

# A Teacher's Journey with Students to Ghana

Ka-fu WONG

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# About Ka-fu WONG

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Comparing to the students who went to Ghana with him, Ka-fu WONG, often known as KF, is old. He is at the age of student's parents.

KF teaches at the University of Hong Kong. Most students know him through his Introductory Microeconomics courses. There are numerous rumors about him. He was named as GPA serial killer in HKU Secrets. He was the only teacher who would reply to HKU Secrets post when tagged.

Economics is in KF's blood. He has been in love with Economics since senior high. Talking to him, you will discover his view of this world based on Economic principles.

KF enjoys nature, hiking, travelling, photography and volunteer work. He grew up in a poor family. Nature and hiking are always cheap to enjoy. He developed such interest in early years. Yes, he talks about birds, butterflies, dragonflies and plants. In fact, he worked as volunteers in Hong Kong Wetland Park for three years.

Travelling and photography were a luxury. Only in recent years he started to do more travelling and photography. Wealth effect, definitely!

See the world before it is too late, he often says. To him, to see the world up close, nothing is better than doing some volunteer work in cities and villages, when such opportunities arise. He did volunteer teaching in a small city in Fujian and a small city in Ghana. The experience of close interaction with local people supplements what we know about a country from news and economic reports.

Young people are not too foreign to KF. He is a father. His son is at the age of the many students going to Ghana with him. He had witnessed the growth and development of his son. Such experience has changed his view of teaching and learning substantially. Relax, now he often says to himself, his friends and students. There are different mode of learning. Some will learn from lectures effectively, some will learn more from experience. And, on experience learning, mistakes are essential components. In fact, mistakes from your perspective need not be mistakes from my perspective. No need to emphasize on mistakes, but to emphasize on the experience and how we learn from the experience.

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# Preface

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In June 2019, I went to Ghana with a group of students for volunteer work, via the Beyond the Pivot (BTP) Go-to-Africa (G2A) project.

No, my role was neither a team leader nor an adviser! When I told my colleagues and friends that I was going to Ghana with a group of students for volunteer work, almost everyone thought that I was taking the students to Ghana. No! I was just an ordinary participant. Please consider that they took me to Ghana, instead. A point I wanted to emphasize throughout the journey.

It was not easy for me to be an ordinary participant. I am older and more experienced. I was a teacher at the very same university of the participants. I repeatedly reminded myself not to opine too much because my voice might end up intervening the leader's decision. It's a student's project, not my project. If they made correct decisions, I would enjoy the good outcome. If they made bad decisions, it would be a great learning experience for everyone – including me.

The luxury of being an ordinary participant was that I was free of the laborious duties and thus had better chance to observe. Many thanks to the five team leaders for doing the difficult work for the rest of the team, including me.

Many friends and colleagues donated money to finance the cost of toilet construction and the hepatitis B screening kits. I feel obliged to share with them what I learned from this trip. In fact, for this reason, I wrote almost one journal a day during my whole journey there – posted on Facebook (English) and Wechat (Chinese).

This little memoir is an account of my journey to Ghana. I hope, this memoir will stimulate some interest in future participation in the BTP G2A project, as well as supporting them financially.

If you ask me now whether I want to do it again, my answer is a definite YES.

All participants of G2A project played a very important role in my trip to Ghana. I have learned a lot from them. Many contributed pictures and writing to this memoir. Here is a list of all the participants.

	Name	Nickname	Speical Role
1	CHEN Yue	Isaac	Leader, Tech team member, Accountant
2	JIANG Xinjie	Jo	Tech team leader
3	XIONG Chuyang	Elina	Leader
4	AU Ching Lam	Andrina	Leader
5	YU Bingzi	Ice	Leader
6	XU Yunqiao	Lily	Teaching team member
7	CHEN Jiaying	Jenny	Teaching team member
8	LIU Xiaoyu	Sherrill	Teaching team member
9	YUAN Minjun	Erin	Teaching team member
10	DU Liheng	Alan	Teaching team member
11	LUNG Hsiang Yi	Angel	Tech team member
12	AU Hon Man	Howard	Tech team member
13	WANG Yangzhi	Benjamen	Tech team member
14	ZHANG Weiqi	Jennifer	Teaching team member

# One

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## Why do we join the BTP G2A project?

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In the first joint training session of the five GTP projects<sup>1</sup>, we were asked the same question twice. Once before a brief introduction of the situation of the remote villages we were going to serve, once after.

There were some converts. After the introduction, more volunteers aimed to serve and help the poor in these remote villages.

My objective remained the same – to see and understand the world up close. Yes, I also want to help the poor, but this can only be a secondary objective, or a by-product, so called. I can claim to know the real world but I must also admit that my so called knowledge about the real world was mainly from books, magazines, newspapers, and television programmes. A first-hand experience will be different, definitely.

In this sense, I am selfish. I want to enrich my understanding of the world through the volunteer work at Ghana. Going to Ghana as a tourist will never yield the same experience. Tourists tend to visit touristy spots, take a few pictures and then move on to the next ones. Rarely they would talk to the locals and definitely lack the opportunity to see the other side of the country.

I also want to help the poor, but I do not want to exaggerate what we can accomplish in three weeks.

After the trip, I can only confidently say that I have learned a lot. How much did we contribute to the remote village? Sorry to say, we have not done any systematic evaluation to allow me to make any conclusion.

Yes, during the trip, I repeatedly asked the question: “What is the best way to help the poor in Ghana?” When asked, a local volunteer suggested donations. I said I worried about corruption and therefore the money would not reach the needed. He said we can donate to help talented students to attend university. The universities are relatively trustworthy and accountable and will help monitor the donation. I have to agree but our group have multiple objectives – helping the poor in Ghana

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<sup>1</sup>There were five BTP projects in 2019 summer. In addition to the Ghana project, there were one to Inner Mongolia, one to Yunnan, one to Sichuan and one to Hainan.



and personal enrichment. A simple donation helps the poor but lacks the aspect of personal enrichment. After all, we are really after the personal enrichment.

Interesting! My starting question was how to serve the poor the best. I ended up emphasizing personal enrichment!

# Two

## Visa

Hong Kong SAR passport holders need a visa to enter Ghana.<sup>1</sup> Tourist visa was what we need.

Visa application is always a very interesting process. For the Ghana visa, the application form was short (one page) but we were required to fill in two pieces of information of which I normally would have hesitation to obtain before the visa approval.



Figure 2.1: A visa to enter Ghana

- Names, addresses and telephone numbers of two references or place residence in Ghana or name(s) of hotel.
- The ticket number of our return ticket.

Should I purchase a return ticket before my visa application? What if I am not granted a tourist visa?

Ghana seemed to have an office in Hong Kong but it was not an embassy or consulate that could process visa applications. We had two options.<sup>2</sup> We could apply it through the Hong Kong office. The cost would be 2080HKD each. Or one of our team members could represent the rest of the team to apply for visas at Beijing – 720 RMB each. As the end of the semester drew near, we were not sure if any of us would like to volunteer their valuable time for

<sup>1</sup>Hong Kong SAR passport holders can double check at [https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/service/travel\\_document/visa\\_free\\_access.html](https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/service/travel_document/visa_free_access.html)

<sup>2</sup>There may appear a third option. That is to obtain visa upon arrival. Note, visa upon arrival are only those who cannot obtain visa ahead of time. Even if this is possible, it is just too uncertain for us.

a trip to Beijing. Thanks to the superb negotiation skill by one of our team leaders, the Ghanaian office in Hong Kong finally agreed to lower the application fee to 1200HKD. But, that was only for students! As I was not a student, I had to pay 2080HKD.

The processing time turned out to be two weeks. On the visa, it showed the fee paid – 720 RMB. That is, together we paid approximately 6800HKD as additional processing fee (about 1200 HKD as additional processing fee for me, and 400HKD each for students).

Recently, I heard that Ghana will implement an e-visa application system later this year (2019). I really look forward to its implementation. I am sure the e-visa implementation will encourage more tourist/business visits to Ghana.

# Three

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## Sim/data cards

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Can you live without internet connection? Most of us would answer yes to this question but at the same time, we all would like to have access to internet. This question “Can you live without internet connection?” is in fact not a very good question. A better question might be “How much are you willing to pay to have an access to the internet?”

I am concerned about internet connection too. If there is a reasonable internet connection, I would not need to leave my administrative duty to a colleague to handle. Of course, with internet connection, I can stay connected with my family members throughout the trip.

We were told by the pilot team that we could easily get sim/data cards in Accra, the capital of Ghana. That was what we decided to do.

After we arrived and settled at the hotel at Accra, we went to a mall to exchange for local currency and purchase sim/data cards.

Despite the lack of a counting machine at the store, the currency exchange was quick. In contrast, the purchase and setup of sim cards were slow. This was the first time I experienced the low efficiency of doing business in Ghana. The purchase of sim cards required passports. Our passport information were entered into the computer. The sim card information were entered into the computer. Perhaps because of a rather complicated procedure of activation, the sim cards had to be activated by the store staff. Although two out of the three employees in the office were deployed to help ten of us, we ended up waiting for almost one and a half hours. It was a training of patience.



