letter to Parents

(The letter is to let the parents know who I am and what I will teach. It also asks for permission of photographing their children.)

告家长书

亲爱的家长朋友们：

您好！

感谢您对摄影课程的支持，我是摄影课的老师朱声仄。这个暑假以及九、十月份，我会教授您的孩子基本的摄影技巧。我们希望通过摄影课程来丰富孩子们的生活，培养孩子的创造力、想象力和洞察力。我们希望把相机交给孩子，让他们用照片去发现生活中的美，并捕捉生动、活泼的一面。

为了您孩子的摄影课学得开心、拍得开心，现有如下几点要求，希望得到家长们积极配合！

一、请教育您的孩子爱护相机，小心使用。任何的碰撞、跌落都会导致相机损害。所以请督促您的孩子，用手绳挟好相机，并在拍摄时握稳相机；使用完毕后，一定要把相机装到相机包里，并小心收好。不要把相机放到桌边、床边等易跌落的地方，也不要将相机放在水杯边。同时，使用相机时如有任何疑问，请拨打我的联系电话（13971100974），请不要胡乱触碰相机上的按钮或随意调整相机设置。

二、请配合您的孩子拍摄要求。摄影课是一门实践课程，想要拍出漂亮的照片，唯一的方法就是勤动手、勤动脑。除了课堂上学习，我们会要求您的孩子把相机带回家，在课余时间进行练习、拍照。因此，请您尽量配合孩子的拍摄要求，充当他们的模特。我们相信这些被孩子记录下来的瞬间，将来定会成为您美好的记忆！同时，我们会带领孩子在华安里社区、常青公园及其周围进行外拍练习，或者跟随孩子们回家拍摄。

三、请允许我使用、编辑孩子们拍摄的照片、视频等影音资料。课程结束后，我们会在明一月份举办展览，展出孩子们拍摄的相片；同时我们还会把照片带到国外参加一些展览或比赛，因此，请允许我使用和编辑孩子们拍摄的照片、视频等影音资料。

亲爱的家长，我们和您一样有一个共同的愿望，那就是您的孩子、我们的学生能健康、快乐、学有所成。因此，希望您能按以上要求指导并监督您的孩子，让他们在学到知识的同时，充分享受摄影带来的乐趣！

非常感谢您的支持与配合！

朱声仄

联系方式：13971100974

家长签字：
Awards for People Supporting My Project in the Crowd Funding Campaign

Poster Cards
Bookmarkers
Packed Poster Cards
Preparation for the Photo Exhibition

Flyers

Luster Paper Prints
Wood Frames

Posters
Photos of the Exhibition
Project Expenses

<table>
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<th>Photo Class</th>
<th>Each</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-owned Nikon P60 Point-and-Shoot Camera</td>
<td>296 RMB</td>
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<td>888 RMB</td>
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<td>135 RMB</td>
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<td>4G Kingston SD Card Delivery Fee</td>
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Awards for the Crowd Funding Campaign

| Post Cards Test Printing                                                   | 16.8 RMB |
| Flyers Test Printing                                                        | 19.67 RMB|
| Post Cards                                                                 | 646 RMB  |
| Flyers & Envelopes                                                         | 101.32 RMB|
| Stamper                                                                     | 43.6 RMB |
| Book Test Printing                                                          | 157 RMB  |
| Book Printing                                                               | 767 RMB  |
| Other Supplies                                                              | 36 RMB   |
| Delivery                                                                    | 450 RMB  |
| TOTAL                                                                       | 2,237.39 RMB|

Exhibition

| Photo Test Printing                                                         | 30 RMB   |
| Photo Printing                                                              | 260 RMB  |
| Wood Frames                                                                 | 166.42 RMB|
| Posters                                                                     | .95 RMB  |
| Other Supplies                                                              | 108.23 RMB|
| TOTAL                                                                       | 659.65 RMB|

GRAND TOTAL.........................................................................................4,212.04 RMB
...........................................................................(Approximate) 680 US DOLLAR

*Cost of Shengze’s Shooting is not included.
Photo Essay of Migrant Children

Please check the Media Folder to see Shengze Zhu’s photo essay of China’s Migrant Children.
CHAPTER 5:

Analysis

Inside and Outside Views of China’s Migrant Children:
Migrants and Non-Migrants Who Viewed Photographs of Migrant Children
Interpret Them According to Their Own Backgrounds

Perceptions of migrant workers as poor, dirty and uneducated are rooted in stereotypes, and their contributions to China’s prosperity are often ignored. I also had a stereotypical image of migrant workers. I knew that image probably would be changed if I immersed myself in their stories, but I was still worried that my photographs might be biased. I am Chinese, but to Chinese migrant workers, I am an outsider. Although I did research in advance and taught migrant children photography for three months, I wondered: Could my photographs provide a fair and well-rounded portrayal of China’s migrant children and their families? Would I interpret those photographs differently than they did due to my life experience and knowledge?

To examine these questions, I conducted research using photo elicitation -- the technique of inserting photographs into interviews. Using ten of my photographs of migrant children and their families that portrayed various aspects of life such as the community environment, housing conditions, the school and the classroom, I interviewed six migrant workers (insiders) and six non-migrant workers (outsiders). By comparing the
insiders’ responses and the outsiders’ responses, I sought to learn whether my photographs fairly and accurately depicted the lives of migrant children.

The findings indicated that the insiders and the outsiders interpreted the photos according to their own backgrounds and knowledge. On one hand, the outsiders were more likely to provide responses predominately focusing on the poor living conditions of the migrant children’s families, which reflected the outsiders’ stereotypical impressions of migrant workers as poor and dirty. On the other hand, the insiders seldom paid attention to the modest conditions but considered the photos a typical portrayal of the daily lives of migrant children, showing their families as family units that were no different than other families in the society.

