Rice field...bungalows...field again...over-bridge...bungalows...

I'm on the coach from Chengdu to Leshan, taking a two-hour route I have treaded over five hundred times. It cannot be more familiar to me: the rhythm coach bumps, the interval patterns of trees outside. The cabin is full of passengers as usual, and I'm alone at a rear seat by the window. The life of drifting is drawing to the end, I know. This might well be one of the last rides. An urge drags me into the same Sunday afternoon six years ago, when I first left hometown Leshan to study junior school in Chengdu.

It was hard to start a new life at a completely unknown place: I resisted against my parents sweet words to coax me onto the bus, and gave up after knowing the angry driver had been waiting me for 15 minutes. The first few weeks were hardest, in a world full of strangers, not like home where there were always people caring for me, catching me if I fall. On quiet nights, my eyes often blurred up the unfamiliar neon lights outside the dormitory windows. Only on the weekly returns back to home would I be truly happy, a feeling so lighthearted and lucid that I can taste even now, here on the road.

But the effect of time lapse was silent yet powerful. Strangers became friends. The fear for the unknown was diminished as my steps filled up the whole campus. A second home was established. But it took quite a long time.

The next exit calls me back to reality. Almost half-way now. I recall another half-way on the ride, from downtown to the foot of Mount Qingchen. Wayne, Leo and I were heading towards our hotel, preparing for the next day's ICPC. We formed the team SilverBullet to compete with college students as unofficials, mainly for travel and fun. Owing to a mistake of schedule, we arrived 2 days in advance, but it turned out to be a chance that made this memory the most unforgettable. We reveled the first day, and climbed the mountain the second. We drew our heads together to watch movie on a 14` screen, and it was there that I got my first try of Dota online.

It was not easy to establish rapport like this, for we were both comrades and rivals in Olympiad in Informatics; sometimes we had to fight for privileges that could only be given to some of us. At first, there was an inclination to study in individual to avoid leaking some tricks or methods though by oneself. This is common in fact, in exam-oriented education system. But I was only too familiar with the coldness of air, the feeling I spent so long to overcome as a junior, and how hard it was to live in such an environment. So I attempted to make changes. I tried finding common interest by bringing sets of ping-pong and badminton rackets, and occasionally asked others to join the game. Later, I stepped further, setting common goals in Informatics. In this way, we gradually increased our rates of discussing, and ultimately, sharing. The ice curtain was broken. I found it was important to make a “push” by taking initiative, even a small step, to solve the problem of isolation and establish a sense of belonging. I'm that that I made one, and with others collaborating, our computer lab was like a home again.

As more and more trees caught in my sight, the remaining distance is less than a quarter. Having worked another week at C2 game studio, I finally get the chance to relax. This August, I and two high school alumnus, who have now graduated from college, founded C2. In fact, we knew little of others, but it was the common ambition that bounds us together. This is something special because we are not chosen, but make choices on our own to be together. Strangeness is never a problem: common interests contribute to common activities, while diversity becomes the capital of talking when having dinner. Sometimes I just have to make a slight indication, and other two will come into agree, because the sense of belonging is a universal need. In just a few weeks, we were closer as comrades. A new home set.

The man sitting next to me must've found me delirious to see me staring out of the window and doing nothing, then smile and laugh abruptly. Hills start to elevate outside, and I listen to the regular frictional bum caused by deceleration strips, while appreciating the distant but familiar starts in black sky. Home is close. I can sense the delicious meal now.

HI Mike,

The phrasing of this essay is strong, and it’s tightly worded. My comments are on the content and the larger message. Your insight into how this sense of belonging is important to you and to others is lost in this essay. Other than provide a “good feeling,” what did this sense of belonging do for you and for others?

Re-read the quote you love. A sense of belonging “frees us” to be who we are. I don’t see that change. There is no clear BEFORE and AFTER to measure how the younger students grew, or how you and your two buddies developed a trust that was useful in a dire situation, or how the intimacy of the C2 programming group enabled a unity or intimacy that helped members grow. Why is feeling “home” more than simply a lingering schoolboy desire for friends and company? Show us deeper impact on you or on others.

Concisely, the reader can’t tell why this sense of belonging is so meaningful. If it’s just a feeling, then it doesn’t say much about you, and at worst implies you are dependent on this feel-good sense of community. I would wonder, then, if you could function well on your own.