Figure 3.1: Sim card store

I could imagine a similar store in Hong Kong will be able to handle ten of us in 30 minutes.

In view of the long waiting time, if I were going to visit Ghana again, I would probably pay 50 to 100HKD more to purchase a much more convenient plug-and-use sim card while in Hong Kong. The saved time can be used for a short tour in downtown Accra or in the neighborhood.

Am I complaining? No, I am thankful that I get the chance to see the different efficiency of doing things in Ghana – a valuable lesson indeed!

# Four

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## Travel Health Precautions

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Ghana is a less developed country and it is in Africa.

Heard of Ebola? Ebola is deadly and has occurred in some of the African countries. Fortunately, there has been no confirmed cases in Ghana.

While the absence of Ebola is comforting, there are a lot of health issues we need to pay attention to. A colleague from the medical school was so kind to come to give us an overview. We definitely need to worry about Yellow Fever and malaria. Without proof of Yellow Fever vaccination, we will be denied entry into Ghana. Malaria, a parasitic infection transmitted by mosquito bites, can be deadly. In fact, Malaria was responsible for 19% of all recorded deaths in Ghana in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, no vaccine has yet been developed. For prevention, medication is required during and after the trip. Doxycycline has to be taken once daily beginning 1–2 days before travel, while in malarious areas, and for 4 weeks after leaving. The alternative is Atovaquone-proguanil. Again, the medication has to be taken once daily beginning 1–2 days before travel to malarious areas and should be taken daily, while in the malarious areas, and daily for 7 days after leaving the areas. We all would have chosen Atovaquone-proguanil if it were not much more expensive than Doxycycline.



Figure 4.1: Travel Health Kit

While I had collected some information at a relatively early stage, the best medical advice comes from a consultation visit to Travel Health Centre at Wanchai.<sup>2</sup> At

<sup>1</sup><https://www.severemalaria.org/countries/ghana>

<sup>2</sup>Required to make an appointment at least 6 weeks before travel. More information at

our scheduled time, an experienced doctor explained to us the situation and give us all the medication advice we need for the trip. I ended up with vaccination of Typhoid Fever, Meningococcal (ACWY), Yellow Fever (with a certificate), and Hepatitis A. Doxycycline was prescribed. I also bought from the Travel Health Centre a travel health kit, which, among other things, also include a bottle of mosquito/insect repellent. For only 100 HKD. I would consider it money well spent.

Mosquitoes concerned us. At the end, each of us bought an additional bottle of mosquito/insect repellent, as well as a mosquito net. There were mosquitoes but not really a lot in the town we stayed. We were bitten but not too much. As an additional precaution, I bought some mosquito repelling clothes and apply insect repellent lotion every day. The insect repellent lotion included in the Travel Health Kit can stay effective for 12 hours per application. Thus, we only need to apply once a day. At the end, I used less than one bottle of mosquito/insect repellent in this trip.

Despite all such precautions, one volunteer did develop symptoms of malaria and was later verified as malaria infection. With the medication prescribed, she was able to recover and function normally. Yes, with proper precautions, malaria hazard can be overcome.

To reduce our chance of sickness during the trip, we need also be careful about what we eat and what we drink. We should avoid street food definitely. We were also warned that water in Ghana may not be clean. Boiled water is usually safe. Bottled water may look safe but may not be safe because some unethical merchants may simply fill the used bottles with contaminated water and sell them as new. We were advised to get a filtered water bottle or a water filter. At the end, we decided to get a water filter. In Ghana, people often drink water in plastic bags. We also tried to drink water in plastic bags. Once we discovered a funny taste in such plastic bagged water, most of us started to use the water filter. Some later then switched to the more expensive bottled water (almost four times more expensive). I continued to drink the plastic bagged water whenever it was provided and thus continued to use the water filter.

In addition all these precautions, I had a regular rest schedule and did 30-minute exercise routine every morning. Overall, I managed to stay healthy throughout the trip.

# Five

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## Our pilot team

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Our volunteer team consisted of two subteams – the toilet team and the teaching team. The toilet team was also called the pilot team. They had to arrive at the site one week earlier than the teaching team. The reason is obvious, it was estimated to take more time to complete the toilet construction.

The toilet team's responsibility was on the design of the toilet, supervision of the construction work and, of course, cost control. Workers were hired to do most of the manual work but the team members also engaged in different parts of the actual construction work.

The pilot team/toilet team consisted of five volunteers. Three were students of the Faculty of Architecture (Jo, Howard and Angel). Two were students from the Faculty of Business and Economics (Allen and Benjamin). Obviously, Jo, Howard and Angel were responsible for the design. Both Allen and Ben assisted the toilet construction. In addition, Allen helped with the book-keeping and budget control – our accountant.

Allen also met the teaching team at Accra on the day of our arrival. This involves a non-trivial travelling time on a bus ALONE – sixteen hours. In addition to greeting the teaching team and helping them to get data sim cards and to exchange for local currency, he was also there to buy additional supply for the toilet construction. Then, there was another long ride



Figure 5.1: The toilet construction site



back to the town Sawla, northwestern region of Ghana, this time on a hired coach.

I belong to the teaching team. By the time the teaching team was due to arrive Accra, the toilet team has already chosen the site and started the foundation work.

## Six

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# One dose of doxycycline a day keeps the malaria away

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May 31, our flight departed in midnight. When we met at the airport check-in counter, we greeted each other with “Have you taken the malaria medication yet?”

Yes, we went to the Travel Health Centre for a pre-trip medical consultation. After a 45-minute consultation, we were recommended to take a few vaccine shots. Among them, Yellow Fever vaccine is the most important. Without the proof of Yellow Fever vaccine, we will be refused entry into Ghana.

We all would love to do a Malaria vaccination too. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine developed yet. Therefore, we are recommended to take Doxycycline throughout the journey and 30 days after its completion. We started our Ghana journey with Doxycycline. In total, we have to take Doxycycline for 50 days, we will need to take it every day. One dose of doxycycline a day keeps malaria away!



Figure 6.1: The teaching team

# Seven

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## Corruption, my first impression of Ghana

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June 1, finally arrived Accra, the Capitol of Ghana. We had all documents ready – passports, visitor visa which we applied while in Hong Kong, Yellow Fever vaccination certificates. Everything went smoothly until I met the immigration officer.

There were many counters for non-citizens. All lines were short. Most of the volunteer team members split ourselves into different counters. Soon it was Elina's turn. I was behind her and chose to stand behind the yellow line. Standing behind the yellow line and waiting for the officer to call upon you were the most normal thing to do, isn't it? Yet, the immigration officer invited me to go to the same counter with Elina. He collected both of our passports. Perhaps we were thought as father-daughter pair. After my "daughter"



Figure 7.1: The father-daughter pair

was done with her immigration check, the officer stared at me and pointed to his chest several time. As I was preparing for photo-taking and finger-printing, I thought he meant my looking into the camera at the counter. "Camera?" I said and pointed to the camera at the same time. He repeated the same gesture and mumble. Soon I figured out that he was asking for money. No, I was not prepared to pay. Paying would encourage more corruption in the future. Plus, I have only 100 US dollar bills and I am not willing to give that much to an officer to speed up the immigration process. I pretended I did not know what he was talking about. Eventually, he said "money" out loud, and again pointing to his own chest. I shook my shoulder, waited a little while. He finally gave me back my passport.

Later, I know that in developing countries, such request for money by immigrant officers and custom officers are common. I was later told by a local volunteer that it was not uncommon to pay to put oneself on a fast track when they were in a long line waiting for some services. Indeed, in 2018, Ghana has a Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>1</sup> of 41 (out of 100) and was ranked 103-th most corrupted country/region or 78-th least corrupted country/region.

A note. Before I reached the immigration counter, I noticed an office for visa application. We applied the visa via a Ghana representative in Hong Kong. I paid 2080 HKD (1432 cedis or 1835 RMB) for my Ghana visa. Apparently our application was processed by the Ghana embassy in Beijing (China) with a nominal cost of 720 RMB. I cannot help wondering, in a country in which most people earn 1000 cedis per month, if I had applied for a visa upon landing and were willing to pay 200 cedis, would my application be approved instantly?

Suppose you are at the immigration checkpoint but do not have a visa, and you can apply for a visitor's visa at that point. How much do you have to pay in addition to the regular visa application fee? Who would have more bargaining power? You or the officer?

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<sup>1</sup>The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is an index published annually by Transparency International. The index ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption according to experts and business people. The score takes value of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corruption\\_Perceptions\\_Index](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corruption_Perceptions_Index) for overview and <https://www.transparency.org/> for details.

# *Eight*

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## Sixteen hours on the road

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Sixteen hours! June 2, after sixteen hours, we finally arrived at the hotel at Sawla (Awusi Lodge) after midnight, a total of sixteen hours on the road.

I had done such long trip before. I still remember vividly my long journey from the east coast to the west coast in the United States via Greyhound coaches back in 1989. Now, I am older and supposedly need more stretching breaks.

On the coach, I did not say a word about taking stretching breaks. I was hoping some of our team leaders would request the drivers (we have two drivers, one gives direction or as backup) to make pit stops every three hours or so. It did not happen.

