

二. It hit me as soon as I stepped off the bus. The putrid, rotting stench of dead fish nearly bowled me over, and threatened to render me unconscious. It was the smell of devastation, destruction and Typhoon Morakot. I was in Jiadong, a seaside town in Pingdong, and it was just ten days after Morakot had wreaked havoc in southern Taiwan. I had come as a volunteer with great ambitions: I envisioned myself salvaging homes for the victims of the storm and bringing comfort to the homeless. The mere smell of the place not only wiped these glowing images from my mind, but also placed doubt in my naïve heart as I gazed at the foul-smelling mud piled as high as my waist by the road. I felt defeated. What could I, a sixteen year-old slip of a girl, hope to accomplish against such forces of nature?

I spent the rest of the day with a mask strapped over my face, my muscles screaming in protest as I hauled bucket after bucket of stinking mud out of a butcher's house. More than once I considered conceding defeat. I was covered in filth from head to foot and my spine was threatening to snap in two any moment, yet the overwhelming smell of decaying fish swept ashore by the typhoon showed no sign of letting up. The sheer strength in the faces of the local people kept me going. They showed no emotion as we threw out their muddied belongings, and they toiled alongside us without a word of complaint. If this was my house, I remember thinking, I would probably throw my shovel away, sit down on the ground and bawl my misery to the heavens. The most unforgettable smell I have ever inhaled is the terrible smell of the aftermath of Typhoon Morakot. This is only partly because it is the worst smell I have ever smelt. It is unforgettable because the strength and the dignity of the people I met in Jiadong are engraved in my mind along with the smell there, and I hope that if I ever have the misfortune of encountering that stench again, I can show the same fortitude and bravery in the face of adversity.