With the comparison, I was able to discover misunderstandings that I was not previously aware of. I realized that “migrant workers” and “migrant children” were oversimplified words, because every migrant worker and every migrant child has his or her own character, emotions, and stories, just as everyone else does. Thus, with the help of this photo-elicitation research, I was able to make my coverage more balanced. My continued photographic work of migrant children focused more on the vitality of their lives, instead of the poverty, with an attempt to present a more in-depth and well-rounded portrayal of their lives.

In a broader sense, socially vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers, exist in every country and every culture. Photojournalists often try to tell the stories of the “other” group. This project could serve as an example for other photographers who plan to work on similar topics. Moreover, photographers who intend to photograph subjects as
people, instead of as stereotypes, should not label the subject as belonging to one category, such as “migrants” because the photographer’s stereotypical impression of the subject would easily lead to biased coverage.

In this study, I defined migrant workers for the sake of acquiring responses from both the insiders and the outsiders. To define a migrant worker, I used the concept of “Hukou” -- the household registration principle in China, which identifies a person as a resident of the area. For this specific research, migrant respondents (insiders) did not have the Hukou of Wuhan whereas non-migrant respondents (outsiders) did. In addition, in an attempt to get a truly insider’s perspective, I only interviewed migrant workers living in the Hua’anli community because that is where all of the images used in the photo elicitation were photographed.

The interviews were conducted individually. Respondents were shown the same ten photographs in the same order. They were asked to look through the photos and respond to any one that stood out to them. After that, they were asked to review the photos again and make separate comments on each image. Last, when they were satisfied with their responses, I asked specific questions, such as “Which photo most accurately represents migrant children and their families?” In all the three steps, they could choose not to respond.

Half of the respondents in each group were male and half were female. They ranged in age from 25 to 64. The occupations of the insiders’ group varied from unemployed to a bistro owner to clothing factory workers, while those of the outsiders’ included a doctor, a university professor and a police department secretary. Most of the
migrant respondents only went to primary schools, whereas the non-migrant respondents completed at least college.

The image that elicited the most commentary depicted a young girl, about 3, crying sadly, while her mother was feeding a baby and her sister was going to leave (Photo 9). Some respondents focused on why the little girl was crying, while others questioned why the family had three children. Those focusing on the crying gave a similar reason to explain it: Because the mother was looking after the baby, the girl might feel left out. Two pointed out that children from cities would never cry like this. Once the children cry, their parents or other relatives would comfort them immediately. “City kids are spoiled because one family can only have one child,” a migrant worker concluded. Those questioning why the family had three children were mainly non-migrant workers.

The one-child policy in China restricts urban couples to only one child, but rural couples can have two if their first child is a girl. Seldom would a family, whether urban or rural, have more than two children. It is common sense among Chinese, and it may explain their question. Yet, a non-migrant worker indicated that, “It’s not about why they have three kids. It’s about why they want three kids when they all suffer from bad living conditions. They can’t afford it. They can’t provide the things the kids need. I have to say I don’t understand,” he said, verging on anger.

Another picture that elicited notable responses, but only from non-migrant workers, portrayed the tangle of electric, television, phone, and Internet lines (Photo 4). Respondents used words such as “dangerous” and “chaotic” to describe it. Furthermore,
the university professor thought about a bigger story the image might tell: a metaphor for China.

“It’s like what happens in China now. There are lots of different types of problems and conflicts tangling and twisting with each other […] so you have no idea how to handle with them. You don’t know where to start. The thick lines are the main conflicts, and the thin lines are other secondary issues or problems,” she said.

In contrast, most migrant workers recognized the context in which the photo was taken. Only two considered the wires dangerous and said that they had seen one or two accidents happen there in the past.

Similarly, migrant workers were more likely to provide neutral reactions when viewing photos related to the school life of migrant children, such as a photo of the school’s flag-rising ceremony on the rooftop (Photo 1) and a photo of several students playing during class break (Photo 2). Most gave short and simple feedback such as “It was a school activity” and “The kids were playing”. Only a male clothing factory worker thought that “It was a shabby school without a playground,” and indicated that the school conditions presented in the photos were worse than those of the schools in his home village.

By contrast, all six of the non-migrant workers provided detailed responses to the school pictures. Most focused on the poor conditions of the school. The police department secretary indicated that it would be dangerous for the children to attend the ceremony on the rooftop. “What if someone falls down?” she wondered.
The doctor also thought the rooftop was dangerous, but she suggested that schools in rural areas may have much worse conditions than this one. “I heard that kids living in remote mountains had to walk two hours to the school. So these kids here […] are lucky,” she said.

While most non-migrant respondents were concerned about the modest conditions of the school, the university professor took her comments to a political level. She considered the flag-raising ceremony as a “China-model moral and national education.”

“It’s a kind of brainwashing and political indoctrination,” she said, “Even under horrible conditions like this, the school still didn’t forget to promote a sense of national identity, which naturally meant loving the Party.”

In general, non-migrant interviewees’ responses were more in-depth. Perhaps this was because many migrant workers lacked education. Some of them had only completed their studies at primary schools. These respondents shared only what was depicted explicitly in the pictures as well as their direct feelings and impressions. They sometimes also connected the picture with their personal experience. Non-migrant interviewees, however, were often able to take their feedback to another, more abstract level.

In addition, the familiarity with the community did affect migrant workers’ judgments of it. Only a few of them gave negative comments on the community, the school, and the modest conditions. This may be because the migrant respondents lived in the community, and some of their children studied at the school. They had acclimated to the environment. They probably would not consider a tangle of high-voltage electrical lines as dangerous because they walked under the wires every day. Insiders’ knowledge
and daily experience enabled them to become more tolerant of the living conditions. So, compared to the outsiders, the insiders were more likely to give neutral responses.

Next, the photo representing most respondents’ choice of the most accurate portrayal of migrant children was of a girl doing her homework on a bed (Photo 7). Both migrant and non-migrant respondents thought the image reflected an important characteristic of children from rural areas. A female clothing factory worker connected the photo to her personal experience and explained, “I’m from the countryside as well. I know studying hard is the only way for kids from rural areas [to succeed]. Only in this way, they may be able to change their lives, you know, to not end up as a migrant worker as we have.”

