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Love, dreams sustain children out in the cold

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BEIJING, Jan. 25 -- What Liang Peipei loves most about Beijing is its glittering neon lights. "In my home village in Hebei Province we dared not walk on the unlit roads at night," she said.

Like many other children of migrant workers, the 13-year-old is excited to be spending the Spring Festival in Beijing, though her knowledge of the capital is confined to the east suburban Tongzhou District.

Liang's family of four lives in a room about 9 square meters where a small stove produces little warmth.

The girl has only one sweater inside her jacket.

The school for migrant children she attends has closed for the winter break, and she spends most days alone at home.

Her parents go at 3:30am to a nearby wholesale market to buy fresh vegetables which they sell, sometimes late into the night. Her only toy is a doll that cost 8 yuan (US\$1) — she skipped breakfast for a full week for it. In her spare time, she makes dresses for her doll out of rags she collects.

"I'd like to be a fashion designer when I grow up."

Liang has never played or even talked much with her city peers. She might even feel lucky, compared with Shi Xiangqian, a 9-year-old boy from central China's Henan Province whose father recently died of lung cancer.

When his mother went home last week for the funeral, she left the boy some instant noodles and an instruction to take care of his handicapped sister, and feed the Tibetan mastiffs the family raises and sells for a living.

"We take care of each other," Shi said. His sister Shi Shengnan, 13, cannot walk, but her motherly affection helps him fall asleep on cold winter nights.

In return, the boy does the housework and dispels his sister's fears when the big dogs bark at anyone near the house.

"Besides warmth and care, these children need to be accepted by our city," said Tu Meng, secretary-general of China Youth Development Foundation, an organization long devoted to the well-being of youngsters.

The foundation surveyed 360 migrant children in Beijing.

It found many migrant families in Beijing are in poverty: about 6 percent of the children surveyed live in slums; one out of every 10 feels cold at home and most families cannot afford a quilt for everyone.

Statistics from the fifth national census in 2000 show China has 19.81 million migrant children.

(Source: Shanghai Daily)

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