

This summer, I went to Dali, Yunnan Province, China for my Leadership in Action Project. Although I did not go abroad, compared Dali with my hometown Hong Kong, this experience still felt very cross-cultural. Dali is always seen as a tourist city, as it is surrounded with amazing scenery of Cangshan mountain and Erhai Lake, but I was amazed that this place exists in a different temporal dimension. It is because Dali is well known for its minority cultures, especially the Bai ethnic minority. Living there showed me it's more like a big village than a city. The Bai people have been there for centuries, and their culture is everywhere.

At the Dali Wamao Clay Workshop, I learn and support the heritage of *Wamao*, which is a traditional clay roof decoration that local Bai people believe protects the house and brings good luck. At first, I was terrible at it. I kept rushing through each step. When I kneaded the clay too fast, it would crack. When I tried to shape it quickly, pieces would break off. Later, artisans kept telling me “slow is fast”. I started to realise that every step, preparing the clay, shaping, painting all required me to slow down and take my time. At first, this slower pace made me uncomfortable as this is hard for me. In Hong Kong, everything is about efficiency and speed. But here, I had to learn that some things can't be rushed. When I finally slowed down, everything worked better. The clay stayed smooth, the shapes held together, even the painting looked cleaner and smoother. Working with clay taught me that the most important part wasn't making a perfect thing quickly, but it was learning to pay attention to each step along the way.

Living in Xizhou town also made me think differently about the concept of “community”. Life there is centred around the weekly market, where people buy, sell, chat, and exchange stories. On weekends I often visited the market and spoke with local elders. These simple conversations gave me a sense of a grounded way of living. These weren't dramatic stories, but there was something peaceful about how they talked about their lives. Happiness comes from daily routines and familiarity. This was completely different from the restless energy I was used to in Hong Kong. The Bai people were like their environment, very calm, gentle, and confident. Being in this atmosphere felt like stepping into a kind of utopia.

I gradually realized that Wamao is much more than roof decoration. It symbolises deep meaning for Bai people, like protection, good fortune, connection to family and nature. These clay cats appear at life's important moments such as new houses, festivals, weddings. Working with something so meaningful taught me patience in a way I'd never experienced before. In Hong Kong, I always felt like I needed to be doing something, achieving something, moving toward the next goal. But making Wamao showed me there's real value in slowing down and taking time with things.