The photo representing the second most respondents’ choice of the most accurate portrayal was about a young boy jumping on a messy bed (Photo 6). Many Respondents considered the boy as miserable but mischievous. As the doctor pointed out, “He enjoyed playing with himself even under poor living conditions.”

However, a migrant worker who didn’t select this photo as the most accurate picture provided information behind it: “I knew the boy’s father. He even bought an apartment in his home village. They have money! Why do they still live in an apartment like this? It’s like a shanty house, and the boy looks like a homeless kid.”

This was an example reflecting another obvious difference between the insiders’ responses and the outsiders’ - the insiders sometimes would provide contextual information that was not presented in the photos; in contrast, the outsiders were more
likely to provide stereotypical reactions and opinions, which in fact, often differed from reality.

One example was the doctor, who considered the migrant children in Wuhan “lucky”, because she thought schools in the countryside would have worse conditions than the one presented in the photos. However, a few migrant workers mentioned that schools in their home villages actually have better conditions than the one in Wuhan. “At least we have a large playground,” said the male clothing worker.

In addition, since captions were not presented during the interviews, some respondents were not sure exactly what was happening in the photos. Their feedback was limited due to a lack of knowledge of the context and content of the photos. For instance, most respondents did not recognize the food in a picture of a girl eating (Photo 8), so their initial responses all concerned questions of what she was eating, which was not the issue that I intended to address in that picture.

Furthermore, I realized that photos could be misleading without captions. The picture of a girl crying while her mother was feeding another baby (Photo 9) was a good example. Many respondents thought that, because the mother was looking after the baby, the crying girl felt left out. In fact, the misbehaving girl wanted to do something that her mother and older sister would not allow her to do. Thus, her sister shouted at her, and she cried.

This example reflected that the respondents, whether migrants or non-migrants, tended to provide logical explanations based on their experience, knowledge and common sense, although these explanations often differed from reality. This reminded
me that, as a photographer, I might sometimes be too close to the subject and the photo, and I might assume that viewers share similar background knowledge with me. In fact, however, they often do not share that knowledge, and they will react based on their own experiences and knowledge. Thus, captions indeed play a significant role in illustrating what the photographer intends to present.

Another finding was that respondents, regardless of insider or outsider status, preferred to connect the images with their personal stories. Their responses were greatly shaped by their past experience. All the interviewees recalled their personal life, such as their kids and their childhood, at least once during the research interview.

Lastly, I realized that the initial responses and impressions of the photos were simple and short, but as the interviews went on, the respondents looked at the photos more carefully and provided more detailed information. Thus, warm-ups were needed in order to acquire more in-depth responses.

Conducting this photo-elicitation allowed me to see many nuances. For instance, the female clothing factory worker provided a different perspective to an image of a girl sitting backward in a chair (Photo 10).

She explained: “The way of the girl sitting on the chair is different than the way of city kids. When you visit the countryside, you always see people, especially kids, sitting on a chair like this, you know, sitting backwards in a chair. Country kids do whatever they want at home because their parents would not restrict them too much. In cities, however, no one would act like this.”
Overall, all 12 respondents thought that the ten photos accurately and fairly depicted the lives of China’s migrant children and their families. What was different was that the outsiders tended to focus on the poverty while the insiders focused on the normality in the pictures. Many of them saw the photos in a positive light: although the children have to “endure horrible living conditions”, they looked “happy”, “mischievous”, and “innocent”.

However, the university professor added another perspective, “There also are poor people who are not migrants but from cities, you know, like those unemployed and with low income. If you do not mention that these are migrant children and their family, I may think that they are just poor Wuhan citizens. So don’t label people as groups. For instance, I met a woman who was selling apples on the street, and she told me that she had bought three apartments in Wuhan. She was just selling fruit for fun because she was retired and had nothing to do at home. So, don’t label people when you don’t know them. Life is complicated.”
APPENDIX 1:

Addendum of Changes

I had originally proposed two options to conduct the photo class: one was to partner with a nonprofit organization, Compassion for Migrant Children (CMC) which was founded by an America, Jonathan Hursh in 2006 in Beijing, China; and the other was to partner with Lingzhi Elementary School, which was established in 1999 in Wuhan, China and specifically recruit migrant children as students.

After I visited Lingzhi and its surrounding community, I decided to partner with Lingzhi because the place has many things that are photographically interesting. It is a 1.2 square kilometer area with over 120,000 migrant workers as residents and more than 3,000 apartment buildings, surrounded by shopping malls, skyscrapers, and the renovated Hankou Railway Station. The environment and the living conditions there inspired and appealed me a lot.

In addition, the children studying at Linzhi might need the photo class more than those taking part in the programs of CMC. The NGO has 80 cameras and many volunteers, and it has offered photo classes before. Also it offers many other kinds of after-school classes for migrant children. But Linzhi didn’t have funds, resources, and facilities to do these. So I thought that the children at Linzhi might need the photo class more, because they seldom would have opportunities to use cameras and express their thoughts.

Moreover, because Wuhan is my hometown, I am familiar with the city and I can easily communicate with migrant workers by speaking local dialects. Most migrant
workers come from rural areas near Wuhan, so we share a similar background of languages and conventions.

I have made another change to the original proposal, which was to interview six migrant workers and six non-migrant workers, instead of four and four, in order to acquire more diverse responses and insights for the research.
APPENDIX 2:

Project Proposal

Introduction

I was always impressed by the innocent curiosity and enthusiasm of children. Whenever I took photographs for them, they wanted to hold and look through my camera. I was also astounded by how mature they could be. Imagine a scene in which a boy aged at 3 or 4 and just learned how to talk, proudly telling his classmate that his uncle is rich and powerful because he is the head of the local police station, would you be surprised? That was what I saw in a Chinese broadcast documentary, “Kindergarden” (directed by Yiqin Zhang) during my undergraduate study in China.

