2. Zhang Xuejiao

My name is Zhang Xuejiao. I was born in a small village in Hubei province in 1984. It’s a long way from my hometown to Beijing. I came to Beijing in July 2015. I remember the date very clearly. I even kept the tickets.

I’m a single mom. One of the reasons I left my hometown was because I had some family problems which I decided to escape from. Over one year later, my husband filed for a divorce.

During my nearly three-year stay in Beijing, I didn’t go back home even one time for Chinese New Year. I could only spare some time in April or July, when my workload was a bit less. I don’t have any pastimes after work. I only visit nearby parks sometimes with other coworkers.

Things at work could be crazily hectic sometimes. There were times I only got back around 2 a.m. Beijing deep in the night feels so different from daytime. There are very few cars and almost no one to be seen. The street lamps are bright. If you look up, lots of windows in the buildings have their lights on. Lots of office workers stay up late working overtime. Which makes me feel less lonely because I’m not the only one working so deep into the night. Everyone is working hard for a better life.

Winter in Beijing could be really freezing, and sometimes I needed to walk the electric bike my company lent me a long way when it ran out of electricity. I can still feel that freezing air. But I still think I made the right choice coming to Beijing. Beijing has paid me back for my hard work I think.

The main reason I decided to return home is that I want to spend more time with my family. My grandma has turned 94, and my child is growing up quickly. I don’t want to be absent from their lives.

I would say my most treasured memories are days in my childhood. Almost all the villagers stayed in the village. Migrant work wasn’t a trend yet back then. People would chat while doing farm work together while children were running around wild. We were poor, but, a bit strange to say, you don’t really feel poor since everyone in the village is poor at a more or less equal level.

We planted rice, grew vegetables, enough to support the whole family. And we would submit the extra food to the local government.

There weren’t any unplanted fields. We even cleared the weeds on the mountains regularly. We only fired wood for cooking, no gas or coal.

I want that simple life back when I grow old. Doing some farm work with some money saved from working to support myself. I’d be happy to lead a life like that.

There’s a nursing home located near my village. I’ve always wanted to visit them—maybe to cut their hair or just chat with them. I want to treat them nice partly because I think I will very possibly end up spending some of my old age there.

I believe that everyone was brought to this world for a reason. From the beginning to the end of our lives, we may find the days repetitive sometimes. But every day is also unknown and unpredictable, and that, I think, is what makes life meaningful. Every day is a new day with new things happening, both for us as individuals and also for the country as a whole.

I don’t really want to start life over again. If I had to live my life again, I’d probably lead the exact same life, who knows.

**Note from Kuang:**

My lease provides a monthly cleaning service, and Zhang Xuejiao was the one who came to clean the apartment. She always talked about her days as a kid with great delight and nostalgia and about her son she left at home for her parents to look after. She decided to return from Beijing to her hometown in Hubei after nearly three years.