“Hand in Hand” Family Visit- Zeqian Zhang

Reporter: Miao Wang ( Beijing University of Chemical Technology, she lives nearby)

Family background of Zeqian Zhang: Zeqian Zhang is in Grade 5 at Meiling School. He has a twin brother. When they were seven years old, their father had an accident at work which resulted in serious brain injury and made him mentally retarded. Their grandfather has heart disease and their grandmother has mental disease. So it’s their mother that has to support the whole family on her own. But she works in a small factory and only owns meager salary.

Feb 3rd 2013 was a Sunday. That morning I contacted Zeqian Zhang’s family and went to their house. Zeqian, Zekun and their grandfather were waiting for me in front of their house. In fact, the twins and their mother rented a small place near Meiling School. This winter break, the twins are doing part-time job at their mother’s factory. They are so busy that they seldom have time to come home to visit their grandparents. But today since they knew that I would come to visit them, they came home early in the morning.

The twins politely gave me a chair and asked me to sit down. Their grandpa was very nice. He gave me detailed information about the family. And he told me that the twins’ father and grandmother went out. Zeqian was very shy. He squatted against one corner of the dining table and lowered his head. But Zekun was very lively. He looked at me and chatted with me. He told me about their father’s accident. It happened on their first day of school when they were seven years old. Their father sent them to school for registration that morning. Then, he went to work. Unfortunately at the working site, a huge metal hit his head. He went into a coma. After several days, their father gained consciousness but lost his memory. After receiving treatment, he finally was able to recognize his family members but he was mentally retarded and behaved like a three-year-old child. At that time, Zeqian did not have the courage to visit his father in the ward. I asked Zeqian why. He told me he was afraid of seeing his injured father lying on the bed; and that he was afraid of seeing a bloody scene. He told me that in the end his twin brother pushed him into the ward to have a look at his father. Later, their mom rented a small place and lived there with the twins and their father. Their mom works at a factory to process small metal parts. She works day and night in order to support her kids at school and to relieve her in-laws’ burden. Since their father had accident when he was at work, the factory afforded the medical bill and compensated him. But still their mother has to carefully maintain the household and plan for future potential expenses, such as the twins’ education fee. After the accident, their father cannot live by himself. Moreover, he always goes out and gets lost. After a day’s hard work, their mother had to look for their father here and there. The twins told me that one night their mother looked for their father for a long time but still could not find him. Since it was really dark, their mother fell from the bike when she was going uphill. She cried loudly and helplessly. Finally their relatives sent their father back. I cannot imagine how these two small children accepted all the unfortunate days. In the end, their mother made a hard decision and sent their father back to their grandparents’ place. Therefore now their grandpa not only has to do all the work in the fields, but also has to take care of their grandma and father.

I received support from others as well. Probably because of the same experience, gradually Zeqian talked more and more. They told me about their life and study. Due to the rent fee, they changed many places. Finally they found a place with the cheapest rent: 58 RMB per month. I guess probably it is quite an old building. I asked them whether it was big. They nodded their heads satisfactorily. Then they told me how nice and friendly their first landlords were. They rented their first place from an old couple. This old couple loved them a lot, providing them with meals and giving them tasty snacks. Now due to safety concern, their mother does not allow them to go out. But still they go to visit that old couple even though they live a little far away. When they talked about this old couple, they looked very happy. Later they moved to their mom’s workmate’s place and lived there for a while. After that, they finally moved to where they live now. Their current landlords are very nice to them as well. They talked happily about their current landlords. In all, they cannot forget how nice their first landlords are and always think of them.

When talking about their mom, they showed their deep love for their mom. They described a typical day of their mom. Usually she gets up at 4 or 5 am. After making meals for the twins, she goes to the factory. She has lunch at the factory. She asks the twins to heat the meal prepared in the morning and eat that for lunch. At night after eating dinner, she goes back to the factory for the night shift. She processes small metal parts, so she has to sit there for hours. It also impairs her eyes. The twins are doing part-time job at the same factory this winter break. They showed me their hands. All the fingers are punctured. They whispered to me that actually their lunch is not good at all. Most time, the food is cold. Because their rice-cooker seems broken, it cannot heat. They try to use the rice-cooker to heat the food, but it is still cold. I asked them, why they did not tell their mom. They told me because a new rice-cooker would cost some money. Usually they eat cold food for lunch. Sometimes they have no taste for cold food, so they don’t have lunch at all. I then asked then what they would do if they felt hungry in the afternoon. They told me they would just wait for dinner and eat a lot at dinner. Speaking of this, they felt quite helpless. They mentioned an old saying “eat well for breakfast; eat full for lunch and eat less for dinner.” But their situation is the opposite: in the morning they eat fried rice without much nutrition; they sometimes don’t eat lunch; and at dinner they eat a lot. In order to help their mom, they usually boil water and cook rice before their mom coming home from work. Therefore, their mom only has to prepare dishes. They also wash the dishes and clean their place. They once asked their mom to teach them how to cook. But their mom refused since they were still too young. When their mom is working the night shift, they do their homework first and then go to bed. Sometime, we wait for their mom to come home while reading book after finishing their homework, but they usually fall asleep with books in their hands. They also told me a secret and asked to keep it. This winter break they are making some money from doing part time job at the factory where their mom works. Rather than spend that money for themselves, they plan to give their grandparents and their parents each a red envelope for Chinese New Year (gift money). I think they are so filial that they just forgot to give themselves a red envelope.