And that’s how I became intrigued with kids. The world in their eyes may be not too different from the one in the adults’ eyes. Their conduct and thoughts may be strongly influenced by the surrounding environment and the whole society. Just as Zhang mentioned in the beginning of that film, by examining the lives of children, we actually examine ourselves and the world at the same time.

Then, in Prof. Keith Greenwood’s class, Photography in Society, I first encountered “Shooting Back”. By giving cameras to homeless children and teaching them the basic skills of taking pictures, Jim Hubbard provided opportunities for them to present their own voices and their understanding of the world. I was amazed by those pictures - they are honest, powerful, creative, and most important, they capture many
moments that an outsider might not experience. I felt like I was reading their minds when looking at those pictures.

So when I was brainstorming what I should do for the Master’s project, I just thought about conducting a shooting back project with Chinese youth. Since China’s booming development has attracted attention from all over the world, how does her next generation interpret it? And how does the development influence the youths’ perception and conduct? A shooting back project may provide insights.

At first I planned to conduct the project with children living in remote and impoverished regions who have never seen a camera before or had no idea what a camera is. But I was worry about the access and funding. Then I decided to find children from a more prosperous area who are exposed to the influence of digital technology and the Internet at their early ages. However, neither of them are exact what I want. They are like the two extremely different sides of one story, so each intensify something while weakening something else.

Then one day I read a message from the Chinese twitter, weibo, which is about a nonprofit organization, Compassion for Migrant Children using truck cubes to build communities for the children of Chinese migrant workers and provide after-school programs for them. Then all of a sudden, I just thought, “what about Chinese migrant children?” Migrant children are those originally from rural areas who came with their parents to urban areas seeking jobs. I decided their perception and interpretation of the development is worthy of exploration.
In addition, migrant children are deprived on many levels due to the low household income of migrant families and a discriminatory household registration principle applied to them. The principle, hukou, identifies a person as a resident of an area, controls the place that one is eligible for education, welfare, marriage, employment and so on, and classifies Chinese citizens as urban residents and rural residents. Migrant workers as rural residents are not eligible for urban welfare, social services, and urban employment. They have to seek for heavy labor jobs that most urban residents are unwilling to do or become vendors selling things on the street. Their children who are not eligible for urban public education have to attend substandard schools. Also, as migrant workers have to work excessively long hours in arduous jobs, many migrant children are more likely to be victims of crime and have psychological problems. Thus, I hope photography can serve as a tool to help or even “empower” migrant children. I hope that this shooting back project will alleviate their suffering, enrich their lives, and give them opportunities to convey their thoughts.

Furthermore, I will shoot my own photographs of Chinese migrant children and their family. As a girl who was born and raised in an urban area and rarely paid attention to the lives of near-by migrant workers and migrant children in the past, I hope this project will give me an opportunity to step in by offering photo tutorship. At the meantime, migrant children and their family who hardly could afford a camera may use photography as a new approach to explore the surrounding world. I believe that the interaction will meaningful and interesting, and both of us will be enriched by our experience together.
Then, after both their shooting and my shooting are completed, I will use photo elicitation as the research method to explore whether my photographs fairly represent those being photographed.

There are four goals that both the professional skill component (the shooting back project) and the research component (the photo-elicitation study) attempt to achieve. The basic goal is to educate - I will teach migrant children basic photography knowledge and help them to grasp a skill. I believe I will not only learn from those photos shot by them, but also benefit from our experience together.

The second is to document. Both children’s work and my work will document the life of migrant workers and their family. But are these captured fragments fair and thorough? Although photographs always strive for intimate and accurate images that could represent the truth or reality, seldom could they achieve this objective. I will mainly explore this question in the research component.

The third goal is to convey a point of view. I hope that in the shooting back project the children will become their own advocates. Their voices would convey that they are important and they need attention. Also my images will express my own understanding of this group of people and China’s development.

The ultimate objective is to communicate. By conducting both the shooting back project and the research, I, a middle class girl who has grown up in an urban area, hope to maximize my understanding of migrant workers and to discover any nuances that my photographs fail to convey. More importantly, since many urban residents hold suspicion or even hostile attitude toward migrant workers, this project will serve as a bridge.
between the two. The voices of the migrant children and their family expressed by photographs may be heard and understood by other people.

By pursuing these four goals, I believe that my understanding of photography and the responsibility of a photographer will continue to grow.

I realize that it will be an adventure, and I admit to the idealism inherent in it. But what steels my resolve is a deep desire to figure out what is going on in China right now. The two-year study at the University of Missouri has not only taught me about photographic techniques, but also allowed me to immerse in a culture that is totally different than the one in China. The experience provides me new perspectives to rethink many issues.

One of the most important lesson that I learned from the two-year experience as a photojournalism student is that, as an outsider, how does my own experience and background influence my work. In other words, the experience always remind me to meditate that as an outsider, could I shoot accurate, insightful, and well-rounded stories? Language barrier and culture differences are two rooted obstacles always challenging my work. For instance, when I photographed a story of a guy, Brad Montgomery, who is crazy about vintage cars for the Picture Story and Photographic Essay class, I realized that hardly could I understand what he was talking about. One reason is that there is no vintage cars culture in China, so I have no idea about the specific terms of car parts and types. Another is that Brad speaks an informal language that I never learned from my English class. Thus, I had to ask him questions again and again in order to figure out what he was talking about. The communication between him and me was rough, even
though I really enjoy the shooting process. I just can’t stop worrying that I might ignore some important information. I always thought that, if the photographer was a native American photographer, would the story be different regardless of photographic techniques? What would he/she pay attention to? What would he/she ask? What did I neglect because of the language barrier and culture differences? Is there anything I intentionally focus on due to my Chinese background?