We did request a toilet break at one time. That happened when someone could not hold it in for much longer. Ladies had no choice but to solve their problem in the toilet – however unbearable. Men chose bushes.

Later, we had a lunch break in a Kumasi mall. Everyone was so glad about the clean toilet.

Before the journey, I was told that there could be bandits on the road from Accra to Sawla. “Give them what they want. Safety is the top priority.” Yes, on the road, we saw several road blocks, guarded by persons with what appeared to be machine guns but they all turned out to be police. Some cars were stopped but never us - luckily. In hindsight, wouldn't it be fun that the police stopped us just to check who we were? Or, you say I am insane to have such thought at all.



Figure 8.1: Changing a broken tire in the middle of the road and in the middle of the night

To save time, we did not stop for dinner. During our lunch break at the mall, we bought additional food for dinner. We had a late start in the morning. We were expecting to arrive the hotel in Sawla just before midnight.

We drove fast – in the dark. There were potholes everywhere. The driver often had to steer to avoid them. Bang! We hit something. I knew it was a pothole. One of our tire went flat. We had to stop to change the tire and to add water to the radiator. Of course, some of us took the chance to do a toilet break in the dark.

We arrived after midnight. Exhausted but we were so glad that we arrived safely. Several lady team members were holding in for so long that they had to rush to the toilet almost immediately!

## *Nine*

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### Mango tree – a conference place

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June 4, the first day after the teaching team arrived Sawla. Everyone was anxious to see the school, meet the students, and to find out what we really had to teach. No, we were not told exactly what we would help teach. Perhaps primary school, perhaps junior high. Perhaps mathematics, perhaps science, perhaps English, perhaps ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). There were too many uncomfortable “perhaps”.

A meeting with the school needed to be arranged as soon as possible. In the afternoon, perhaps. But, then, we were told that generally, the schools here would have no classes in the afternoon.

We told the local contact and local volunteers that we hope we could see the school “today”. Could we just go to see the school? Finally, we went to visit a school, the school near which we were building our toilet. It was a junior high school. Six classrooms, two classes per form (Form 1, 2 and 3). After talking to the headmaster at his office, we were allowed to sit in the classes to observe. In my classroom, the teacher taught English. The topic covered was “Giving directions to a friend to visit you at home”. Left, right or straight ahead when you see an intersection? The distance to walk along the road? The need to reconfirm our location by looking at landmarks. The need to tell your friend the appearance of your house, etc. It was interesting topic, lively taught. Students were reasonably good. I liked it. The only problem is that we were told later this was not the school we would be teaching!

The next day, we finally had a chance to visit OUR school – in fact two schools – we would be teaching. A primary school and a junior high school that sat next to each other (and a kindergarten next to them as well). We were greeted by the junior high’s headmaster and teachers in the shade of mango tree. Seriously, this was their expanded office.



Figure 9.1: A mango tree office

I was initially assigned to teach integrated science. My other team members responsible for Math and English will start teaching the next day (i.e., Thursday) but I would not be able to start teaching this week because the teacher of the course had simply disappeared a couple days ago, there was no sign when he would return and whereabouts he was, and consequently I would not be able to obtain the progress, advice and instructional materials from him. The headmaster had issued him a warning. If he did not come back in the next two days, the school would search his desk for the instructional materials and pass it to me. Apparently, we were at one of the most under-privileged schools in the district.

Possibly due to the absence of a teacher, I had the chance to give a lecture on game theory. I had prepared this before I went. I covered a simple sequential game and used it to illustrate the concept of Backward Induction and the importance of forward looking in making decisions.





Figure 9.2: A group of junior high students

If you want to be an engineer, you will need to obtain a bachelor degree in Engineering. If you want to get a bachelor degree, you need to get admitted to a university. If you want to get admitted to a university, you will need to perform well in university entrance exam. If you want to perform well in university entrance exam, you will need to work hard in senior high years. If you want to get into a senior high, you will need to work hard in your junior high – NOW.

# Ten

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## Rainy June

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June is always a rainy season in Ghana. Historically, it has the highest level of rainfall.

Month	Rainfall (mm)	Month	Rainfall (mm)
Jan	13.6	Jul	121.3
Feb	40.3	Aug	88.9
Mar	88.2	Sep	133.0
Apr	115.7	Oct	128.1
May	160.7	Nov	56.6
Jun	210.4	Dec	24.6

Table 10.1: Average rainfall across months in Ghana

Due to rain, on our supposedly second day of our service teaching, classes were canceled. Rain at Sawla can be very heavy. Indeed, although it was not very heavy initially but it later got much heavier, accompanied by thunderstorms. There appeared no centrally administered weather rainstorm signals like those in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> Although no broadcast of rainstorm signals was made by the authority, kids knew that there were no classes.

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<sup>1</sup>In Hong Kong, rainstorm signals are hoisted to alert citizens of the possibility of serious road flooding and traffic congestion. Amber signal if heavy rain has fallen or is expected to fall generally over Hong Kong, exceeding 30 millimetres in an hour, and is likely to continue; red signal for 50 millimetres; and, black signal for 70 millimetres.



Figure 10.1: Rain! Minor roads are not paved.



Figure 10.2: Heavy rain

Our school was rather under-privileged. Most students walk to school. Umbrellas appear rare, possibly a luxury. Heavy rain can cause flooding and all kind of inconvenience of walking to school. In addition, some classrooms were old and not well-maintained. Blackboard was made of cement and there were scattered holes on it. When it rains, and with wind, water can come in through some of the windows. Lacking electricity and lights, closing windows will result in a very dark classrooms, making it impossible to teach and learn. Not just about the drips and light, it was also about the noise of rain hitting the roof. Too noisy for teaching and learning to happen.

Kids know. If rain starts before school hours, kids will stay home. If rain happens in the middle of school, when it becomes too noisy, teaching will be suspended, kids then just enjoy some free time (or possibly inclass exercise time or possibly copying lecture notes from the blackboard) by themselves.

## *Eleven*

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# Hepatitis B screening at a really remote village

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June 9th, Saturday. No school. A hot day in Sawla, Ghana. Today we teamed up with the local NGOs to conduct a screening test of Hepatitis B at a remote village. Yes, thanks to many sponsors back in Hong Kong and Mainland China, the HKU Beyond the Pivot team were able to contribute the testing kits. We brought it all the way from Hong Kong.

The village was really remote! It took us almost 1.5 hours of bumpy ride to get there from Sawla, which is itself a small city of Ghana. In addition to the distance and the bumpy ride, the village had no telecommunication signals. I did not see any villager using any form telecommunication devices. Most houses were built with mud brick and painted with a layer of cow dung on the outside to protect the house from rain. Most kids did not go to school here because school were far away and education was deemed not very useful for the life they live. People did not remember their exact age. When kids do not go to school, adults do not have a compulsory retirement age, and their is no social benefits to claim after a specific age, what is the use of remembering how old we are?!

When we arrived, we were welcomed by dance and music.



Figure 11.1: A welcome dance



Figure 11.2: Percussion instruments



Figure 11.3: Assembly under a mango tree

We met most of the villagers under the shade of a big Mango tree. The Mango tree was the place for the villagers to hold assembly. After some brief introduction by all parties and a quick lunch we had brought along, we quickly started the screening tests, under the tree. The local, volunteers who have some basic medical training, help with pricking the fingers, collecting the blood sample for the test. We helped keep the time and the results. Villagers could see the test results in less than an hour. The whole screening process was completed in 2.5 hours.

After the screening, some of our volunteers still had the chance to learn local dances before we head back to the city of Sawla.



Figure 11.4: Helping with Hepatitis B screening

Before we visited the village, we were expecting to talk to villagers, explain to them the causes and consequences of hepatitis B, and hence the need of vaccination. In fact, we had no chance to do so because the villagers did not speak English.



# Twelve

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## Mole National Park

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June 9th, Sunday. We took a break from volunteer work at Sawla and visited the nearby Mole National Park. It took us a two-hour ride on a hired coach to get there.



Figure 12.1: Wild elephants in Mole National Park

It is said that elephant, buffalo, kob, warthog, waterbuck, bushbuck, roan antelope, hartebeest, duikers, oribi, patas monkey, green (vervet) monkey, crocodile are the species commonly seen at Mole National Park. We could only see and identify baboon, kob, warthog and elephant. We tried to find crocodiles but did not really see any.

Wild elephants, to us, were the major attraction. For safety, we need armed rangers to accompany us. We went to an afternoon safari ride. We signed up for an hour. The rangers took us to the likely habitat of wild elephants. A lot of walking

on a hot day, we did not see any.

Most of us were not willing to go without seeing any elephant. We decided to do another hour. Finally, we saw two elephants in this second hour. We were all so happy!



Figure 12.2: Don't get too close. These are wild animals!

# Thirteen

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## Teaching Area and volume

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June 10 (Monday), second day of teaching primary six. Last Friday, due to the rainy weather, classes were cancelled. Originally, I planned to teach the required topics leisurely because it appeared that we would have plenty of class time. Now, seeing how weather could affect school, how weather could be very unpredictable here and we are in a rainy season, I decided to tighten up my teaching. If I were lucky, I could cover all the required materials early and would have time to cover an additional mini-lecture I prepared before I came. If I were unlucky, at least I would not leave too many chapters uncovered.

