

June 2007, Buyi Women and Trash Collecting

The migrant center also works with another Buyi minority community that is about a 30-minute walk away. With this community, they do not work with the kids, but with a group of women who do something called “Theater of the Oppressed,” which involves singing, dancing, and a short play which includes a reenactment of their lives. Many of them collect trash for a living, and can make about 30-40 yuan a day (after working about 7am – lunch, then 4pm – through the evening). They are from Guizhou, and the stereotype here in Kunming – that people from Guizhou are the trash-collectors – does ring truth. This job pays a decent amount, if one can handle it.

A Hong Kong volunteer went with them on Tuesday to record some sounds of Kunming to put in their play (as background noise) and I was able to follow along. It was such a bittersweet experience – I knew it was an incredible opportunity, yet I soon realized it was certainly not just some exciting adventure. These women took the time to give us a glimpse of their day, yet it really was only a glimpse – usually, they push through intensively, and split up to make their rounds. This time, three of them came with us and, for our sakes, didn’t collect as much as they would have during their shortened shift.

That is the beauty of it – their overwhelming kindness. Even while working this difficult, humiliating job, they were able to make it accessible for us and we could see a bit of what they go through everyday. They come from China’s poorest and probably most underrated in terms of culture and beauty (though I wouldn’t know; I haven’t been there yet) province, and they have come to Yunnan to find a better life. The things I have been able to learn informally at this migrant center, all without conducting any formal interviews, have been invaluable. I can’t wait to spend more time with those women.

I uploaded a short video to YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PH8iU9k3KDU>
Slightly impromptu - they knew we were recording, but I was trying to be discreet. This is them walking and singing a Buyi minority song after a short rest.



Later that night I got to watch them practice at a public square. They brought some of their children with them, and went through their routine. I felt a bit of déjà vu from my own high school drama experiences, although, this was still drastically different. No director, no space to themselves, just a routine to go through over and over again until they get it right. If you are in China, maybe someday they’ll be coming to a stage near you!