In addition, I was deeply impressed with some of my subjects, especially those having a simple, tranquil living style. Brad is an example - he was born and raised in the countryside, never having a job, but spending most of his life pursuing his interest, vintage cars. I also photographed an outdoorsman, Mike Cooper for the Staff Photojournalism class, who has spent more than 30 years living in a mobile home located near the bank of the Missouri River because of his love of nature. Neither of them are rich, but they enjoy the simpleness and peacefulness of their lives. However, in China, seldom would a person be willing to live in this kind of style. Maybe because I was born and raised in an urban area, what I have experienced is a bustling and crowded city in which most people are strive for a happiness life tightly relating to wealth, power, and social status. In other words, what kind of job a person have or what type of house he/she can afford become the criteria to weigh whether one is successful.

I don’t mean to judge that one is better than the other, but the comparison between the two indeed urge me to think and question some issues: why most Chinese make great efforts to gain material wealth? Under the rapidly growing economy, what do China and her residents neglect?
Furthermore, I greatly appreciate that the School of Journalism offered me a Graduate Research Assistant position as a videographer, which not only helps me grasp solid skills of video shooting and editing, but also gives me precious opportunities to communicate with people working for different fields of communication.

Both the classes and the work help me reinforce professional skills of visual storytelling, as well as develop a global perspectives for being a journalist. The two-year study is not only a professional training, but a valuable chance of exploring. With the help of all the questions, thoughts raised from the experience in U.S., I believe that, when I go back to China to conduct the project, I will be more capable of presenting a well-rounded, insightful portrayal.

In addition, because I intend to be an independent documentary filmmaker or documentary photographer in the future, I hope this independent project can be a jumping off for my career.
The Professional Skills Component

At present I am still arranging the project. There are two options to conduct the shooting back portion.

One is to partner with a nonprofit organization, Compassion for Migrant Children (CMC) which was first founded by an America, Jonathan Hursh in 2006 in Beijing, China. It is devoted to helping migrant children through offering social and educational programs. CMC has offered similar photo classes for migrant children before and they have 80 cameras that I could use.

Another is to partner with Lingzhi Elementary School, a school specifically recruiting migrant children as students. It was established in 1999 in Wuhan, China, and is also known as the “rooftop school”, because it is in a worn four-floor apartment building as the classroom building while using its rooftop as the playground for 521 students.

The greatest advantage of cooperating with CMC is that they are able to provide cameras, which will profoundly reduce my budget. However, they require me to comply with their schedule, so I will only have three or four weeks beginning from the mid of July, 2012 to conduct the shooting back project. In order to fulfill the minimum 14-week requirement, I will have to set up two photo classes with two different groups of children. Although I would like to teach more children about photography, I prefer to stick with one small group in order to fully interact with them and better understand their thoughts. Another difficulty is that finding a short-term accommodation in Beijing will be hard.
Thus, Lingzhi Elementary school seems to become a better choice for me, because on one hand, they give me more flexibility and control of the class set-up; and on the other, I don’t need to deal with accommodation because Wuhan is my hometown. Also, the shabby building and the poor neighborhood seems to be more visually interesting. However, my only concern is the cameras. If I would acquire support from one or two camera companies, I definitely would partner with Lingzhi Elementary school to conduct the shooting back project; Even if I couldn’t, I might still partner with it, because the cost of living in Beijing is almost equal as the cost of buying twenty point-and-shoot cameras.

At present I haven’t made the final decision of which to partner with yet, but in either case, I will approach the project in two ways. First, I will set up a photo class with the partner institution, and assemble a group of 10-20 migrant children aged 10-to-12-year-olds and teach them basic skills of photography. The central theme is to allow them to use the camera to perceive the surrounding world, rather than ask them to judge what is a good picture. Besides, there will be no limitation on what they can or cannot shoot, but a series of assignments will be given as guidance. Possible assignments include: what is the most important thing for you, what is the most beautiful thing you find/meet today, what is your favorite food, what place means something to you, and who is your best friend. I will meet with them as a group at least twice per week to review their photographs together, and the class will last at least 3 months. And I will ask them questions about those photographs. Second, I will shoot my own pictures to document the lives of migrant children and their families. I will take photographs for the whole
community at first. But gradually I will focus on one or two families and follow them in order to present a deeper story.

I will carry out the project in July, 2012, China. The following is a planned timeline for my project:

1. May-June: Preparation (Issues need to be solved: who will be my partner? who would like to provide the cameras and what kind of cameras may I use? Who will be the participants (age, gender, hometown)? What will I teach and in which ways should I teach (class contents, assignments, critique)? Where will I live in Beijing if I choose to partner with CMC?)

2. July - November: Conducting the Shooting Back as well as the Interview Portion of the Photo-Elicitation Research

3. December: Post-Editing (Edit both the children’s work and my work, prepare for the exhibition, log in the interview)

4. January - February: Holding the Exhibition and Writing the Research Paper

During the time in China, I will communicate with the committee members through email or blog every week to inform the progress, exchange ideas, and hear their advice. The emails will serve as the field note of the whole project. I will go back to MU to defense in the late of February or early of March, 2013.

Upon completion of my professional project, I hope to have a photo story that can run in either print or on-line media. Possible considerations for publishing my work include local media in Wuhan or Beijing depending on who will be the partner, and
national media in China as well as international media organizations who care about migrant worker issues. Now I have not made any initial contacts to editors at any publications about this project yet. Besides, if time and funding allowed, the project will culminate either in a joint exhibition of the children’s and my work at a local gallery or school, or I will build a website to exhibit the children’s photographs on-line.

