

## **Document 18.3: Stories of their families written by the children of migrant workers living and working in Beijing, 2007**

*The Dandelion School in Beijing is the first non-profit middle school in the capital, established for children of migrant workers. Many of the children live nearby in homes of one or two tiny rooms with dirt floors, and no running water or electricity. Some of the students board at the school. These essays were written in January 2007 in response to the principal's request to write about their lives.*

### **1. “Hard Life,” by Hu Yajing, a 9th grade girl**

#### *Part I*

I had pain, I had an experience, and I had such a story when Baba (Father) and Mama (Mother) were away from me.

I remember when I was young, my father went to Beijing first, and then my mother went to Beijing with my little younger brother, leaving me and my 12-year-old sister at home.

Before leaving, my mother bought two bags of rice and one jar of cooking oil for us. She also asked my uncle to help us if possible. Because we had no money, she went to school and promised the principal that we would pay tuition as soon as she made some money.

The afternoon when my mother left, it became dark for no reason, and a strong wind started to blow. My mother walked to the entrance of the village, holding my brother's hand. She said to me and my sister, “Be good at home. Wear more when it gets cold. I'll be back for the Lunar New Year.”<sup>1</sup> My mother got on the bus and the bus drove farther and farther away. Watching at disappearing bus, my sister and I cried.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese New Year

In the evening, only my sister and I were left in the home that seemed too big for us. We felt very lonely. After a while, my sister said, "Let's cook something." By cooking, we meant warming up the leftovers from the last meal before my mother left. This was the first dinner my sister and I had after my mother left. It was late after dinner, so we went to sleep.

The next day, my sister warmed the leftovers again as breakfast. Then we went to school. Uncle had us for lunch at his home.

In the evening, my sister decided we should cook by ourselves at home. I was in charge of taking care of the coal stove. Sister washed the rice, put rice in the pot, poured water in, and covered the pot with a lid. While I was making sure the fire was good, Sister went on to wash vegetables. She started cooking vegetables after the rice was done. Watching her cooking skillfully, I seemed to see my mother cooking. I was thinking of mother and couldn't resist tears in my eyes. "What happened? Did your eyes get smoke?" Sister asked carefully. "No. I miss Mama," I said sadly. Sister came over and comforted me. I knew Sister was missing Mama too. She wanted to cry too, but she didn't. She kept comforting me instead. Finally the dinner was ready. We went to bed after dinner.

We lived like this day after day. Gradually, Sister and I got used to the days when Mama was not with us. Time passed quickly. Suddenly winter came. It was almost the Lunar New Year. Sister and I remembered clearly what Mama said when she left "I'll be back for the Lunar New Year." So we looked forward to the coming of the Spring Festival,<sup>2</sup> very soon. Mama would be back by then and we would be together with her again. Then three or four days before the Spring Festival, Mama called and said she couldn't come back. Our hope became disappointment.

## *Part II*

During the summer vacation that year, Sister and I went to visit Grandpa on Mama's side. Grandpa's home was very far, and Sister and I didn't want to use money for the bus. So we started off very early in the morning when it was cool enough. While walking, Sister and I

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<sup>2</sup> The period immediately following the Chinese (Lunar) New Year is known as the Spring Festival.

thought about those days when Mama was with us and all the things that had happened when she was away. We missed Mama so much. My eyes were full of tears again.

Crying too, Sister looked at me and said, “Although Mama is not with us, we managed anyhow for such a long time. Say no more. Mama will be back eventually. We even learned how to be independent this way.” We kept walking.

Suddenly Sister brightened with some idea. She said, “I have a good idea. When we see Grandpa, we can ask him to write a letter to Mama for us.”

I got excited too, “Great. Let’s walk fast.” Both of us started smiling and walked faster, wanting to see Grandpa immediately.

Sister and I walked for FIVE hours and finally we came to grandpa’s home. We were exhausted when we stepped into the door. We had to lie down. Grandpa was making lunch when he saw us. He was very happy to see us and asked us to rest for a while and have lunch.

After lunch, Sister told Grandpa our idea. Grandpa said yes and brought out paper and pen. Sister was writing, and Grandpa and I were thinking about the content. We had a lot to tell Mama.

