

By Dexter Yuen Heung Fan
School: Diocesan Boys' School

Poverty—from an apple to an alley

If a picture paints a thousand words, then a photo about poverty paints a social phenomenon. Stefen Chow's portfolio tackles the commonly asked question: what does it mean to be poor? He explores the condition of being poor by visualizing how much an impoverished man could buy in a day. One photo caught my attention particularly—the photo that depicts an array of apples on a newspaper. The amount of apples serves as an indication of how much a poor man could purchase in a day. It is depressing to imagine how he can only afford twenty apples a day, when an apple costs only a few dollars. As I looked at the picture as a whole, I realized that the apples are arranged in an imperfect rectangle. What does it miss out? An apple at the bottom right corner. Is the missing apple the 'bad apple'? Does the 'bad apple' refer to the poor who are often neglected by society? Or more precisely, does it refer to the people the society often condemns for "milking" the welfare system? We never know. And this is what makes photography such an amazing art: it leaves the viewers with their own interpretation. I do not blame you for not seeing the missing apple. It is common to accept what is presented to us, similar to how we only see twenty apples in the photo. Hong Kong, dubbed the East Pearl by the press and media, comes across as a prosperous and flourish place. But it is not, as this photo taught me. I then asked myself: are there serious issues that I neglect every day? As a child born in a middle-class family, I understand the situation of poverty in my city purely theoretically, presented in neat pages of graphs and figures. Writing an essay about poverty is definitely not an effortless task for me. I came up with several drafts as I brainstormed, but none of these drafts are satisfactory in terms of their depth.

I therefore decided to change my way of seeing poverty. My school is situated in the district of Mong Kok, one of the most crowded districts on this planet. Normally, after-school, I leave for the nearest underground station by taking the main street. This time, I want to see the issue of poverty in another light. Therefore, instead of going on the main street crowded with people and shops, I go through the alleys. What I see clashes harshly with my expectations. In the alley, I see a hunchbacked old man picking up discarded cardboard and also a homeless man resting on the floor with his waste-paper. More surprisingly, I even see a woman taking care of her seven-year-old child, who wears a dirty school uniform. The journey through the alley struck me deep in my heart, for it typifies the poverty problem in Hong Kong—poverty among the elderly, the housing problem and the discriminative educational system. These are the reasons why the impoverished people stay in the alley infinitely and desperately. And now, viewed as an eyesore, they hide in the alleys, out of the sight of pedestrians.

This is how our society works: when you are in the trough of your life, you are hidden away. Although these individuals are unseen by the public, the difficulties they face remain and exist. They are the missing apples. In Chow's work, they are missing because of our fixation towards the twenty fresh apples and the newspaper beneath, which features the advertisement of a tourist agency and an auction for jewelery. Our materialism and consumerism blinds us from the alleys and corners, and as an unfortunate result, the most serious issues at hand. The so-called civil society, to a large extent, lacks empathy and compassion for the underprivileged, especially those who are suffering in poverty. But are these missing apples really the misfits that we can ignore and neglect? Absolutely not. These missing apples are an inseparable part of our society. Without these apples filling the gap, the rectangle is imperfect, just as how our current society is incomplete. The old man I saw in the alley reflects how previous generations' economic contributions are not rewarded, while the homeless woman and her son reflect a desperate yet hopeful attempt to move up the social ranks through education and hard work. As the person who is writing the essay on a computer, I humbly urge you, my dear reader, who is probably reading this essay in comfort, to address and accept the missing apple. The core of a society is not determined by the majority of which it is composed, but by the minority it cares about. In the photo, we cannot transform the missing 'rotten apple' into a fresh one, nor could we select a newspaper page without a single advertisement on it. But in the alley of Mong Kok, we can change the situation. We could bring three meals a day for the old man, a flat for the homeless and a tutor for the child. But most importantly, we need to change our attitude: we must open our eyes and confront these problems. As a society, we can make a difference, by taking one step further to see what is usually 'unseen'. When the person who writes this essay dares to take the road not taken, the alley, would you like to join me and walk together?