Today, before I started to teach, I wrote on the upper left corner “KF + Elina” and “HKU BTP”. I would like to remind them who we were. I also emphasized that I were here to help them, to help them become smarter, and mathematics helped strengthen logical reasoning and was an important tool to help them become smarter.

As a starter, I decided to give students a quick review on the topic we cover last time (Area of Rectangle on June 6, Thursday) and then gave them an exercise. I feel they need more exercise to strengthen their learning. Later, I asked our teaching assistant (Elina) to help grade the inclass exercise while I continued with the lecture. I went back to talk about the usefulness of knowing how to compute area of rectangles.

The story goes: If the tribal chief is willing to give you a piece of land that you can mark with a 100m rope, how would you mark it? What kind of rectangle?

The answer is: Square. The square have four equal sides. Thus, each side should be 25m.

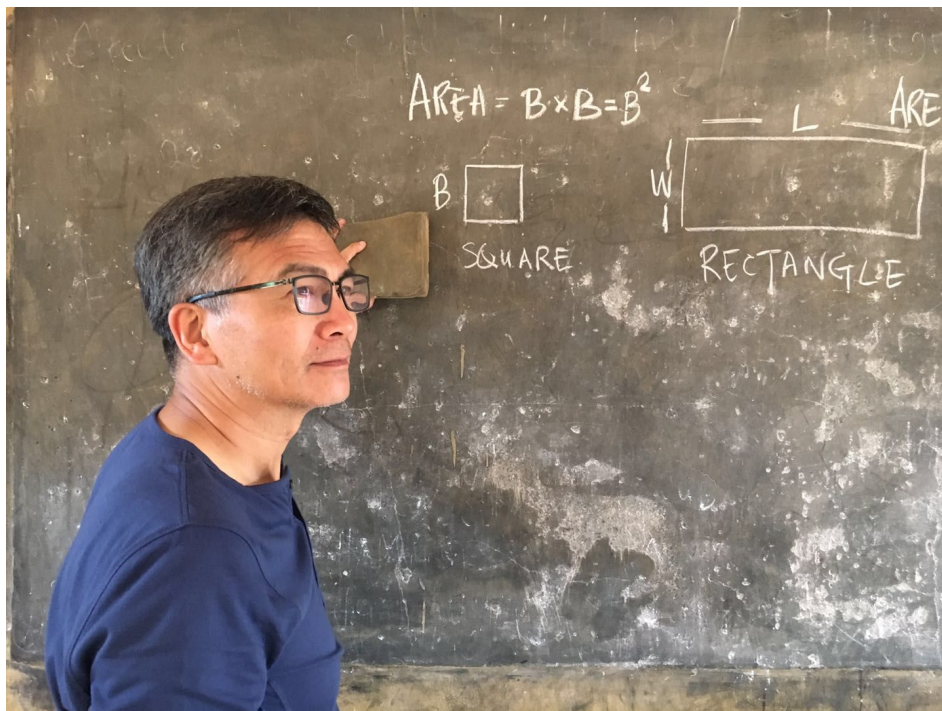


Figure 13.1: Teaching the area of rectangles

I hope such discussion will motivate them. The inclass exercise and the immediate grading turned out to be important. Our TA Elina told me that students forgot to write the units. So, I reminded them we should write units in a particular form.

Next, I talked about Volume of Cuboids. Before I was able to give them exercises on the topic, the time was up. When I was packing to leave the room, students said they had no class immediately after and asked me to continue. No teacher can refuse when eager students want you to stay and teach more, right?

# Fourteen

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## Wake me up

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June 11th, Tuesday. Third day of teaching. Students felt sleepy in the middle of the class. The teacher (ie, me) was not happy. Was it because my lecture were too boring?



Figure 14.1: Let's dance and sing

I wanted to talk them into paying attention. Didn't work. A student suggested to sing a song. What a great idea! So, I immediately asked the whole class to stand up to sing and move around. Kids here loved to sing and dance. After five minutes of singing and dancing, they had regained energy to listen to the lecture again. Yeah, I love this trick!

I tell you. This trick need not work all the time. A couple days later, seeing that they could not concentrate, I asked them to stand up to sing and dance. They were reluctant to do so. I guess, timing was important and who initiated the process was also important. As a teacher, we just have to play by the ear.

# Fifteen

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## Food at school

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At around 10:30am, students would start to have a break. One group at a time so that the line for food would not be too long. The school will provide students with a simple meal. Cooked rice / millet with some sauce.



Figure 15.1: Food distribution

Students could also buy buns from a young skinny girl, at 0.5 cedi (70 HK cents, 10 US cents) each. She was the only bun seller at the school. There was not much chance for me to talk to her. She was always running around selling buns and counting money. And, as she was in her junior primary years, her English was good enough for communication. .

I always wondered why she was the bun seller but not others. As skinny as her, it would not be easy to protect her turf, her buns, and her money. It was only reasonable to assume that she was authorized by the teachers to do so. Indeed, I later saw her connection with one of the teachers. A local volunteer also verified that.



Figure 15.2: The authorized bun seller

# Sixteen

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## A night walk

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Sawla is a small town. Not much happens here at night. The population is too spread out to support a good night market. Nevertheless, when we ventures out at night, we did see some scattered businesses selling tea, noodles and bread.

A tea stall sells coffee, malted drink, tea, bread and eggs.

Seeing the noodle stall, some of us were so excited. A basic stir-fry noodle with vegetable cost 5 cedis. Additional 2 cedis if you want to add canned fish.



(a) A tea stall



(b) Stir-fried noodle stall

Figure 16.1: The night market

We ran into several students of ours. It is common for the kids to help out their family and simply do part-time jobs at night. Perhaps, when school is not too demanding, and you have no TV at home, no computer to play with, and no mobile to play with, you would consider it fun and rewarding to do a part-time job as well.

One of my primary six student sold tea at night, every day, usually from 6 to 10. I always joked with him that he should work harder on his basic calculation skills so that he would not under-charge his customers. Working such long hours after school, no wonder he (and many other students in similar situations) often failed to pay attention to my lectures.

# Seventeen

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## Helping with toilet construction

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Teaching team members were always happy to help but there was not much the teaching team could contribute to the toilet construction. Workers were hired to help with the construction. Design and monitoring of the progress were done by the several volunteers of the construction team. At times, extra manpower were needed to help, mainly with painting.



Figure 17.1: Painting jobs

On June 16th, Sunday, the whole teaching team had chosen to visit a hippo



sanctuary while I chose what I considered a more enjoyable thing to do – painting. It became more interesting when several kids came by to watch and wanted to help. It reminded me of the scene of painting fences in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I joked with them that I would let them help only if they paid me two cedis (local currency). Everyone in the construction site laughed.

# *Eighteen*

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## Weak mathematics training

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8+14=27?

Visited a store to buy some candies at Sawla, Ghana. A pack of ginger candies costs 8 Cedis (local currency); a pack of chocolate candies costs 14 Cedis. I asked the storekeeper how much I had to pay. He said 27 Cedis. I was shocked.

I should not be shocked after all. Because many of my students in the primary 6 class would have difficulty computing this. Yes, they had been taught to calculate even in early primary years but why would they fail such simple calculations? In my class, I witnessed primary six students copying the inclass exercises from their friends. One quarter of students were smart enough to figure out the answers, the rest would copy. Such copying is so difficult to prevent. But, when these students become a storekeeper, where can they copy (who can they rely on) to tell their customers how much their customers have to pay?

Wrong, you would be wrong to think that homework copying is common only in Sawla, and only in primary schools. Such short-cut to get good grades (or avoid penalty) happens in the university I teach as well. I was asked in several occasions by education experts why we did not include more weight on continuous assessments, i.e., projects and homework assignments, etc. If you understand how common copying/plagiarism is, you will not ask such question.

# *Nineteen*

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## Time to say goodbye to Sawla

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June 19th. The volunteer work of teaching and toilet construction at Sawla of Ghana has come to a close. After an early morning of opening ceremony, we left for Accra, the capitol of Ghana. We will stay at Accra for one and a half days before heading back to Hong Kong.



Figure 19.1: The completed toilet



Figure 19.2: The ceremony

We were here for just a couple of weeks. What have we contributed? We built a toilet. Will they use it? How many years will they use it? What can we do to lengthen the life of the toilet?

During our stay, we helped cover several chapters of the curriculum, substituting the respective local teachers in primary school and junior high. Did we do a better job than the local teachers? What impact have we made? What can we do better to help? What have we learned? What else can we do to maximize our learning there? I continue to ponder these questions even in these days.

Since I returned from Ghana, I continue to share my volunteer experience in Ghana with my friends. I was excited to tell a friend that I used a game to teach my students to be more forward looking. My friend responded, “Why should they be forward looking? Was it not a good thing for them to live and focus in the present moment? What is good for us needs not be good for them!” What a different perspective!