They talked about their study seriously and happily. Zeqian likes math and drawing. He gets a high score for each math exam. Zeqian said he inherited the drawing gene from his father. He is very proud of his father’s drawing skills. Before the accident, his father was good at drawing birds. It is quite a pity that he cannot draw any more. Zeqian draws so well that once his classmate thought he copied from the textbook. Zekun likes Chinese. In his opinion, Chinese is easy. He told me last time he reminded his brother the right letter format. He likes reading collection of prose.

Before I came to visit them, I only knew Zeqian since he is the one who receives support from the foundation. When I saw Zeqian and Zekun standing in front of me, I could not tell who was who. They kindly told me the way to distinguish them. Zekun has more than ten moles on his face while Zeqian only has several. Besides, both of them have a big mole on the lower jaw; but Zekun’s is on the left side while Zeqian’s on the right side. In addition, Zeqian has a burning scar on his neck. At the very beginning, I could tell from their personalities. Zeqian was quite silent but Zekun was quite open. But after chatting for hours, I got alone with them well and they both talked to me actively. So it is hard for me to tell who is who from their personality now.

Speaking of dreams, they were both excited. Zeqian wanted to be a painter; Zekun wanted to be a scientist, hoping to invent some medicine to cure his father’s illness. They both love reading. They are especially interested in encyclopedia. Recently their mom bought them a book named “Ten Thousand Why.” They were excited about this book and had already finished reading it. They were super excited when they first got this book. Zeqian told me that Zekun put this book on top of his head and suddenly it fell down and hit Zekun’s nose. Zekun felt so embarrassed that he covered his face with his hands.

The twins are always together. They go to school together every day and sleep on the same bed. I asked them whether they were separated before. Actually they were separated only once. They fought with each other once. Their mom was mad at them so she sent one to her mother. The twins said they both missed each other. Zekun said when he was watching TV at the grandmother’s place, he felt very uncomfortable without his brother’s company. Zeqian said the same. He said he tried to grasp his brother when he was watching TV, but he found he was alone. I laughed at them, saying they have to attend the same university since they need each other’s company so much. Though they are poor, still they are happy with what they have in their life.

I asked them what they most wanted. Zeqian said he wanted a dictionary. His classmate has a dictionary with pinyin, explanation of characters and detailed explanation of words. He really wants a similar dictionary. His uncle works at another city. He told his uncle he wanted such a dictionary. Now he hopes his uncle can go home early with the dictionary he wants. Zekun said he wanted a watch so that he could go to school on time. Because the school gate closes at a certain time, now since they don’t have a watch, they usually have to run to school after lunch in case they might miss the time. I asked them what else they longed for. They said they wanted more books. Except for that, they are ok with what they have now. They smiled heartedly as if they already got what they wanted.

Today when I am writing this article, I am still happy for the call got from the twins last night. Yesterday, after having lunch at home, they went back to work at the factory. They asked their mom to call me at night. When I got a call from a strange phone number, I was surprised. But I immediately recognized that it was Zekun’s voice. Zeqian was shy again. He did not talk to me until I asked him to. Then we kept on talking. The twins said they wanted to play with me. They said if they had time, they would come to give me some tasty snacks made by their grandmother. They even played jokes on me. They asked me to tell who was on the phone. But I got it wrong. But I think one day I will be able to distinguish their voices. They are so cute that I feel happy to know them.

Description of the pictures:

1. They are good at study. They actively participate in numerous activities. These are some certificates of award they got from various competitions. These are just part of their certificates. There are more at the place they rent.
2. The cute twins are with their grandfather. At my suggestion, they made some funny pose with their grandfather and made their grandfather laugh happily.
3. close twins in front of the camera.