9. Number Five

My family name is Chen,. Only a few know my full name here, they just call me “Number Five.” That’s how we address each other here—by the number. Sometimes it takes me a while to remember my colleagues’ real names.

I’m from a village in Xingtai, Hebei province. Special education was not available in my village. I went to the same primary school everyone else did. My parents never bothered to keep an eye on my studies. Guess they just weren’t expecting anything from me. Not surprisingly, I did very badly at school.

My most memorable childhood experience was hitting my head real seriously when I was running wild just like the other kids who could see well. I was in a coma for seven days. My memory was a little affected afterward, but otherwise no serious damage.

I went for special education after primary school, and learned massage afterward. That’s when I started my career as a masseur. I worked in both Hebei and Fujian for a few years, and then I came to Beijing with my wife.

My wife and I are from the same village, we’ve known each other since we were kids. She is working at another massage parlor as a receptionist. We don’t want to work at the same place in case people think we’re giving each other preferential treatment.

We have two boys, one is 14, and the other 10. They are with my parents in my home village for school. I visit them every two months. Luckily my parents are both in good health.

Having kids gives me more to worry about. I’ve been trying hard to save money for the sake of the kids’ future. I need to get them houses to help them get married. The housing price is increasing like crazy. Even buying an apartment in the small town near my home village costs 700,000 to 800,000 kuai. Even building a house in our village would cost more than 300,000!

Providing them a house is probably the best I can do for them. We’re living in a small bubble comprised of visually-impaired people and the sorts of things this group knows. I don’t have much to offer that would do my children any good.

My wife and I are hoping to save some money from working here, and then start a small massage place back in our hometown. No one would choose to live far away from home if they could live near their family. But I’m worried that the business wouldn’t earn much back home—the economy is much slower there.

After doing massage all these years, I can easily tell what health problems people have as soon as I start working on them. Many 20-somethings today are suffering from problems that in the old days just older people would have, like frozen shoulders. Sometimes we have foreign guests too, but I only know three English words: ok, yes, and no. Shame I can’t hold a proper conversation.

We have nine massage therapists here—two women, seven men. Our working time is 9 am to 11:30 pm. We are asked to work in the order of our numbers. When it’s busy, I can massage a dozen guests a day, but sometimes it’s only five or six, or even fewer.

I basically try to avoid any entertainment activities, because going out means spending money. And if you’re not here, you of course get less work, which also means less pay. So I prefer to stay here.

When it’s not my turn, I usually stay in the store’s dormitory taking a nap or chatting with my colleagues. I sometimes listen to audiobooks on my phone, and I also take online massage lessons. They’re free for us.

Both my phone and computer come with VoiceOver mode. I rely on the audio instructions to use them. It’s not very convenient but I don’t have any other options. Things would be so much easier if I were like you.

Am I happy with life right now? I’d say life is not too bad! Also, is there any individual who is completely happy with life? Everyone yearns for a better life no matter who they are or what kind of life they have.

I see myself as optimistic. I’m pretty chatty too if the other is willing to talk. My colleague told me that someone left a comment on Meituan saying I’m a bit too talkative. I’m not sure if he’s just teasing me. Can you check on Meituan for me? And perhaps read the comment to me next time you visit.

Edited by David Huntington

**Note from Kuang:**

Chen is a visually-impaired massage therapist working in a massage parlor called Suhang Blind Massage, tucked away inside a residential building near Dongdaqiao. It’s not a big place, but it’s cozy and clean. He is cheerful and easy to talk to, and he’s very experienced and professional at massage.