12. Meng Fanquan

My name is Meng Fanquan, 21 years old. I am a security guard from Inner Mongolia. My family name is Meng, the same as Mencius. I should be a man of culture.

But unfortunately my studies never went anywhere. When I was in school, my teacher didn’t like me. Even though he never said it aloud, I just knew it. I’m telling you, I’m good at reading people. When you’re on the teacher’s bad side, your grades are bound to suffer.

I went to a community college and studied web design. It didn’t do me much good. I couldn’t find a job after graduation. Then I opened a small restaurant with a friend in my hometown. We didn’t make any money and the business didn’t last long. So I quit and came to Beijing for a shot at a better life.

When I first arrived, I was still hoping to find a decent job in a company or something. I submitted my resume a whole bunch of times, but I never heard back. That’s when I started working as a security guard. I worked in the subway for a while. Oh, actually I did work as an office clerk for a bit too, filling out spreadsheets all day. It was a job introduced by a friend. But that place would fine you 500 kuai just for being late. I worked there for a couple weeks and hardly made a penny. In fact, I almost lost money. Then they fired me.

Working as a security guard here is alright. I got 4,000 kuai last month. If I watch my expenses, I can even save up. We’re working on two shifts. For the past few months, I’ve been working the night shift, from 9 pm to 9 am the next day.

The checkpoint is in front of the alley, where the wind blows through. I’m basically wearing our spring, summer, winter, and fall uniforms all at the same time. But my feet are still icy cold. Someone said that I could freeze to death if I keep working like this. No way this is gonna kill me. Me? This’ll make me stronger. We human beings are born to suffer, aren’t we? You have to go through hard times for life to improve.

When it’s really cold, I stand up and move around a little. Have you heard of the app called Zouduoduo? You can get money from walking. For the number of steps I walk every day, I can get one or two kuai.

A couple kuai is money too! Almost enough for me to buy a pack of cigarettes. I’ve been smoking since my second year in junior middle school. A buddy taught me how to blow smoke rings. Since then I’ve only become more and more addicted. Now I smoke five packs a day. That means I light a cigarette up every few minutes. I smoke the cheapest type called Dafengshou, 2.5 kuai a pack.

The cold at night isn’t the worst part for me. What’s unbearable is just sitting here. Before midnight, there are still people passing by from time to time. But the street gets very quiet deeper into the night, almost no one to be seen. I can only play with my phone to kill some time. I like to watch some comedy shows with the volume on high, to make it feel like someone’s here with me.

Every night I’ll see some beggars walking through. They don’t look crazy or anything, just dirty. One night, it must have been past 1 am, a beggar came by and rummaged through that pile of garbage for a long time. The second he found a mooncake he was nibbling on it. If I don’t work hard, I could be like him.

There was this buddy who used to come chat sometimes. He always bragged to me that he can earn 600 kuai a day. I didn’t find out until later that he cleans toilets. 600 kuai a day? Who is he fooling?

My food and accommodation are provided by the job, only in very crowded workers’ dormitories. Five or six of us live together in a small room. We have a fat guy who snores like crazy. But that doesn’t affect me. By the time I get off work at 9, I fall asleep the second my head touches the pillow.

My parents back in Inner Mongolia are farmers. They grow corn and do other odd jobs to earn a living. I don’t contact them very often. When it’s time for me to start work, they’re getting ready for bed. When it’s daytime, it’s my turn to sleep. It’s like we live in two different worlds. But I send money back every month as soon as I get paid. I have a younger brother in junior high school. I want to support him so he gets a good education. I don’t want him to end up like me.

I’m 21 years old but somehow I feel much older than that. I feel like it’s been such a long life for me already, and I barely remember anything from my childhood. I just remember that my parents often beat me. If they hadn’t beaten me so much, I wouldn’t have turned out so introverted. If I could start my life all over, I would study more. Then my life wouldn’t be so difficult.

But 21 isn’t too late, right? I’m planning to take the exam to get a certificate in health management. There are three levels. I have to start from the basic level. It costs over 3,000 kuai for one exam. I’m saving up for it.

I especially believe in samsara. I figured that out while I was sleeping. Think about it—all of creation can reincarnate, flowers and plants can reincarnate, cats and dogs can reincarnate, and people must be able to as well!

I believe in reincarnation, so I also believe in karma. I once borrowed 200 kuai from a friend. I didn’t have any money at that time, but I still found a way to pay him back. One reason was I didn’t have the heart not to—he was in a very bad situation himself. He was sleeping on the street at the time. The other reason was that I was afraid of retribution. No one gets away with a bad deed.

I just hope that I can have a stable life, to have a steady job, and maybe run an online business on the side so I can save money to buy a house. Not here, of course. That’d cost millions. I’ll never make that much in my whole lifetime. Only if I get born with a silver spoon in the next life, then we can talk about it!

The world is unfair, but I never complain. We should stay happy no matter what happens. That’s what my dad told me when I left home. I think he’s right. I think the meaning of life is just to live. No matter whether things are good or bad, there is meaning.

Edited by David Huntington and Dan Xin Huang

**Note from Kuang:**

There is a curfew in Beijing these days due to the virus outbreak, with 24-hour security checks at the entrance of every hutong. Meng Fanquan is one of the security guards keeping watch all night. I chatted with him for over an hour, and my hands and feet were freezing up. It was nearly 11 pm when I left. My phone read zero degrees, and the coldest time of the Beijing night had yet to arrive.