# Twenty

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## A travel log based on imagination

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We were promised a visit to Cape Coast in the last part of our itinerary. So, we did. Three hours one way on a coach from Accra, where we stayed. We ended up with six hours max in Cape Coast.

Half a day was all we had in Cape Coast of Ghana. Just enough to give me an imagination of a longer visit in the future. If I were to come here again, I probably would stay here for five full days. I can easily spend a day in the Cape Coast Castle. Another day strolling around this small town. When I walked around a little and tried to peek into an unloading pier, I was invited to go in – but only with a fee. I would imagine that some people may ask you to pay if they discover you taking pictures of them. This practice is like many of the tourist spots in mainland China, and possibly many other countries.

Near the Cape Coast Castle, I can imagine the great scene when many fishing boats go out and come back to unload their catch at the same time. If the castle is open, that will be one of the best spots to capture some good shots.



Figure 20.1: The fishing village



Figure 20.2: Cape castle

The long beach is very nice. I can easily spend several hours watching the wave and the sky. Some fishermen often set their nets there and harvest the fish near the sunset. That scene will make a great picture.

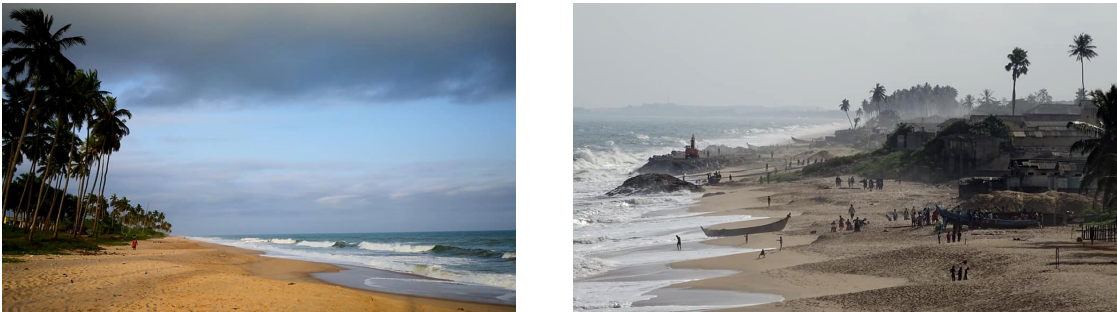


Figure 20.3: The “long” beach

Definitely spending one or two days at Elmina Castle. It is just 20 minutes away (by car) from the Cape Coast Castle. It was a very important castle historically. The Portuguese built it. From 1500s till the end of slavery trade, it was taken over by the Dutch and then British. It is a place of pilgrimage for many African Americans seeking to connect with their long lost heritage. Near the castle, I can imagine a great sunset view. (There are several other forts in town, but only if you have time for it.)

# Twenty-one

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## Shea butter

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I was offered the fruits. The skin was green in color. To my unfamiliar eyes, it did not look ripe to eat. Peel open the skin, you will see a yellowish green meat. You do not chew on the whole thing. You want to avoid the big seed inside. The meat is sweet and has a durian-like texture but does not smell like durian. It is a perfect snack for kids.



(a) Climbing up the Shea tree



(b) The green fruits

Figure 21.1: Shea tree and its fruits

In the little town we visited, Shea trees are found everywhere. Thus, it is not uncommon to see kids throwing object at a Shea tree. The hope was that some fruits would fall off. Some would even be more aggressive to climb up the tree for

the fruits.



Figure 21.2: Shea seeds

Kids eat the meat and throw away the seed. They may know the value of the seed but they never care to keep. Some people will collect the seeds, sundry them, and later sell them to some merchants. The seed can be used to make Shea butter. Shea butter is widely used in cosmetics as a moisturizer, salve or lotion. Expensive stuff!



# Twenty-two

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## John, the night guard

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Other than me, none of our team members seemed to notice his presence, not to mention talking to him – John.

John was always around at night. The gate of Awusi Lodge (our hotel) would close at night. He would sleep near the gate, sometimes at the bench right next to the little hut next to the gate, sometimes on the ground at the hotel's front porch (when the chance of rain is high).

I woke up early, usually at six. After my exercise routine, breakfast was usually not yet ready. I would then sit at the front porch, enjoy a cup of tea, and check my messages on my mobile phone. John was there every day to greet me.

I wanted to go out at night. I consulted him whether it was safe to do so. He told me: “Before ten, it is OK. After ten, you'd better be careful.”

He lived about an hour from the hotel by bicycle. He would go home during the day to help with farming and stay at the hotel as a guard at night.

His bicycle was made in China. He had modified the backseat so that it would become sturdy enough to carry people and goods. One day, he asked me whether I could bring him a bicycle from Hong Kong if I ever come again. He did not know the transportation of the bicycle can cost a lot of money. After I explained to him the cost of doing, he did not insist. Nevertheless,



Figure 22.1: John

he did ask me whether I could give him my shoes. I said no and he did not pursue.

Before I left, I asked him for an address so that I could sent him a picture. He was excited. He then disappeared for an hour and found a piece of paper with his address on. Yes, I sent him the pictures as I returned to Hong Kong. As the address looks incomplete to my unfamiliar eyes, I am not sure if he will receive them though.

# Twenty-three

## Not-so-hot Sawla

Closer to the equator than Hong Kong, Ghana must be hot! Very hot! Much hotter than Hong Kong! As a part of Ghana that is closer to the equator than most Ghana cities, Sawla must be even hotter.

Naturally, the hot weather concerned most of us. In Hong Kong, most of us turned on our air conditioners during summer nights. Can we sleep without air conditioning in Sawla? What if there is no air conditioning in the hotel? And, of course, as for any traveller, we must also know how the weather is like to pack our clothes.

Weather check! On my Ghana trip, we will stay at Sawla, not Accra (Accra is the capitol of Ghana). Sawla is 12 hours north (by car) of Accra and is closer to the equator. As an inland, there is a bigger variation in temperature. While the day temperature can be 35 Celsius, it would cool to 24 Celsius at night. Relative humidity would be at a cozy 60% at night. This is the kind of temperature and humidity that I can easily sleep well without air conditioners!

In stark contrast, because of their proximity to the sea, the variation of temperature is smaller in both Hong Kong and Accra. Temperature is usually around 26 Celsius at night and humidity is around 90%. Weather wise, I would rather spend my summer in Sawla!

It turned out that our hotel had only six rooms with air-conditioners. As most of us would like to enjoy a nap in the hot afternoon, air-conditioning seemed important. Consequently, we chose to squeeze fifteen of us in six rooms.

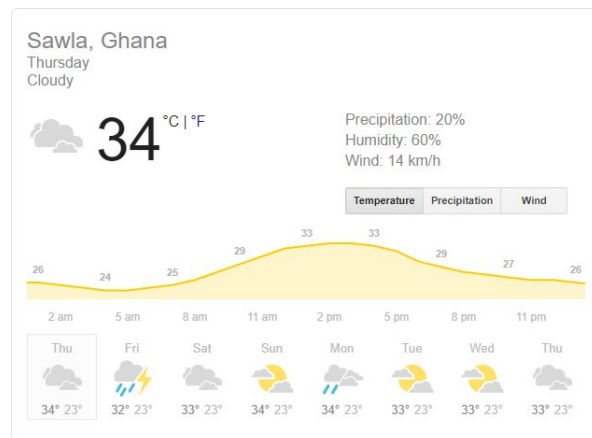


Figure 23.1: Weather of Sawla around May 30

# *Twenty-four*

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## Obroni, sifu, pictures

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Foreigners were rarely seen in Sawla. During our stay, we seemed to be the only foreigners in town. Kids seemed fascinated by our presence. They were all friendly. Most of them liked to be taken pictures. When we tried to take pictures with a few, often many others would join. We were never asked to give them the printed pictures. They simply enjoyed the moment.



Figure 24.1: It was initially a few, but soon became a crowd.



Figure 24.2: Primary school students fighting for picture

When there was not much to do (usually in the afternoon), I often sat at the front porch to check email and to write journals. Kids passing by often looked at me through the fences. They shouted “obroni” (i.e., foreigner or white person), sometime “sifu” (i.e., master). Sifu, as I found out later, was due to a TV series imported from Hong Kong – “Journey to the West”, based on the novel of the same name.<sup>1</sup> Most Ghana people grew up watching it.

One day when I was sitting in the front porch, two groups of three stopped by to say HI at different times. One group of girls and one group of boys. I took the chance to interview them. The three girls were twelve in primary five, eleven in primary three, and six in primary one. The two elder ones aimed to become doctors. The three young boys were brothers, the fourteen in secondary one and wanted to become a lawyer, the thirteen in primary six and wanted to become an accountant, the twelve in primary six and would like to become a doctor.

I asked them about their family structure. I was told that there were 15 kids in the family of the three boys. From the same father but three different mothers. Although polygamy is illegal in Ghana, it is obviously still in practice.

<sup>1</sup>The novel is story about a Tang dynasty Buddhist monk who traveled to the "Western Regions" to obtain Buddhist sacred texts. In the process, he went through many trials and much suffering and each time were saved by his three disciples . These three disciples were Sun Wukong who was a money king, Zhu Bajie who was a pig, and Sha Wujing who was river ogre. They agreed to help the monk as an atonement for their sins.