The final submission for my master’s project will include 20-30 prints of both children’s and my work as well as a CD including all the selected intakes.
Budget

Plan I - Partner with CMC and Go to Beijing

Children’s Shooting

SD Cards ................................................................. $15 (each) x 20 = $300

TOTAL ........................................................................ $300

Exhibition

Photo Paper (Epson Ultra Premium Luster 13x19") ...................... $80 (each) x 1 = $80

Printing Fee ........................................................................ $5 (each) x 50 = 250

Flyers ........................................................................... $0.5 (each) x 100 = $50

TOTAL ........................................................................ $380

Shengze’s Shooting

Rent ............................................................................... $300 (per month) x 6 = $1800

TOTAL ........................................................................ $1800

GRAND TOTAL ........................................................................ $2480
Budget

Plan II - Partner with Lingzhi and Stay in Wuhan

**Children’s Shooting**

Point-and-Shoot Cameras ................................................................. $100 (each) x 20 = $ 2000

SD Cards .......................................................................................... $15 (each) x 20 = $300

TOTAL ...................................................................................................................... $2300

**Exhibition**

Photo Paper (Epson Ultra Premium Luster 13x19’’) ........................... $80 (each) x 1 = $80

Printing Fee .......................................................................................... $5 (each) x 50 = 250

Flyers .......................................................................................... $0.5 (each) x 100 = $50

TOTAL .................................................................................................................... $380

GRAND TOTAL ........................................................................................................... $2680
The Professional Analysis

From the pinhole camera to the acclaimed Leica to the most advanced DSLR camera, the relation between what the camera has captured and what is the reality is never settled. Although a picture always appears so truthful - it documents real people and real things from the real world, is it the reality? Does it fairly represent the people, the place, or whatever has been captured in that image? Furthermore, can people believe what he/she has seen?

I used to be a supporter of old axioms such as “The camera never lies” or “Seeing is believing”. But as my understanding of photography has grown and my skills have developed, I have realized that no photographs can be completely accurate. Photography is a process based on making choices - you have to choose the lens, the camera angle, the use of light, the composition, the focus - all of these are subjective procedures that highly rely on the photographer’s own knowledge and live experience. Thus, I am curious about the gap between what I have seen and photographed and what the subject actually is. I always wonder how my own life experience and knowledge exerts impact on my work.

Accordingly, the main purpose of the research component is to examine whether one’s photographs fairly represent the thing one has photographed. I intend to use photo elicitation as the research method, an approach of inserting photographs into the interview to stimulate responses from the interviewees.

In order to judge whether my photographs provide a fair and well-rounded portrayal of the lives of Chinese migrant workers and their children, I will conduct photo elicitation interviews with both migrant workers and non-migrant workers. By comparing
the responses from migrant workers with those from non-migrant workers, this study intends to analyze:

Q1: Do migrant workers and non-migrant workers, respectively, believe the photojournalist’ photographs are an accurate/fair representation of migrant workers? Why or why not?

Q2: Do the personal background and knowledge influence one’s interpretation of the photographs?

On one hand, by conducting photo-elicitation interviews with migrant workers, I will be able to obtain thoughts from an insider’s perspective, which will help to improve my photography work as well as learn any patterns of neglect or bias in my photographs. Photographers always strive to immerse themselves into a story in order to capture intimate moments. They do research in advance of the shooting, they spend more time with the subject, they observe carefully and listen patiently, they try to be fair and thorough, however, it’s still possible that they will interpret their subjects differently than their subjects may interpret themselves. Thus, I hope to hear insights from migrant workers themselves to see whether my photographs are accurate portrayal, and how my own life experience influence my work.

One the other hand, I will conduct photo-elicitation interviews with non-migrant workers. Would they believe my photographs are an accurate portrayal of migrant workers? Would they interpret differently than migrant workers when looking at the same image? By comparing the response from migrant workers with the response from non-
migrant workers, I will be able to further explore how one’s personal knowledge and life experience influence one’s interpretation of an image.

In addition, by compare and contrast a variety of perspectives from both migrant workers and non-migrant workers, I hope to understand any cultural nuances that my photographs fail to convey.

To better conduct the research, I will use the social construction of reality theory for guidance. In order to explore whether one’s photographs fairly represent reality, it is of great importance to know what reality is and how it is constructed first.
Theoretical Framework

the Social Construction of Reality theory.

Well-known sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1990) propounded the Social Construction of Reality theory in 1967 and pointed out that, for the purpose of fully comprehending what is “reality”, it is of great importance for us to know how the reality is constructed. In their opinion, the reality is socially constructed because it needs to be shared with others (p.23); and being “socially constructed” means that it’s the interaction among people - their subjective meaningful conducts and thoughts - that originates and maintains the reality (p.22).

They also said that the comprehension of reality could be influenced through three dimensions: first, one may misinterpret other’s meanings even in face-to-face situations due to one’s subjectivity, which is only accessible to him/her in a way the other can never be; second, one may label the other as belonging to one category, such as “an European” and “a buyer”, and these “typifications” will influence one’s interaction with the other; and third, the degree of one’s interest and intimacy with the other or the degree of one’s remoteness with them may affect the interaction as well (p.29-34).

Adoni and Mane from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem pointed out in 1984 that the social construction of reality should not only be seen as a relationship between culture and society, but also a type of media effect (p.323). They also found three types of reality in the dialectical process between human beings and the social world: objective social reality, symbolic social reality, and subjective social reality (p.325-326).
In their opinion, objective social reality is the reality par excellence, which does not need any further verification. Symbolic social reality is any form of symbolic expression of objective reality, such as art, literature, and media contents. Different people will perceive different spheres of it. Then, the individual can use both the objective and the symbolic realities to construct his/her own subjective reality. And it’s the subjective reality that provides the basis for one’s social conduct (p.325-326).

There are interactions among these three types of reality. Adoni and Mane found that in the field of mass communication, some issues were raised. For instance, by using subtle verbal and visual techniques, broadcast news could present a distorted picture of objective reality. Thus, a question came out - “who is responsible for, and what determines the modes of reality portrayal in media contents?” (p.329).

Then, Adoni, Cohen and Mane (1984) used a questionnaire to explore how people perceived the social, political, and economic conflicts portrayed by television news. The main finding of the study is that young people are not only able to realize the difference between social reality and television reality, but also be able to distinguish them, which, they concluded, may serve as “a barrier against an overwhelming effect of television on the construction of subjective reality”. (p.47).
Method

Photo elicitation is a research method that inserts photographs into a research interview (Harper, 2002). John Collier, an American anthropologist first proposed in the mid-1950s for using pictures in interviews (Collier, 1957).

