

It's Hard to Say Goodbye

Written by Li Wei-huang

Monday, 12 January 2009 00:00



After the once-a-year harvest of corn, Laiyuan residents brace for another cold winter. The bare branches and pale blue sky make up a beautiful but somewhat desolate picture.

It was cold in January in the mountains of Laiyuan County, Hebei Province. It was 15oC below zero (5oF) when we arrived there after a four-hour ride more than 260 kilometers (162 miles) northeast from Beijing. “You don’t have enough clothes on for this cold,” Chen Kao (陈考), an old man with his hands tucked in his sleeves to keep warm, told me when he saw me shivering.

I would have returned Chen’s smile if I had been able to. However, my cheeks and lips were so frozen that I literally couldn’t command them to squeeze out even the faintest smile. I was that miserable, even though I was wearing five layers of clothes underneath my overcoat, two pairs of gloves, and warmers in my boots. Seeing that Chen had on only rather light clothing, I asked him, “Aren’t you cold, sir?” “We’re used to this,” he replied, his nose running.

The elderly caring for the elderly

We came to a local house that was 150 years old. It belonged to Sun Xu (孙旭), 84. The walls were clay mixed with stones, and broken windows were patched up with old newspaper in a forlorn attempt to ward off the freezing, penetrating winds. Small candles lit the inside of the house, while corn cobs fueled an open concrete fire bowl that helped keep the room less frigid. In a corner of the house, some sealed earthen jars held pickled vegetables. This was a typical household in Laiyuan—old people living in shabby old houses.

When Sun saw us, he woke his wife, who was resting in bed. She was 78 and had been ill for 19 years. Sun took care of every aspect of her life. He would get up at six and jog five kilometers (3.1 miles) in the village for about an hour. Then he would prepare breakfast for the two of them. He swung his arms back and forth to exercise when he talked to us. He had been working out for ten years to keep in shape so that he could care for his wife.

Their married daughter would bring them some flour, cooking oil, and salt when she occasionally came back to visit. However, Sun still needed to farm his half-are (one eighth acre) of land to provide for the family. How else was he to put food on the table? There was no extra money for much of anything else. Even when his wife got sicker, she could not afford to stay in a hospital. She just had to tough it out and hope the discomfort would go away in time.

In China, older people make up 80 percent of the population of rural villages. In Laiyuan, there are many other elderly couples like Sun and his wife, in addition to widowed, handicapped, and sick people who live alone with little material or social support. Though the government has been trying for 30 years to improve living conditions there, and though the average income has increased at least ten-fold, there are still tens of thousands of people in Laiyuan whose income is less than a thousand renminbi (US\$146) per year, or less than 40 cents a day.

Laiyuan is almost entirely mountainous, so arable land is scarce. Residents are mostly corn farmers. Each year, an are (0.2 acre) of land yields about 350 kilograms (770 pounds) of corn,

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or just over 400 renminbi (US\$58) at the prevailing price. Although not much money, many farmers can't even get that much because they must eat most of their harvest themselves, leaving little for sale.

What takes Laiyuan residents a whole year to earn takes city folks only one or two restaurant meals to spend. Laiyuan is on the list of the nation's poorest counties.



A large-scale aid distribution

Tzu Chi volunteers in Beijing have been working with Laiyuan's social services officials since 2006 to provide the extremely destitute with daily essentials. In February 2008, they held their first large-scale distribution in the townships of Jinjiajing and Nantun in Laiyuan County. In January 2009, the distribution was expanded to include three more townships: Shangzhuang, Liujiashuang, and Dongtuanbao. A total of 7,600 people from 3,756 needy families benefited from this distribution.

To receive aid supplies, some aid recipients set out from their homes at four in the morning. They walked with their mules for four hours to get to the distribution site. Most people who came for the aid were typical of the population of the county: the elderly and infirm. Their offspring were mostly out of town, working in large cities where making a living isn't quite as hard as at home. The younger people may come home to help out during periods when more hands are needed in their parents' fields.

It seems that in Laiyuan, corn is everywhere and served at every meal: corn porridge, corn noodles, or corn bread. An average resident there can't easily afford flour or rice. Therefore, it was refreshing for the recipients to receive good quality flour from the distribution. Recipients generally use the flour to make steamed buns or noodles. Each family member received a 25-kilogram (55-pound) bag of flour, which will last the recipients a good while. They also received thermal underwear, cotton-filled overcoats, comforters, cooking oil, salt—all essential items that were also crowd-pleasing.

We visited the homes of some recipients. Each house was filled with smoke and scent from, typically, one burning fire bowl—the primary heat source for the house—around which most of the elderly spend days and nights in winter. While fire bowls do serve the important function of keeping the houses warm, the smoke also tends to make the interior air quality less than ideal for health. In the free clinic that accompanied the distribution, medical volunteers from Taiwan found that many patients suffered from respiratory diseases, among other conditions.

