

Narrative Report

I write this narrative with chagrin because my experiences in mainland China, while instructive, taught me about the obstacles to international activism more than about activism itself. The obstacles I faced were more difficult to overcome because atypical pneumonia in China paralyzed the city where I was conducting my internship. However, I believe the projects I was involved in were thwarted by United States activists too ignorant of circumstances in China to be effective and the atmosphere of taboo and laziness that is what is left of Chinese communism.

My first responsibilities for the internship were to coordinate the finalization of a questionnaire about labor codes of conduct. This was rewarding in many ways because I was essentially the mediator between U.S. and Chinese activists who were in conflict with one another. The U.S. activist, a lawyer with no knowledge of conditions in mainland China, had organized the project around the idea that labor conditions in China are horrible because the Chinese do not respect the individual. He essentially believed Chinese entrepreneurs would improve the conditions of their laborers if taught the culture of individuality that U.S. corporations are known for. The Chinese activist had not confronted the U.S. activist about his views and their racist implications. Rather, she had added questions to the questionnaire that, ironically, questioned the entire concept of codes of conduct. After explaining to the U.S. activist what I believed the origin of the conflict was, he was quite admirably receptive to the idea of adjusting the questionnaire and the goals of the research project.

These earlier interactions had occurred via the internet. The Chinese activist and I arranged to meet, and I expected that, face to face and in Chinese, I might be able to draw out the ideas of the Chinese activist to harmonize our different perspectives.

At that point, knowledge of atypical pneumonia hit the papers and people panicked. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people left Beijing. Universities were quarantined and entertainment establishments were ordered to close their doors indefinitely. In this atmosphere, those who were left in Beijing locked themselves in their apartments fearing contact with the contaminated outside world. The Chinese activist I had arranged to meet canceled our interview and moved outside of Beijing.

Because I was convinced that people were overreacting, I strategized with the U.S. activist to continue with the project. We decided that I would go ahead with the interviews alone — originally, I would have conducted these with the Chinese activist. When I asked the U.S. activist for the information to contact our corporate interviewees, however, I discovered his naïveté about conditions in mainland China.

I am not certain that I can convey the frustration I felt upon hearing that this activist did not have interviews already arranged and believed I could walk cold into the offices of corporations in China and conduct interviews about their labor practices. I had expected that the Chinese activist, as a representative of the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, would have important connections that would facilitate our interviews. I had expected that the U.S. activist, as a representative of a coalition between activists and many of the corporations we were to interview, would be able to facilitate interviews. I had expected that

these two together, having organized the project before I was involved, had realistic expectations about the research environment in China and had planned accordingly.

I had to explain to this activist that the representatives of U.S. corporations in China that I would have access to were likely to be Chinese. They would have no idea what a labor code of conduct was, and they would, out of habit if not out of principle, refuse to interview with any organization they were not familiar with. This is quite apart from the fact that because labor conditions are one of the most cited criticisms of China in the international arena, entrepreneurs in China are likely to expect only headaches from questions about their labor practices.

Although the U.S. activist told me he would find contact information for interviewees, he did not. When I realized that he was not able to make connections with corporate representatives in China through his U.S. contacts, I asked for letters of introduction from those U.S. contacts, hoping that it would at least lend me credibility in China. I did not receive those either.

Without these things, I attempted to arrange interviews through my own contacts. Of course, I had difficulties, and at this point, I was hearing stories of people catching atypical pneumonia across the street from my apartment. To protect my own health, and because I thought it would be appropriate to give the U.S. activist more time to find the contact information of interviewees, I left Beijing and traveled to Britain for almost three weeks.

When I returned, although the worst of the pneumonia was over, Beijing was a village of ghosts. The air was certainly cleaner, the ordinarily omnipresent construction crews were nowhere to be found, and interviews were hard to arrange. I tried to arrange interviews through the American Chamber of Commerce and its related organizations. Out of fear of pneumonia, many of its representatives were avoiding the office. In addition, crazily, the outbreak of pneumonia had coincided with the return of many of their people to the U.S.. However, because of the pneumonia, no one was willing to return to their positions in China. Most corporations limited their business to a handful of hours a day and would not arrange meetings with anyone.

I was able to make important headway at the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. I organized a research presentation for UNIDO and later cultivated fruitful interactions with the head of that organization. I was able to interview a handful of people through connections I had outside of the corporate world. I was able to interview representatives of a computer corporation because they were equipped for teleconferencing. Eventually, the Chinese activist returned to Beijing and I was able to meet with her and interview one of her contacts. However, after these three or four months time, the Chinese activist had decided to withdraw her participation in the project. Because I doubt that the U.S. activist will be able to continue the project without her, I must regretfully report that I doubt this project will accomplish one of its goals.