

Interview with Liang Zhiqiang, Ms. Liang and Chen Tao

Interview with Liang Zhiqiang, his wife (for whom I will use Ms. Liang) and Chen Tao. All three are residents recently moved from Purple Cloud Village (*Zixiao Gong Erzu*) and now inhabiting an old school to the southwest of the temple [the village was to the northeast of the temple]. Interview conducted as the sky darkened towards the end of the day and the residents were preparing and eating dinner.

Interviewer: I see that you and several others have come to occupy this school. Can you tell me how this came to pass?

Ms. Liang: We came here after the relocation. This place here used to be a school but has been abandoned for some time now and so we decided to come here for temporary housing. With no home of our own, we had no choice. When we were initially told that we'd have to move from our village, some residents went to Laoying but having no luck finding a job, quickly returned. Meanwhile, the rest of us saw the troubles they went through and simply refused to even try what we figured would be a futile attempt anyway. We knew we'd have no chance to live there and so came here instead. But look around, this place is no good. Ten to twelve people per room and we are forced to wash, cook and bathe outside. It's simply no good.

Liang Zhiqiang: Just look how squalid the living conditions are here. We are forced to fit eight families into a single classroom!

Interviewer: Local officials I've spoken with claim that their intention in moving residents is to get them off the mountain's touristed area, yet you've just moved to another location equally close to the tourist spot of Purple Cloud Temple. They didn't mind you moving here?

Ms. Liang: They paid no attention to us moving here, but there's a good possibility that we'll have to move once again by the end of this year.

Interviewer: Can you tell me of some of the events surrounding your move?

Liang Zhiqiang: Well, one day this spring they [local government officials] came to our door and simply handed us a letter saying that if we don't leave our houses immediately and dismantle them, then they'd do it for us. Some were forced to move within a week, but we were the last. My older brother is in the military and everyone knows him they so they gave us some leniency. It turned out that no one had to be forcibly moved, nor houses forcibly dismantled as the order was a strong enough threat to get people to do it themselves.

Interviewer: I've noticed some people still living in the area.

Liang Zhiqiang: Yes, these are the most poor. They live in makeshift shacks built of the remnants of the village. Theoretically this isn't allowed, but neither is our living here. So far no one has bothered them or us about it though.

Interviewer: How was your compensation package?

Liang Zhiqiang: It's just not enough to move out and start a new life. Originally it was only 120 yuan per square meter, then after some of us went to Beijing and appealed for more money the local government got scared and added another 60 yuan per square meter. They likewise added a moving fee of 2000 yuan per person. You could say this was aid for the poor (*fupin*), but it's still not enough.

What upset me most was that not only were we given so few yuan per square meter, but the measurements themselves were often skimpy. When they came to the house to take measurements, they didn't include areas of the house like porches and balconies. We complained and said these were legitimate parts of the house, but they didn't listen.

Interviewer: Have you heard of the similar situation south of here at Three Gorges Dam Site?

Liang Zhiqiang: Yes, but I heard that they got a much better compensation package than us.

Interviewer: Have you been able to find work since the move?

Ms. Liang: No, I collect litter during the day [on the environmental preservation team (*huanwei dui*)] and make about 400 yuan per month, but I don't consider this work. No one can live on such a small amount. Well maybe a single person can if they're not paying rent, but no one can support a family on so little.

Liang Zhiqiang: And many don't even have it this good. Before the move I was still in school but now there's no way that I can complete my studies.

Interviewer: Are you working now?

Liang Zhiqiang: No. When the local government first told us that we had to move they told us all sorts of promises about the good work opportunities they could arrange. But once we moved they completely forgot about that. Not only have I been forced to quit school because of my present economic situation, but now I'm also unemployed.

Interviewer: Although I know you're overqualified, have you considered collecting litter or another such government arranged job, even if it pays horribly little?

Liang Zhiqiang: Yes, but they won't give it to me. Only one person per family can get one of these arranged jobs and my wife is already on the environmental preservation team.

Interviewer: Do they give these jobs to anyone who inquires (provided it's only one person per family)? Or is there a formal application process?

Liang Zhiqiang: Yes you have to apply.

Chen Tao: The government arranged jobs go to anyone who can perform the work competently. But only women can work for the environmental preservation team to collect litter. If a man takes the arranged work, he's assigned onto the forest-fire prevention team (*fangwei dui*) in charge of tending the forests and preventing forest fires. The local government arranges both of these jobs, but they shouldn't be seen as real jobs. They are temporary work.

Interviewer: What did you do before the move?

Chen Tao: I had a small commercial stall on the road up to Golden Summit, but it was dismantled last year.

Interviewer: But I've seen many stalls alongside the road to the Golden Summit. Why were you forced out and others not?

Chen Tao: Well the rule is: if you have a store and the proper permits before the move you can keep it. But in reality even some of these people with the proper permits were forced out. When my shop above Crow Ridge was dismantled I lost my job and they only reimbursed me about 28% of the value of the souvenirs I sold in my shop. This was in July of 2001. Back then I came to Purple Cloud Village, only to be moved once again this spring when I came here. Since 2001 I've done mostly hard labor, inconsistent coolie work.

Interviewer: I've noticed great disparities in the way some people were forced to move right away and others in due time. Some have been provided jobs, while others not. Some have retained their shops, while others not. In your opinion, how would you account for this inconsistency?

Liang Zhiqiang: It's hard to say. Some are given more leniency and others not. Those who know to give generous gifts (*songli*) to the right people often get by better than others.

Interviewer: Can you say anything about your hopes for the future? Will you stay here?

Chen Tao: If they let us stay here, we will. If they force us to move again without pre-arranging housing for us, we will be forced to seek a court appeal once again.

As for my hopes, all I really ask for is a chance to make a decent living. I've been educated and I'm young and strong – how can I be a coolie for life? The problem with the compensation package is not so much the money, but the lack of any stable work and source of income.

Life here now is drab and bleak. There is no TV and not much of anything to do with no work nor money to spend. But even this we can deal with. All we really need is a stable income source to assure us food, clothing and shelter.

Interviewer: Would anyone else care to add anything?

Liang Zhiqiang: No I, think he covered it.