What distinguishes the photo interview from the word-only interview is interviewee’s responses to images (Harper, 2002, p.13). In fact, how people react to these two forms of symbolic representation has a physical basis:

The parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus, images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words (Harper, 2002, p.13).

In 2005, Faith Cathcart, a graduate student of the University of Missouri, conducted a study by using photo elicitation to explore the reaction of residents from Mazunte, a small fishing village in Mexico and its relation with memory (Cathcart, 2005). While indicating that photo elicitation is an “extremely fluid and conversational method” to evoke information (2005, p.50), Cathcart also found that an individual’s memory plays an crucial role in affecting his/her response. For instance, even though no pictures depicted the hurricane Paulina, which hit the village in 1997, all of the interviewees referred to its physical force and lasting consequences during the interview (2005, p.80). Thus, Cathcart concluded:

Photographs, operating on multiple levels, offer a unique window onto collective
memory. On one hand, they represent a freezing reality “as is”. on the other, they allow and invite the viewer to draw broader meanings (2005, p.80).

Susan Whitney, another graduate student of the University of Missouri, also used photo elicitation after completing her “Shooting Back” project with children from Bywater, a poor and most African-American community in New Orleans, in order to examine how being an outsider influences one’s coverage (Whitney, 2002). She edited both the children’s work and hers down to fifty photographs and labeled the children’s as set A and hers as set B, and then presented both of them to five adult residents of Bywater.

Those photographs engendered very different or even opposite responses among interviewees. For instance, one interviewee considered Set A as more about the intersection of people and place whereas another interviewee thought Set B was (p.45 & p.61); and most important, two of the five interviewees didn’t deem the photographs - both Set A and Set B - as the accurate representation of the community - one said that the photos were “part of the truth” and the other, who has studied social constructionism theory before, considered the images as “one’s representation” and there should be no “accurate” images - to be more precisely, “my reality of Bywater is very different from a whole bunch of kids’ in the Bywater, and who’s to say mine is accurate or theirs is accurate” (p.62). She concluded that “not only does one’s past affect the way one gives meaning to photographs, but so do one’s tastes, worldview and expectation”(p.71).

Viewers, who also have emotions and thoughts and are able to choose, affect the interpretation of what does that photographs mean and what does it represent ( p.71).
Accordingly, “a photograph is what it is to me, but that might not be what it is to you” (p.71).

In addition, she pointed out that using captions may affect people’s interpretation of photographs as well, so it would be more appropriate to not present the caption to interviewees when using photo-elicitation (p.45).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Jerald Swope, a graduate student of the University of Missouri is especially relevant to my research. After photographing people’s lives in Lakota, an Indian reservation, Swope compared the perspectives of three Lakota Native Americans with the perspectives of four non-Native Americans in his photo-elicitation study to examine whether his photographs provide an accurate look into Lakota life (2002).

He found that the subjects’ own personal experiences clearly influenced their responses (Swope, 2002, p.53). For instance, a non-Indian participant responded to the picture of the two men setting up the tipi and the picture of the sweat lodge being built with doubts - “he asked if they were getting ready for a pow-wow, whereas an Indian participant commented the photos as “struggle and stress” because he knew that the work was tough (Swope, 2002, p.58). Swope (2002) further illustrated:

There were a number of pictures that all the subjects or at least a majority of the subjects liked or commented on. Sometimes these comments illustrated that they liked them for the same reasons, while other times it was clear that they liked them differently for different reasons. In some cases, the non-Indians were drawn to the same images for similar reasons, while the Lakotas were drawn to them for
different reasons. In several instances, comments that were made by the Lakota subjects were reinforced by the non-Indian subjects (p. 54).

He concluded that “each subjects’ responses were clearly influenced by their individual personalities, their life experience, and how and where they were raised” (Swope, 2002, p. 67).

In my research, with an attempt to explore whether one’s photographs accurately portray his/her subject, I will conduct photo-elicitation interviews with both my subject, migrant workers and non-migrant workers. I will interview four migrant workers differing at age, gender and profession, but all living in the same community, which will be either the CMC community or the Lingzhi community depending on which I will photograph. I also will interview four non-migrant workers who lives in the same city as those migrant worker do, but are not the members of the community. In other words, they have the hukou of the city and they are not migrants. Similarly, I will choose to interview hukou holders differing at age, gender and profession.

I will conduct separate interviews with the eight participants. In each interview, I will show him/her ten photos photographed by me, and ask him/her to flip through the photos and give me any thoughts, ideas he/she has. That is, I will not ask questions first but listen to his/her intuitive feedback. After it, guided questions will be asked for further exploration.

I will conduct the interview portion during the shooting process, because I believe the responses, especially those from the migrant workers, will provide first-hand advice for my shooting.
Literature Review

images and seeing.

English art critic John Berger (1972) clarified the difference between an image and the reality in his essay Ways of Seeing:

Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how something or somebody had once looked - and thus by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people. Later still the specific vision of the imager-maker was also recognized as part of the record. An image became a record of how X had seen Y (p.10).

Arthur Asa Berger (1989), previously a professor at San Francisco State University, illustrated what is an image from another perspective - the connection between “image” and “imagination” - while also distinguishing it from the reality:

Imaginations exists in the mind, while image - for our purposes - is tangible and visual. But the image is often a product of imagination, which means that the visible image is strongly connected to the mental one (p.2).

More precisely, in the field of photography, the photographer’s intelligence and emotion have an impact on selecting camera angles, use of light, choice of focus, and the like, which leads to a fact that photographs only reveal “what photographers want their photographs to reveal” (Berger, A., 1989, p.73).
Sandra Weber from the Concordia University (2008) further illustrated that what a specific image can mean or represent is also related to who is the viewer and in which context the image is viewed - the social, cultural, and political knowledge the viewers have and the way they see the image will influence their interpretation of it.