“Mama, Sister and I are at Grandpa’s now. Other people are farming most of our field. Grandpa (father’s side) is staying with Step-grandma, and he never came back. Uncle and the neighbors checked on us when they had time. Mama, when can you come back? We miss you so much. We hope you can come back soon ....”

Sister and I cried when she wrote this part. After a while, the letter was ready. We asked Grandpa to send out the letter. I was even thinking, “Mama is so far from us. Could the letter possibly be delivered to Mama’s hands?” “Silly girl, the letter will definitely be delivered to your Mama’s hands,” Grandpa laughed. I laughed too. About a week later, Mama called back and said she received the letter. I later heard from my father that Mama was very happy to see the letter, but she cried when she was reading it. I knew she must have been missing us.

### *Part III*

Another Spring Festival came. Grandpa prepared to go to Beijing. Mama decided to ask Grandpa to take us to Beijing too. Sister and I were so happy and excited at that time. We thought Mama's home in Beijing would be much better than the one in our hometown.

Grandpa took us to Beijing. We were very happy on the way. I was shocked when I saw the new home, a small room that had a space for two beds only. I was heartbroken. I could not imagine how my parents lived in such a place. But, in this very small room, I felt the happiness of being at home.

Then I knew Mama was working in a hospital, taking care of patients, 24 hours one day and time off the next day. But when she was at home, she didn't rest, but did all the chores instead. We children were not very considerate at that time. We always made a lot of noise, and Mama couldn't get enough rest. Because she didn't have enough sleep, Mama got a kind of sickness and had a few surgeries in the hospital. Baba [Father] was also a contract worker. He changed a lot of jobs because of low salaries.

Now my parents are making coat hangers in a factory. I clearly remember that my parents were not happy when they heard the news of my Sister passing the exams and being admitted into a senior middle school in our hometown. They kept Sister here in Beijing and never mentioned anything about school.

The school year was about to start and Sister wanted to go back to our hometown. Mama said to Sister, "It's not that Mama is cold-hearted. You've seen how hard it is for the whole family to even have enough food. Your three years in senior middle school will cost a lot of money and we really can't afford it."

Sister knew how hard Baba and Mama had to work to make money and the family had huge financial burdens. But Sister was determined to go to school and go on to college. She said to

Mama, “As soon as you support me to finish senior middle school, I’ll take out loans for college.” Hearing this, Mama had to let her go to school.

Since then, Sister studies much much harder in school. At the same time, the financial burdens for our family have become much heavier. Faced with tuitions every year, Baba and Mama are busy working every day. Mama’s health has got worse and worse.

#### *Part IV*

Now my younger brother and I are both in junior middle school. Whenever we have time at home, we help our parents with chores. When I was in the 9th grade and about to prepare for admission exams for senior middle school, the school asked us to board in school. So I can only come back home once a week to help my parents. But my younger brother has become much more understanding and helpful after he went to junior middle school. To help our parents more, he decided not to board in school and go back home every day to help the family. When our parents saw us being understanding and thoughtful, they worked even harder to earn a living for the family.

I remember when I came back home just a few months ago, my brother told me that for quite a few days our parents got up at 2 o’clock in the morning to work. When I heard this, my eyes were full of tears. I feel guilty when I see there are more and more, deeper and deeper wrinkles on Baba and Mama’s faces.

Now Baba and Mama are still working persistently. They never stop working and making money in the hope that we can go to and afford college. I deeply understand how hard life is for them. I hope I can grow up faster so my parents don’t have to work this hard, and they can live happily for the rest of their lives and enjoy the happy life they deserve. I will study hard; I want to grow up; I want to grow up faster.

Translated by Kongli Liu

## 2. “Rebirth,” by Hu Yan, a 7th grade girl

Living requires confidence and courage.

I’m not a considerate child. I never tried to understand my mother’s heart, but hurt it again and again instead. But my mother still loves me with all her heart despite all this.

I feel my mother is to be pitied more than any person in the world, because she doesn’t know what happiness is. Her family was very poor, and she underwent a lot of suffering. After she grew up, she had no choice but to marry my father at a relatively young age for the sake of her brother’s marriage.<sup>3</sup> She was young and didn’t know a lot about housework. My father’s mother (Grandma) was always angry with her.<sup>4</sup> My mother and father had a lot of fights, and they didn’t live happily together. That was her marriage. Then, my and my younger brother’s births gave her and my father a new beginning. They stopped fighting and had a better relationship. However, the happy days didn’t last long before my father left home, leaving nothing to us. At that time, a lot of people advised her to leave us and marry again because she was still young. If she lived with us, there would be nobody who would want to marry her. But my mother didn’t do that. She said that my younger brother and I had already lost our father, and she wouldn’t want us to live without a mother. So she chose us, and at the same time, chose a life full of hardship.