Figure 24.3: My little friends

This was the kind of informal social interview I often did in Sawla.

# Twenty-five

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## Peaceful relationship between Muslims and Christians

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About seventy percent of Ghanaians are Christians, twenty percent Muslims. As we can imagine, this religion mix and its regional distribution are a result of trade relationship with and occupation by other countries in the past few centuries. Portuguese occupied the southern part of Ghana in the fifteenth century, followed by many other western countries such as Danes, Dutch, Germans, Swedes and British. Before its independence in 1957, Ghana (what was known as the Gold Coast) was a British Colony.



(a) A church



(b) A mosque at the major road junction

Figure 25.1: Churches and mosques are everywhere

In Sawla, the northern part of Ghana, there might be less Christians and more Muslims. Nevertheless, churches and mosques were seen everywhere. In walking distance, I could easily found several churches and mosques. Unlike the conflicts seen in the other parts of the world, here, Christians and Muslims lived peacefully with each other.

Churches are no stranger to me because I spent six years in a Christian school (Lutheran). Mosques, I have never been to one. I knew little about Muslim.

We could feel a bigger presence of Muslim in Sawla because I always heard loudspeakers calling for prayers by Muslims every day near sunset (but not at other times of the day). There was a public holiday celebrating a Muslim festival during our stay. June 5, Eid al-Fitr or the “Festival of Breaking the Fast”.

Salat al-fajr:	dawn, before sunrise
Salat al-zuhr:	midday, after the sun passes its highest
Salat al-’asr:	the late part of the afternoon
Salat al-maghrib:	just after sunset
Salat al-’isha:	between sunset and midnight

Table 25.1: Muslims pray at five set times of day

I missed this golden opportunity. As there were no teaching on June 5, everyone was relaxing. I woke up in the usual 6AM, did my exercise routine, and had breakfast at around 7:30AM. It was only when I got too bored and walked outside the front gate of the hotel. I saw a congregation, almost all dressed in white. As I found out very soon, the congregation had just ended. I only managed to take a picture of the congregation at a distance, and later a group of visitors passing by our hotel.

If I had paid more attention, I would ask some local volunteers to go out to observe the congregation and hence to know more about the practice and belief of Muslims.



(a) The congregation



(b) Several visitors after the congregation

Figure 25.2: Eid al-Fitr or the “Festival of Breaking the Fast”



# Twenty-six

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## Food

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The taste of food are very different from ours.<sup>1</sup>



(a) Millet-Ginger Porridge

(b) Yam

Figure 26.1: Local food

We did not have much chance to try the real local food. Occasionally, we had yam for lunch and dinner. But, Millet-Ginger Porridge was one of my favorites. It was so good that I ate two cups for breakfast, in addition to peanut butter on a thick slice of bread I already had. I asked the locals how they would eat this. I was recommended to add sugar to the porridge and stir it well. I added 3 spoonful of sugar to my medium size cup. Taste a little bit of sweet, a little bit of sour and a little

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<sup>1</sup>In case you want to try, there is in fact a restaurant in Tsim Sha Tsui Chungking Mansion specialized in Ghana food.

bit of ginger. In fact, that ginger taste is rather strong. Aside from the ginger taste, it really tasted like strawberry or some kind of sour-taste fruits. I was told later that the sour taste came from the fermentation of the millet. Yummy! Apparently, no one else in my volunteer team appreciated the porridge. So, I hesitated to ask the cook to prepare porridge just for me.

Hearing my favorable recommendation, another volunteer rushed for big bowl, without adding any sugar. After eating the first spoonful, he quitted. I wish, as for all new dishes, he had first try a small amount instead of a big bowl and first asked for recommendation on the best way to eat the food from some experts. A lesson learned!

About food in Sawla, I did hold a different opinion from my team members. I thought most of the food were reasonable. What I did not like was the lack of vegetables and fruits. We had watermelons and mangoes but we would love to have a bigger portion.

One day, I went to the market and try to see what was available there. Water melons, mangoes are readily available. Vegetables? Not much. Meat? Not much.

But there was okra and some small squash. I like okra. One cedi per handful. So, I bought four handfuls. I instructed the cook to wash it and boil it for two minutes. It tasted just like the one I had in Hong Kong.



Figure 26.2: Vegetables from the local market

How about meat? There were stalls selling meat but if you see them, you would not want to buy them. They were covered by flies!

# Twenty-seven

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## English as a national language

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Checked before we went to Ghana. English is the national language. Therefore, I thought I would have no problem in communicating with the locals.

My experience was vastly different. In the remote village we conducted hepatitis B screening, essentially none of villagers spoke English. In the marketplace of Sawla, some could speak English, some could not. Notably, the younger generation could, the older generation could not.

Indeed, Ghana is a country with more than seventy ethnic groups. Each group has its own distinct language. Yes, English is called the official language because British ruled the country for almost 100 years and had coerced the use of English. Nevertheless, nowadays, eleven languages have the status of government-sponsored languages while Akan ethnic languages are the most spoken:

Akan ethnic languages	Mole-Dagbani ethnic languages	Others
Akuapem Twi	Dagaare	Ewe
Asante Twi	Dagbanli	Dangme
Fante		Ga
		Nzema
		Gonja
		Kasem

Table 27.1: Languages sponsored by the Ghana government

The situation was pretty much like Hong Kong many years ago. Although English was the official language in Hong Kong, people in Hong Kong spoke Cantonese and different dialects because most of them were immigrants from different parts of mainland China. The situation was also like mainland China. Putonghua is the official language but people in different ethnicity group speak their own dialects.

In essence, in Ghana, English is better understood as a common or bridge language for the moment. More people will be able to speak English as the younger

generation are forced/encouraged to learn the language at schools, and as they find the English increasingly more important in daily communications.

## *Twenty-eight*

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### The meaning of YES

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“Yes” may not mean “Yes” at Sawla of Ghana. Here, when kids at school or on the road saw us, they often called us Obronni (white person or foreigner). I often returned with a smile or a hand wave.

Sometimes, I asked them “How old are you?” Sometimes I got “Yes” or “I am fine” as a reply. Seeing this improper reply, sometimes, I tried to guess their age “Are you 7 years old?” When the answer was “Yes”, I often would double check with a very unreasonable age “Are you 2 years old?”. If they answered “Yes”, it must be the case that they did not understand my English.

In class (primary 6), I often asked “Do you understand?” and “Okay?”. Often, I got “Yes” as an answer but in fact, they did not understand my lecture.

“Yes” is just like “I hear you.” This happens often to students who do not understand the language or have difficulty expressing themselves. I recall, I was like that many years ago. That is why it is so important for teachers to give students inclass exercises to double check their understanding.

# Twenty-nine

## Soccer

Soccer has no “boundaries” . At Sawla of Ghana, there was a soccer field next to where we stayed. Soccer is big sport there. In this soccer field, I saw training practices and games almost every day. But, look at the field, it has fuzzy boundaries. Such boundaries seemed only visible to the players, not to outsiders like me. When you look at what the players wear, it is not surprising to players wearing clothes with some Chinese characters. After all, they only need the same color to tell they are in the same team. Who cares about what Chinese characters are on the shirt!



Figure 29.1: A soccer game

# Thirty

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## Can I trust you?

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It should not surprise anyone! Wherever we go, there are bad people and there are good people!

My first encounter in Ghana, I ran into an immigration officer who asked for money. That suggested to me that corruption was common here. During the trip, we had met people who asked us to give them money (one cedis, two cedis and sometime tens of cedis). There were occasions when we felt that we were cheated by the workers we hired for toilet construction, and even the local NGO contact person. When deployed to buy some materials for the toilet construction work, some workers would like to claim for transportation expenses when in fact the store was within a walking distance. When we hired a van to take us from Accra to Sawla, we were told the cost was 4000 cedis when in fact the standard market price was 3000 cedis. Having seen all these, I became very careful about making deals with anyone. Yes, I started to develop mistrust on people in Ghana!

The morning of June 22nd, our last chance to see the downtown of Accra. We wanted to hire two taxis with the help of hotel staff. We got two cars (essentially Uber cars). One driver wanted to charge us 40 cedis and the other 50 cedis. From what we knew from Google, the trip should cost us 30 or so cedis. We felt that both were trying to overcharge us. Of course, we were given a reason – likely congestion at this hour. There was no way we could verify the congestion situation in downtown, before we actually saw it. Upon knowing our tight schedule, they tried to persuade us to hire them for the full two hours



Figure 30.1: A selfie with James

with 150 cedis each car (one of them leading the conversation and the bargaining). They would then show us around the city during these two hours.

Partly due to mistrust and partly due to the lack of cash near the end of the trip, we only chose to take a one-way trip to Accra downtown. Although we did not like it, in a sense, it was a fair deal as in the bargaining often involved in any transaction. You offer, I give you a counter-offer. You counter-offer, I counter-offer again. The process can repeat till there is a deal. You can walk away. I can walk away too. Nevertheless, we did not really had much bargaining power as we lived a little farther away from downtown and we only had two hours.

