

## **LAU Paul Chun Man**

Hiding safely in our air-conditioned multi-storied concrete edifices, it is easy not to realise how truly privileged we are to live and grow-up in Hong Kong. It certainly was not at the forefront of our minds as the 20 of us made the trip to Dabao Village some 600 km away.

Gathering at the border crossing at a mean 8am, we made our day-long journey to Danzhou Ancient Town. The quaint and beautiful old island surrounded by a yellow silt-filled river began as a bit of a shock – what with the unfamiliar food, unstable internet connection, and undesired company of various small critters. But it soon came to represent a comforting respite from the even more foreign environment a half-days travel away. Along the way into Dabao our bus (perhaps inevitably) broke down, live animals and vegetables were sold in street stalls literally within reach from the car's windows, and our walk into the village was pre-emptively cooled by heavy rainfall as the bus climbed upwards (though the sky had thankfully dried up by the time our walk started).

Despite all the silent (or not so silent) half-jokes, concerns and worries about the difficult living conditions we might face in the days ahead, our arrival triggered more pressing concerns as our program of events kicked-off. We hurriedly went about putting into action our well-meaning plans for games, activities and mini-classes, joined variously by around 40 children. Unsurprisingly some plans went better than others, and we almost always had to make impromptu adjustments. We alternated between fear that it might rain and make outdoor activities impossible, and worries that it was too hot and sunny to be outdoors for long periods of time. We tried to keep the children's attentions as they ran off, refused to come into classrooms, or just engaged in their own games and conversations.

No doubt the three days of activities honed our ability to think quickly on our feet, taught us how to work with children, and refined our ability to communicate in Putonghua. But perhaps most striking was the sheer irrelevance of our intricate and imperfect plans to the children who joined us. Of course it was great that we had the opportunity to teach meaningful health practices like washing ones hands and brushing ones teeth, and it was heart-warming to see their joy as we made musical instruments and launched water rockets. But ultimately I'd like to think it was our company that they truly enjoyed. Whether watching the Olympics together, digging for worms and snakes, or them showing off their favourite fishing spots.

Throughout, they embodied a joy and happiness that is conspicuously absent amongst even children in Hong Kong. To us, it might appear to be a very simple life, lacking in many material comforts and missing the complexities of our social environment. But perhaps it wasn't us that did the real teaching. They were the ones that helped us realise that you don't have to own a phone, access the internet and play Pokémon Go to be truly happy. They were the ones that enjoyed and treasured what they had, rather than be constantly troubled by what might have been.

Of course, that's not to say that Dabao was a perfect nirvana. The prevalence of both smoking and drinking was evident during our short three-day stay, though I would be remiss not to mention the considerable efforts of our members, who organised a well-attended and well-received personal hygiene and anti-smoking performance. My conversation with a villager during our evening visit to their home reflected the painful struggles they faced in securing the educational opportunity we so easily take for granted in Hong Kong. I was also painfully aware when some of the children returned each day in the same clothes whilst others had the luxury of a change of clothes. There of course remain deep and significant challenges, but that does not detract in the slightest from the local

community's positive outlook. If anything, it is all the more impressive that they can cherish what they have without dwelling on those trials and tribulations.

There was, as might be expected, a process of adjustment. Our arrival was preceded by some extremely bumpy roads, and quickly followed by the discovery that there was an almost complete absence of phone signal literally everywhere in the village. Though we were surrounded by lush greeneries and had clear skies, neither fully compensated the shower-less and bed-less lodgings that contributed to some less comfortable evenings. Our palates remain somewhat apart, and we probably surprised our kind hosts with our constant desire to literally wash everything, from the fish before it was deep fried to the plates before we ate.

But through it all, we should remember that these minor adjustments and discomforts are literally that – minor. Yes the road was extremely bumpy and the bus's air-conditioning unreliable, but at least we had a bus to carry the heavy load. Yes the food was not what we were accustomed to, but even then we were eating copious portions compared to what our hosts were having. Yes our activities could have been better planned and executed, but the children enjoyed our company as much as we thought they ought to enjoy what we were doing.

It is probably human nature to be competitive and comparative. But we ought to ask ourselves who we are competing and comparing against. It is all too easy to be caught up in the social rat-race that is Hong Kong, but this trip to Dabao is a telling reminder that there is a world outside of ours. For all the things we might complain about, we are speaking from a position of extreme privilege. And we had better do something good with that.