

Biying's Story

Interview and story written with michelle liu



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou_

Biying is a frontline worker at a restaurant who will be entering university in September.

Biying immigrated with her family to Toronto from Guangzhou 4 years ago. She works part-time as a waitress at a small sushi restaurant in Scarborough, where she started about a month before the arrival of COVID-19's third wave. Biying, who is now 19, typically works 5-hour shifts 4 days a week and devotes her evenings to night school, while awaiting confirmations of acceptance from Universities for the coming Fall.

Pandemic restaurant work presents a dilemma for many workers in the food service industry. Like many working-class jobs, food service work now requires every individual worker to carefully weigh risk and wage. With take-out orders making up the bulk of what Biying does, and a reduction in overall restaurant patronage, her income from tips—an important supplement to minimum wage (and often below) that many food industry workers rely on—has nearly disappeared.

At the same time, Biying is relieved that fewer people in the restaurant also means a lower risk of workplace outbreaks and a diminished chance of catching COVID-19.

Although the impact of the pandemic on her personal life has not been unmanageable, Biying relates that worries of contracting COVID-19 and exposing her family to the highly contagious and deadly virus remain constant. While PPE is provided at work, and the number of employees per shift at the small restaurant rarely exceeds 2-3 people, there are nevertheless moments of uncertainty around COVID safety in the day-to-day motions of work, transit, home and school. Without a driver's licence and access to a car, Biying primarily relies on TTC and carpooling for her commute to and from work.

Biying finished her last semester of high school as the pandemic began nearly a year ago. Like many young people living and learning during the pandemic, suspension, missed birthday celebrations and remote hangouts on WeChat became the norm.

In February, before the first wave began in the Greater Toronto Area, she made the decision to quit her part-time job at a restaurant to focus her energy on her studies. Biying made many plans for her much-anticipated post-graduation year, a valuable gap year she

had planned for herself between high school and university. She was looking forward to the time to reflect, gain new life experiences and work opportunities in her anticipated field. She had planned on getting her driver's license, working at a summer camp and gaining hands-on experiences related to teaching.

The impacts of the pandemic on high school and post-secondary students have often been invisible, and its effects are not always easily measured. When the pandemic hit and Biying found herself without a job, the emergency relief programs (CERB, CESB and CRB) left her and numerous workers like her—in industries where pay in cash is common—behind.

Despite having worked in the restaurant industry from the middle of grade 11 to the middle of grade 12, she was disqualified from accessing the emergency assistance programs meant to lessen the damage of the pandemic and its accompanying economic crisis.

While some students, youth and workers were able to find short-term relief through the much-needed emergency assistance programs, there were many others who were excluded.

When asked what she thought could be done differently to better support students, Biying suggested bringing changes to OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) that can permanently broaden eligibility and increase the amount of financial aid

“While some students, youth and workers were able to find short-term relief through the much-needed emergency assistance programs, there were many others who were excluded.”

“While it is still possible to survive—and many students do find different ways support themselves, whether it’s part-time work-study programs or off-campus jobs like retail and restaurants...wouldn’t it be even better if the government can help students so that we have more time to study?”

available to students, to reflect the real costs of living and studying.

As Biying says, “while it is still possible to survive—and many students do find different ways support themselves, whether it’s part-time work-study programs or off-campus jobs like retail and restaurants...wouldn’t it be even better if the government can help students so that we have more time to study?”

Reflecting on the experiences of her friends as she considers her own post-secondary studies in September, Biying remarked that for many of her peers, the assistance they receive is simply not enough to live on—especially in a

city like Toronto where tuition and the costs of living are exceedingly high.

This insecurity is further compounded by a loss of income due to the pandemic and an increased pressure to work on the frontlines without adequate supports. A guaranteed basic income for everyone is one form of assistance Biying would support. If, she added, it also included students and helped take off some of the financial pressures to enable students to focus on their studies.

Biying’s experience of working and studying during the COVID-19 pandemic of course takes place in the context of increased Anti-Asian racism.

Fortunately, Biying has not had to experience it herself, “I feel really lucky, I’ve never seen it personally, it’s never happened to people close to me.” Despite it all, Biying remains optimistic. Although the plans she had originally made for her year-off could not be realized, she will make the best of this summer.