On the ride, I started to asked the driver all kind of questions on all aspects of Ghana. Simply because I like to grab all opportunities to learn about the country during this trip. Through the conversation, a trust seemed to have been established quickly. Without our demand, the driver drove us passing some of the landmarks and pointing to them. Seeing the tight schedule and the sincerity of the driver, some members reconsidered the options and would like to used the Uber car for the two hours. The driver offered to charge us only an extra of 50 cedis. We were so happy.

In addition to landmarks, we talked about everything, including his family, how much he earned, his view on the country, etc. Yes, his English was fluent and had obtained a diploma in supply chain management after completing high school. Why was he a driver then? Because most of these courses in Ghana (the diploma of supply chain management included) just teach the concepts and fail to include practicals or real world cases. Thus, jobs requiring the knowledge of the supply chain management would not be interested in hiring a newbie like him.

His name is James. We enjoyed the chat so much that I obtained his phone number for further chats over whatsapp.



## *Thirty-one*

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### KF, he was my teammate!

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I am sure students feel awkward and thus would act differently when a teacher is present in student-led activities. My best hope was that other participants would view me as a teammate – better, a valuable teammate. I could not help inviting all the team members to submit their evaluation of my presence. Only four of them contributed. The remaining ones, I would assume my participation did not strike them as much.

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#### **31.1 Lily**

I learned one thing through this Ghana trip from KF: Always be open to talk to local people. Sometimes, if you go on a trip with people from similar background, it is easy to stay inside the bubble away from local people. KF always talk with people in our lodge, in the village, in the school. From him I knew the cleaning lady in the lodge is actually the princess of a tribe nearby. From him I knew there is a security guy stay whole night to protect us. Communication is the only way to break down stereotype, We know Ghana from Internet, newspaper and TV before we come. We might think they are poor, they are lazy, they are dishonest. But those words cannot represent Ghana. Every human has a unique story. Every country has unique scenery. Put away your stereotype and be open to locals.

## **31.2 Elina**

When I first knew that KF asked to join our team, I was surprised. During the last ten years, we had never had a professor as our volunteer. All of the leaders including me, worried about whether KF could get along with other teammates. To be honest, I held a negative attitude at the beginning. When we prepared ice-breaking games for the first training, I remember I kept telling other leaders something like “I don’t think KF would like to get involved, these games might be too childish for him”, “what if he feels awkward being around by other volunteers who are less than half of his age?” Luckily, my worries were later proved to be unnecessary at all. KF turned out to be an excellent team player who got along so well with other students.

In our team, KF played a unique and irreplaceable role. Firstly, he was our brilliant diplomat. He always tried to talk to the locals we met in Ghana, no matter it is our partners from the local NGO, government officials, drivers or primary school teachers. From his interviewees, he smartly collected important information that could contribute to our trip or our understanding of the development of Ghana. What’s more, he was the optimist in our team. He was the only member that had never complained about food quality, and he could always find himself a little pleasure and enjoyment in the daily activities that may seem to become dull over time. Additionally, he was also an active and wise adviser. As the only non-student volunteer in our team, he usually offer us with some great suggestions and insights from a perspective of an industry insider. For example, he generously shared his own working experience with our volunteers to help them improve their teaching skills. With his assistance, we managed to adapt to our teaching job soon. Most importantly, he was such a hard worker. During this trip, I was his teaching assistant. Therefore, I was privileged to witness every class he taught. As I noticed, he always arrived at school as early as possible, even when he did not need to. His back was always sweaty because he spared no effort to deliver what he had carefully prepared for to the students. In the deep of my heart, I was so glad that we had welcomed KF as our volunteer.

Without KF, we would not have had such a wonderful service trip. As a leader, I felt extremely grateful for everything KF contributed to our Go2Africa project this year.

### **31.3 Liheng**

Having a professor like KF in our team is like finding an unexpected delicious strawberry on the chocolate cake you ordered. I lived with KF together during this programme and had learnt a lot from him. Though he let us regard him as our same-aged people, this was hard. From my perspective, he was half-teacher half-father. I enjoyed the chatting between us before good-night from which I understood more about time, HK and many other small things. KF is good at pointing out the ideas that are overlooked by people of my age and help you think deeper. He had many impressive and useful advice about our programme and to me, it was a pity that he chose not to share that immediately with us. I understand that he has his own reason like trying not to interrupt us but with his suggestion, we may have avoided many mistakes. Sometimes he would become a little annoyed/angry when we did immature things or acted without thinking but he also chose to bear that in his heart. I was actually willing to hear advice from him so I hope KF can “interrupt” more afterwards.

### 31.4 Xiaoyu

It's my pleasure to meet KF, an experienced teacher, and an accessible friend all along the journey.

KF looked quite abnormal when he first joined the BTP G2A team. He was the coordinator of Introductory Microeconomics which I took right before the summer. Although I didn't take his subclass, I had long heard of his name. To be frank, I was a little worried that he might not fit in a group whose average age is 20.

When I gradually got along with KF, it turned out that my worry is a waste of energy. KF is a responsible teammate and always ready to help. He is more energetic than most of us during activities, contributing to both teaching team and tech team. He was humorous, and his funny jokes always brought joy to everyone. He was easy to approach and got along well with local people (that's why we called KF our "diplomat"). He took things as they were. Even facing terrible food like "fufu" and cassava, he could also enjoy his meal. KF was in charge of the primary school. I had been there to help. Kids were energetic, sometimes naughty. Nevertheless, KF taught them with patience and inculcation.

I still remember that noon when everyone was waiting for the "best" lunch (potato chips with ketchup). I started a "deliberate" conversation with KF in the courtyard. For the very first year in HKU, I could say that I was not satisfied with where I reached. So I was quite frustrated and confused. I had no idea what university life meant to me. KF was rather a friend than a teacher when sharing his university life story. He talked about it was the attitude that divided students in the same university into different levels. When he knew that I was going to the Philippines, he suggested that I could write a report on the local economy and culture. I didn't figure out the exact meaning of university via the short talk, but I found a direction to struggle for.

I appreciate KF's presence in this young team. Before our departure, he mentioned that he was about to retire and wanted to make full use of the rest time with students. His passion infects us and his wisdom guide we youth. There were many interesting clashes between two different ages and concepts. It's my pleasure to meet a friend and professor like KF. If there will be next journey with KF, whether going back to Ghana or heading to somewhere else, I will always raise my hand and say "I'm in."

## *Thirty-two*

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### Epilogue: Expect the Unexpected

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Because the cost of sending a team over to Ghana to conduct a preliminary investigation is formidable, we can only rely on our contact in Ghana to do most of the preliminary investigation. A lot of things seemed up in the air till the last minute.

Before we arrive our destination, we were not sure which school, which grade and which subject we would teach. We prepared some lesson plans we would like to teach if we had time to cover them. I developed a lesson plan on game theory. Other developed plans to cover Chinese culture and so on.

We knew that we were going to bring along the Hepatitis B testing kits and help with the screening in some villages. Which villages? Which part of the screening could we help? Distributing pamphlets to invite villagers to come for the screening? Explaining to villagers how to prevent or treat Hepatitis B?

I was confused as a participant. I would assume the team leaders were not comfortable either.

I have to say that the operation was relatively unorganized – at least to a person who has more experience in organizing activities. Of course, I understand that everyone has their own ways and logic of doing things.

We had six training sessions in total. We had numerous decisions to make. When to meet for the training? I wanted to attend all meetings but most meetings were announced a couple days earlier. Such short announcements forced me to reschedule some of my other commitments, sometimes in a rush. If I were to organize it, I would have pre-announced all the dates of the meetings so that rescheduling of prior commitments need not be done in a rush.

Why did I not tell them my feelings? Because I had promised myself to behave as an ordinary participant and as an observer. I would not want to be the one raising the issues.

Enduring all these, I have learned to expect the unexpected from day one.

The journey was such an interesting new experience!

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# Appendix

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This memoir will not be complete without a proper introduction of Beyond the Pivot, its Go2Africa project, and an overview of Ghana. Special thank to Ice for preparing this appendix.

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## **Beyond the Pivot**

BTP Beyond the Pivot, HKU (abbreviated as “BTP”) is a charity organization registered with Hong Kong government.

Founded ten years ago, BTP has been zealously organizing voluntary supporting education as well as other meaningful events for HKU students.

By far, BTP has initiated six projects. With the assistance and support from HKU CEDARS and Service 100, BTP leaders and volunteers have been involved in teaching and volunteering activities in Africa and China (Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Hainan, Sichuan) in the past ten years. Meanwhile, our Home Kong team stays in Hong Kong and interact with asylum seekers and local minority youth.

We have established remarkable friendship with students, local communities, partner organizations and volunteers from the above places after a decade of efforts. On top of that, BTP also organized other activities with NGOs such as “struggle for survival”, which allows participants to experience an “extremely impoverished day” for HKU students.

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## **Go2Africa**

Go2Africa is an overseas project founded in 2009 by HKU Beyond the Pivot. During the past ten years, we have dedicated our efforts to providing volunteering teaching,

latrine construction and hepatitis B screening. We believe, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main.”