Illness—the dreaded demon

Poverty has kept medical care out of the reach of many people in Laiyuan. In order to pay for the medical treatments that their loved ones need, some people have had to incur great debts that will take them years of hard work to repay.

Here are a few local sayings that depict the people's fear and helplessness at falling ill: "Three,

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five years of digging out of poverty is set back to square one by just one brush with illness,” “When an ambulance siren wails, the effort of raising a pig goes up in smoke,” and “Get whatever you want, but just don’t get sick.” An old man told us he once borrowed 400 renminbi (US\$58) to treat his arthritis, but just taking an X-ray cost him 360 renminbi, leaving little for anything else.

Despite the availability of government-subsidized medical care plans, many people still have not signed up. Even with government subsidies, the plans are still too costly for poor farmers to participate in. It is no wonder that people there put off treating their ills. “When it hurt, all I could do was tough it out,” said Peng Fengqi (彭凤奇), 65, who suffered a hernia for eight years until Tzu Chi helped him get an operation. During all that time, he used strings to help contain the protrusion for unreliable and, at best, temporary relief. Instead of seeing a doctor, he wanted to save the money to help put his two daughters through school.



Hard to say good-bye

In China, though people tend to link poverty first with Guizhou Province, and to associate water shortages first with Gansu Province, Laiyuan somehow invokes more sympathy among the Tzu Chi volunteers. “I’ve been to Guizhou and Gansu to help with disaster relief, but the situations in which Laiyuan residents find themselves make me particularly saddened,” said Taiwanese volunteer Xu Yu-fen (徐玉芬), who lives in Beijing.

The predicaments of Laiyuan residents remind volunteer Luo Kun-ding (罗昆定), a Taiwanese businessman in Tianjin, of his own earlier days. He can never forget the sight of his mother crying when he left home for Taipei at the age of 16 to make a living for himself, his family too poor to support him and his nine siblings. When his mother was on her deathbed 50 years ago, Luo was busy working elsewhere and missed seeing her for the last time. He regrets that to this day. Now he takes part in relief distributions and gives care to destitute elderly people, hoping to dull their pain and alleviate their loneliness a little.

In the home of Jia Rui (贾瑞) in Jinjiajing Township, we saw a big jar with some flour that Jia got at a Tzu Chi distribution one year before. He explained, “We use it slowly so it doesn’t run out too quickly.”

Jia, 84, carries a urine bag around with him as a result of an enlarged prostate. Still, from time to time he needs to raise the five renminbi (75 U.S. cents) needed to visit the hospital to have his bladder emptied. This is a physiological nuisance and no small financial burden on him. His left knee is afflicted with arthritis, but he has to work in the field, walking stick in hand, to support his wife and his retarded son.

Looking at Jia’s dire situation—fairly representative of that of his fellow residents in Laiyuan—we sincerely hoped our relief distributions and free clinics could bring them some

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relief.

Eventually, we had to say good-bye to the Jias. Jia Rui walked out slowly with his walking stick to see us off. He took off his hat, bowed, and called, "I thank you all so much. Have a safe trip home." We couldn't bear to pause or turn around. Even after we had walked some distance, I could still hear his words echoing in my mind.

Translated by Tang Yau-yang
Photographs by Yan Lin-zhao

Через несколько секунд плоты ["Geforce mx mx 400 драйвер"](#) оказались рядом, и обе команды так горячо и радостно кинулись навстречу, так ["Приложение скачать музыку вконтакте"](#) ["Весело приветствовали друг друга, словно с этим неожиданным свиданием"](#) ["Бесплатная музыка скачать детские песни"](#) миновали все опасности и самая угроза смерти.

Утренняя заря, как раньше ["Kis 2010 скачать бесплатно"](#) закат, заставила охотника снова переменить наблюдательный пункт.

Достал из кармана пластмассовый флакон, ["Виктор петлюра альбомы скачать"](#) выкатил на ладонь янтарную капсулу, слизнул ее.

А ["Скачать игру хищник 2"](#) такой самый, какой был у израильтян, когда они в ["Скачать сборник книг fb2"](#) Египте сидели у котлов с мясом.

Поблизости не видно ни одного подходящего дерева, и, если они ["Игра лига скорости играть бесплатно"](#) ["на нас нападут, нам остается только положиться на быстроту"](#) ["Ключ разводной купить"](#) наших лошадей.

В недрах планеты не ["Скачать игру botanicula"](#) оказалось нефти, может быть, только в этих широтах, но не оказалось.

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