

My Experience in SOHGAPH

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I have come to SOHGAPH as an intern in the late January, and now in the early March I am going to leave. This is the first job in my life. Instead of Beijing, China where I spent my previous 21 years, I get this job in Kolkata, India, somewhere thousands of miles from home. What a fabulous chance is this.

I intended to come to India for its exotic charm in my imagination, which made me eager to experience it for real. I chose the City of Kolkata for its prosperity in art and culture, also for its confusion and intricacy as a metropolis in developing country. One of my American friends who had been living in Darjeeling for 9 years told me Kolkata is a place full of extremes. I would hate it or love it but would not be indifferent. However, I don't get the extreme feeling. Compared to someone from western culture, it is easier for Chinese people to understand India. I think China and India have lots of aspects in common. Kolkata make me feel that I have come back home, and I have come back to my childhood memory.

I used to live in those narrow lanes of old district of Beijing. People from the neighborhood were familiar each other, and I always played games with other kids after school. After moving into high rise building in the new district, I even don't talk to my neighbor. People shut their door and make their space private and quite. Now I wake up in my room in Tollygunge every morning in all these noises: dog is barking here and there; crows are flipping wings on the tree under the window; rickshaws ring the bell while turning over street corner. People are chatting in the language I don't understand but I feel they are talking about things that I am familiar with. In such exuberance the day starts, in which no one will ever feel lonely.

However, I am still too much used to my lonely personal space and my lonely Chinese life style, more than I ever realized. I didn't realize the character of Chinese till I come to Kolkata. When I was on a trip in England didn't even think about it. Partly because I was too young at the age of 16, partly because I tend to consider western culture to be more advanced than Chinese culture. However, now with Indian culture as counterpart for comparison, I find out my adoration for western culture is more about superstition, while the limitation Chinese culture and Indian culture have set the boundary of their own characters.

I used think it is such a weakness of Chinese that compared to westerners we are diffident and timid. Now I think this is the side effect of the tender nature that Indian and Chinese share in common. We all cherish family and tend to extend the warmth from family to the community. A person is considered to be a father, a mother, a son, or a daughter instead of an independent individual fighting for his or her own course. Thus people tend to seek intimate relation with each other, and this openness to love renders them sensitive and vulnerable. Although this character might not fit into the modern era of commerce and science, competition and efficiency, however its beauty justifies its value.

In Kolkata, people sometimes smile at me kindly and ask where I come from. They might not know much about China, but they feel happy that I come all the way from a distant place and welcome me to India with great hospitality. In other cases, people don't pay special attention to me and just accept me as one of them, and thus make me feel I belong. This kind of warmth is so gentle and sincere that it is sometimes unbelievable for me. Just like in SOHGAPH, I am more like a guest rather than an intern. Mostly because I cannot speak Bengali, I haven't done much contribution, and this makes me feel uneasy that I do not deserve all these I get. However, seeing how nicely people in SOHGAPH treat each other makes me feel relieved. I am not considered special they just treat me as one of them.

For me SOHGAPH is first of all Indian. Its atmosphere is very different from any Chinese work places I have been to. In China I always see people are separated into their own space and time to do their own piece of work quietly, while in SOHGAPH people share tea and food, discuss a lot, and always work together as a group. I think the Chinese way might be much more effective because people are more focused and tensed up, however, the Indian way is definitely more natural and joyous. I think all the hearty smile in SOHGAPH is hard to find in work places of China. People have fun doing their work, which sounds so unrealistic and romantic, happens right here right now.

Besides I wanted to see how things work in India, another reason for me to apply for SOHAGPH is that it deals with STD and HIV/AIDS among sex workers, which is very extreme for me. I emotionally wanted to help these deprived women out of their suffering. However, again I haven't seen any extreme for real. One afternoon I was in the Lake Town Clinic, a lady came with his son and waited for the doctor to come. We sat face to face. I got to know that she was a sex worker, but the thing I felt for her was that she was a woman with beautiful eyes full of mildness, and she was a mother caring for his son so deeply. The boy had all these bright expressions on his face, that must come from the attention and love he got from her mother. This lady and I didn't talk with each other because I couldn't speak Bengali. We just smiled quietly. At that moment I felt that we accepted each other, just like we accept the sun, the rain, the changing of season, just like we accept how life goes on thoroughly, from the beginning before anticipation till its unpredictable ending.

I think Chinese and Indian tends to accept what they get from life with calmness and obedience. For Chinese people this is out of their practical thinking and strong endurance, while for India I think this might be out of religion. In my understanding of Hindu, everything is god and god is everything. Only through spiritual practice one can merge with god into pure bliss, the ultimate truth of this world. Thus worldly matter itself does not count. What counts is one's perception about it, whether one can reveal the nature of world through the view of love. I am so much impressed by the way Indian people enjoy every moment through this kind of view, and I am most grateful that people in SOHGAPH look at me with eyes full of love, and share with me their vision and their believe for a better world.