We have three major programs:

**1. Voluntary Teaching**

The program aims at providing quality voluntary teaching to Ghana students from local primary schools and secondary schools. Each year, we would design our courses that match with the syllabus of the targeted school. The syllabus would cover multiple subjects like English, mathematics, and science. At the same time, we will also prepare special courses, for example, art crafts class, in order to enrich students' learning experiences and broaden their horizons.

**2. Latrine Construction**

Over the past 9 years, G2A has been working to build public health facilities for residents in many parts of Ghana. More than 12 latrines have been built in Hain, Jansa and other places. We hope to improve the health conditions of local communities and lower the morbidity of many diseases through this project. In 2019, G2A will continue to work with Wang Weijen Architecture and ecological dry toilet company Dehtlet to design a better latrine model and turn it into reality with our own hands.

**3. Hepatitis B screening**

Our project has been promoting health awareness in the local community by introducing the basic knowledge about the spread of fecal-oral diseases, and by popularizing health education among local students and children. According to feedback from previous years, the hepatitis B screening workshop has made great achievements in the local community. This year, G2A will continue to promote this project and provide test results to the local residents and medical staffs to facilitate post-epidemic prevention and treatment.

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## **The pre-trip preparation of Go2Africa**

### **Recruitment**

The promotion for recruitment started from the second term. We released recruiting announcement on social platforms, put up posters on the campus billboards and joined the briefing sessions held by BTP. The number of applicants increased but there were few people applying for the technical team since we expected them to

have basic construction knowledge. Thus, we prepared some brochures and videos about the latrine designed last year and went into the architecture and civil engineer lectures to promote our project.



Figure 1: The leaders are discussing about the promotion of the program

After the application period, we held two rounds of interviews. The first was individual interview and we asked about the interviewees' understanding of voluntary projects and their reactions to various troubles that we might come across during the trip. For the second round, we divided the interviewees into two groups and asked them to complete some tasks, including the preparation of teaching plans and the proposals for a healthcare workshop. Both groups also had to present their work and gave evaluation. Finally, we recruited three volunteers for the technical team and seven for the regular team.

## **Training**

Training is quite critical in the pre-trip stage. It is aimed to let all volunteers get familiar with each other in a short time and help them get ready for the coming trip to Ghana. So, for both technical and regular team, we organized one training for ice-breaking, one for health lecture and one for pre-trip briefing. Taken that the two teams bear different duties, we also held three specific training sessions. For the technical team, the training sessions focused on the design of the latrine while the regular team needed to prepare for the teaching.

In the first training, we introduced the whole program in detail at the beginning. Next, all volunteers introduced themselves and tried to remember everyone's name during a game. Then, we designed a small quiz for them to know more about the nature and culture of Ghana. In the school in Sawla, our volunteers need to cover



the main courses and offer some feature classes. Since we did not have much information about the main subjects in Ghana, we could only pay more attention to the feature class before the trip. So, from the second training, the regular team started think about what they want to teach and write down the proposals as well as the detailed plan. Everyone would have 15 minutes to practice teaching. We also invited a volunteer of last year to give a demonstration and talk about her experience. In fact, the real situation in Sawla is different from our expectation and our preparation was inadequate.



Figure 2: One of our volunteers is presenting her class



Figure 3: The Regular team evaluated the class design and way of teaching

As for the technical team, they first reviewed researchers on the context of the site and some basic design ideas. The leader then assigned the drawing tasks to the volunteers. After finishing the original drawing, they invited the tech leader of last year to review the design and discuss the construction technique together. On the fourth training, they presented the first version to our partner and added the idea of eco-toilet. The second version was reviewed on the fifth training and all members met Prof Wang Wei Jen to improve the design. Eventually, after some little modification, the design was finalized and they could make the budget, the purchasing list and the timeline of construction accordingly.



Figure 4: The Tech team had a meeting with our partner Mr. Lin

On the second general training, we invited a professional guest speaker to deliver a speech about health issue and medical care of the situation in Ghana. Africa is unfamiliar to us and we have heard much negative news about that land like the severe sanitation problem and bad social security. The professor explained the prevalence, different causes and the infection mechanism and of common diseases. She also gave us some practical tips on how to protect ourselves and deal with emergencies.



Figure 5: Professor Ria delivered the lecture about diseases in Ghana.

### **Flight tickets and visa**

We booked the flight of Emirates Airline and chose to transfer in Dubai, which is a common choice of the flight from Hong Kong to the city in Africa. As for the visa, we can apply for it in either Hong Kong or Beijing. The expense of the first choice is much higher (the price in Hong Kong is 1880hkd for student and 2080hkd for adult while in Beijing, the price is only 720rmb for student and 960rmb for adult) but meanwhile the requirements of documents are fewer and the procedure would be more convenient. Last year, they decided to go to Beijing because of the lower price but they also came across a problem that the passport of one volunteer was missing. Fortunately, one of the team leaders lived in Beijing and his parents helped them deal with the following procedure. This year, none of us was available to visit Beijing but we still thought the price in Hong Kong was unreasonable. So, Elina, who was in charge of the visa application, wrote a letter to the Embassy of Ghana in Beijing and mentioned our doubt of the expense. Finally, the office in Hong Kong replied us and lowered the price per person from 1880hkd to 1200hkd.

### **Health consultation**

As mentioned above, the poor sanitary condition is a serious issue in Ghana and many of us worried about it. Therefore, we paid much attention on healthy issue before leaving. In addition to the lecture, we also visited the Travel Health Service Department of Health to get vaccination and consult the expert there. All volunteers are required to inject the vaccines for yellow fever, typhoid fever and meningococ-

cal. And it is recommended to add the Hepatitis-A and tetanus vaccines in case of accidental injuries. Also, in order to prevent malaria, which is very prevalent in Ghana, we need to take medicine every day and be careful of mosquito bites.

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## **An overview of Ghana**

In 1957 Ghana became the first African country to achieve independence from a European colonial power. Today, at the end of 2018, the GDP of Ghana becomes GHS256.6bn and it makes this country one of the year's fastest-growing economy in the world. In the past, the economy of the country relied much on the traditional resources and now it has to ensure the widest benefit from the expansion since it is growing fast and the urbanized population is increasing. Since our program focuses on the education and health issue in Ghana, here we will also give a brief introduction of these two parts.

### **Education**

Starting from the colonial time, education in Ghana became formal. The European colonists built schools and primary education system in this land. However, it was limited to the privileged. After independence, the country noticed the significance of education to its future and development.

The current educational system is divided into three stages. First, the "Basic Education" is free and compulsory. Kindergarten, primary school and junior high school are included in this stage. Second, the "secondary cycle" begins from the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Students who have passed the exam can choose to enter either general or vocational senior high school. Those who want to pursue further education need to join the West African Secondary School Certificate Examination. Third, "Tertiary Education" consists of the academic university and Polytechnics which provides vocational training of a higher level. In general, a person needs twenty years to finish the education from kindergarten up to undergraduates.

In recent years, the government has prioritized the reform of education to improve the access at all levels of the system. The state introduced its Free Senior High School policy, which provides free tuition at all public secondary schools. Improving learning outcomes and fulfilling demand in the job market are other goals of the government. The authorities have encouraged investment in infrastructure and training of certain skills.

This year, we taught the students from grade 5 of primary school to grade 2 of junior high school in Sawla. Every day, the class starts at 7:30 and ends at 13:30 or 12:00 and pupils will have lunch at school. The subjects include English, French, mathematics, integrated science, pre-technical skills and moral education. The schools are lack of textbooks-usually, three students share one book and they can only use it at school-and the daily schedule is quite chaotic. There is only one teacher in charge of all subjects for each class in the primary school and they do not have a fixed timetable.

### **Health and sanitation**

The demand for specialized health services and a healthcare system with a wider coverage increases in Ghana. How to deal with non-communicable diseases and the lack of medical professionals is also a problem. The Ghanaian government covers most health care for the citizens, but the care system varies from urban area to rural area. The healthcare system involves five levels and the Health Post is the first level of primary care in rural areas. There is often no modern health care in villages. Although those villages have clinics and pharmacies, many local people still rely on traditional African medicine.

G2A started to hold hepatitis B screening workshop from 2018. Hepatitis B is one of the most prevalent diseases in Ghana. It is a potentially life-threatening liver infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. It is a serious global health problem. It can cause chronic infections, and patients are at high risk of dying from cirrhosis and liver cancer. According to a survey by the World Health Organization, the African region is one of the regions with the highest rate of hepatitis B infection, and the adult oral infection rate is 6.1%. In resource-constrained environments, it is difficult to obtain hepatitis B diagnosis and treatment for many people. In 2015, 9% of the 257 million people infected with hepatitis B virus were aware of their diagnosis. Among the patients diagnosed, the global treatment coverage rate is only 8%. Many people get diagnosed in the late stages of liver disease.

G2A decided to build public latrine because the sanitary environment in Ghana is not good. According to World Bank data, the use of basic sanitation in Ghana has been much lower than the world average in the past decade or so, and even the average level in sub-Saharan Africa (the region where Ghana is located) is quite different. Its own progress from 11% to 14% from 2009 to 2015 is not optimistic.