Just as Berger mentioned that, “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice” (Berger, J., 1972, p.8). This viewpoint resonated with the social construction of reality theory, which claiming that it’s the subjectively meaningful conduct of people as well as their thoughts and actions that maintain the reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1990, p.19).

**the nature of photography.**

Just as viewers’ perception is “an act of choice” (Berger, J., 1972, p.8), taking photographs also is a process based on selection (Szarkowski, 1966).

Szarkowski (1966), a photographer, critic, and also was the director of photography in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City from 1962 to 1991, says photography has five things: “the thing itself”, “the detail”, “the frame”, “time”, and “vantage point”. Among them, “the thing itself” indicates that although a photograph deals with the actual it is still “the thing itself”, rather than the reality itself - no matter how unimpeachable or indisputable the photo is (p.8-11). He further explained:

Much of the reality was filtered out in the static little black and white image, and some of it was exhibited with an unnatural clarity, an exaggerated importance. The subject and the picture were not the same thing, although they would afterward
seem so. It was the photographer’s problem to see not simply the reality before him but the still invisible picture, and to make his choices in terms of the latter (p.8).

So, how did photographers make their choices? American photographer Jim Goldberg (1985) indicated the importance of being independent when shooting his project “Rich and Poor”. He tried to stand apart and separate himself from both rich and poor, whereas Brazilian photographer Sebastio Salgado chose to be fully involved with his subjects. Sometimes he even lived with them (Bell, 1992).

Salgado emphasized the importance of a good relationship between the photographer and the subject when talking about the nature of photography. “The picture is not made by the photographer. The picture is more or less good as a function of the relationship that you have with the people you photograph” (Bell, 1992, p.198).

For instance, the subject will be aware of the photographer’s presence and act differently (Bair & Bryan, 1999, p.18). It’s how much the subject trust the photographers that determines whether or not the subject would be able to not be wary of the photographer and feel comfortable to continue with their daily lives (p.18).

“Photovoice” and "Shooting Back".

Paulo Feire, an influential Brazilian educator, first used photography to understand others’ perspectives and perceptions about the world. He asked people questions in Spanish and then requested answers in pictures (Boal, 1979, p.123).

Photography has been widely used in participatory communication research, and the method of giving people cameras and encouraging them to shoot and share their
perceptions and thoughts with others through photographs is known variously as “photo voice” or “visual voice” (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994). Researchers believed that this technique helped present a story that “was previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked” (Shinghal & Harter & Chitnis & Sharma, 2004, p.7).

In 1989, American documentary photographer Jim Hubbard created an organization named “Shooting Back,” which specifically gave children and youth at risk cameras and taught them photography (Hubbard, 1994). An Indian teenager mentioned in Hubbard’s Lives Turned Upside Down is quote as saying “I hate the fact that non-Indians stereotype us all as alcoholics who live off the government” (1996, p.95), Hubbard indicated that those have participated in “Shooting Back” have captured some images that was “impossible for an outsider to have ever perceived or experienced” (1991, p.5).
Conclusion

A photograph, in essence, is a record of how the photographer had seen his/her subject. According to Adoni and Mane (1984), the construction process of reality is a process that includes interactions among individuals, society, and culture (p.324). Undoubtedly, different photographers will interact with other people, the society, and culture in different ways. The knowledge one acquiring springs from the previous experience only belonged to him/her. More precisely, a photographer’s understanding about photography as well as about the subject will be unique and - either intentionally or unintentionally - craft his/her work, which is reflected by using different photographic techniques and applying his/her own point of view to guide the whole creating process. Similarly, an viewer’s own knowledge and life experience will affect his/her own interpretation of that image.

Thus, it is naive to consider photography as a mechanical process that would reproduce the reality. Photographs always are subjective reality - they are the photographs subjective choices, they are the viewers’ subjective interpretations, and they are NOT the objective reality. “We are all image-makers and image readers. Images are a rich source of data for understanding the social world and for representing our knowledge of that social world” (Mathison, 2009).

However, if what the photographer has captured is only his/her own subjective feelings embodied in the framing, exposure, composition, and among other things, could a photograph fairly represents the thing captured by it? Could the photograph avoid distorting the subject?
Yes, it still can. It needs trust and collaboration between the image-maker and the subject. It’s an unbiased, honest, and collaborative dialogue that helps the photographer to fairly represent the subject without misleading or distorting. In order to establish the dialogue, the photographer should be “open, unjudgmental, honest, consistent, reliable, flexible, patent, understanding, empathetic, and compassionate” (Bair & Bryan, 1999, p.18).

In addition, as Berger and Luckmann indicated in the Social Construction of Reality theory, the photographer should not label the subject as belonging to one category, otherwise the “reality” may be twisted because of the previous knowledge or even bias that photographer has had. This viewpoint reminds me that I should not label the Chinese migrant workers as “the poor” or “the marginalized group”. In other words, I should just simply treat them as human beings, rather than place them in the “migrant workers” group and attach certain labels on them. As Hubbard concluded in the “Shooting Back” (1994) that, all of us are “powerful, intelligent, and creative”, and we all deserve equality and opportunity in the society (p.xiv). Thus, I think one way for me to fairly represent the life of migrant workers is to NOT label them before I really know them.

In addition, Harper indicated that photo elicitation helps establish communication between people “who rarely share taken-for-granted cultural backgrounds”(2002, p.20), that’s why I decided to conduct the photo-elicitation interviews during the shooting. I believe that the feedback from the migrant workers will serve as an effective tool for me to present an accurate, well-rounded portrayal of them. Harper also emphasized that the
quality of the photograph itself is of great importance for building the mutual understanding (2002, p.23), which encourages me to work hard in order to capture the most powerful and creative moments of the story.
References


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Swope, Jerald. (2002). A Comparison of Lakota and Non-Lakota Perspectives Using Photo Elicitation. Published Master’s Project. Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO.


APPENDIX 3:

Photos Used in the Photo Elicitation Study

PHOTO 1

PHOTO 2