To support the family, she had to leave our hometown to work in the city. She had to leave us with Grandma. My mother worked so hard to make a living and bought us things that other kids had, in the hope that we wouldn’t feel we were unfortunate compared with other kids. She placed all her hope in us, saved every penny she could, and supported us to go to school. But we never understood her hopes and the hardships she had to endure. We didn’t study hard at school and

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<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, in rural areas in China, many families would arrange marriages for young people. Usually, in order to have their son get married, a family had to marry their daughter to a man in their son’s bride’s family as an exchange. In this case, it is very likely that Hu Yan’s mother had to marry her father so that Hu Yan’s mother’s brother could marry a woman from Hu Yan’s father’s family.

<sup>4</sup> In Chinese tradition, a woman moves in with her husband’s family after she marries and is expected to do whatever her mother-in-law orders. This practice is presently more common in rural areas than in the cities.

caused a lot of trouble for which Grandma was called to school many times and had to listen [to] teachers' complaints and criticism. It was common for people to come to our home and ask for compensation for the damage we had caused. It was also common that Grandma had to apologize for our misbehaviors. Our relatives said we were not good children and only wanted to take everything our mother had to work so hard to provide.

I remember one year during the summer break, I took all my books home. My mother saw them. To make her happy, Grandma praised me for the good condition of the books. I thought my mother must have noticed that I never wrote anything because she never saw me doing homework, not even once. She looked at my homework pad and then at all the books. Her face changed terribly. I saw her eyes become filled with disappointment and sadness. I felt my heart empty and then fill with guilt. After that, I studied hard—for a few days. But I gave up quickly because I felt studying was so difficult. Then I began to laze around again and waste time.

After a few years, Grandpa passed away, and Grandma couldn't take care of us any more. My mother couldn't live with us because she had to work in the city to support us. So I had to cook meals and take care of my younger brother. At the beginning, I felt it was fun. Then I felt it was so hard. But if I didn't cook, my brother and I would starve. If I didn't wash clothes, we would have to wear dirty clothes. Suddenly I realized how hard it was for my mother to play the role of being both a mother and a father. During that time, I grew up a lot. But I still didn't study hard, because I had no confidence in myself. I had already given up on myself.

My mother worried about us a lot, concerned that we wouldn't be able to handle everything ourselves. Then she brought us to Beijing and wanted us to go to school here. When I first came to Beijing, I couldn't adjust here at all, because everything in Beijing was so strange to me. They made me feel I was so tiny and insignificant and there was no place in the city for me to exist. Seeing my mother working so hard every day, I felt so empty and had no feeling for going to school. I knew the reason mother worked so hard was to support us so we could go to school and live a better life. But I couldn't do well in school; I would only be wasting money. Schools here were not cheap. Maybe my mother saw through me. She said, "Just try your best. Don't worry about the rest."

When I first stepped into the Dandelion School, I raised my eyes and saw the eight big words on the classroom building. Suddenly, I felt I really wanted to study hard. But immediately I dismissed that thought. I was so bad at school. How could I study hard? I felt funny about myself.

Following the teacher, I came to my class. I felt so nervous and small when I saw so many strange faces. I quietly sat down on my seat, not saying hello to anyone, because I was so scared. Then, a lot of classmates came over and started to talk with me. That drove my fear away. Then I started chatting with them.

Oh teachers, they are the best teachers I've ever met since I started school. They work hard and responsibly every day to take care of every student. They never give up on any single student no matter whether your scores are high or low. Our principal is so nice to us whenever we see her. She is so kind and close to us.

With the help from teachers, I made progress in my school work. Gradually, I found my confidence was back. It is the Dandelion School that gave me an opportunity for a new life. Here I live every day confidently without the feeling of being insignificant. I will study hard for those who helped and cared for me.

Life requires confidence. Never give up on yourself.

Translated by Kongli Liu