RRASC Final Report

My RRASC internship consisted of seven weeks with Rights Into Action and three weeks with AIDS Orphan Salvation. My mid-term report was entirely about RIA; this report will cover the last couple weeks of my internship with RIA and the bulk of my AOS internship.

RIA

I ended my mid-term report with my health lesson in English. I soon realized that many of the staff members and teachers were not interested in having an English lesson so much as they were interested in just having a health class. The health class became a three part lesson where I talked about correct condom use, STIs, and some general hygiene. Because I had not learned a lot of the Chinese scientific and medical terminology, all the health lessons were a learning experience for me while preparing the lesson. The staff members and teachers asked me questions about HIV/AIDS, abortion, marriage, and a healthy sex life, etc. I used some of the websites from our yellow internship folder to help me better answer all the teachers’ questions. I decided to hold the health lessons only for the female staff members. I felt that the women would be more relaxed and comfortable in an all female environment. Early on, I entertained the idea of holding a separate class for the males, but I decided against it because I was not confident that the class would be fruitful for them or for me. Perhaps, if I were male, I could have led a class for them.

I mentioned before that all the staff members have some kind of disability. Lisa (not her real name) was the only staff member who came to the health lessons. By the end of each lesson, she always had extra questions to ask me, such as, a good sex life is
important, right? I had this boyfriend who wanted to do things but I didn’t let him, do you think this is why he broke up with me? Lisa is in her mid-twenties. She has never had sex and therefore, has never used a condom; she didn’t know how to use one until I demonstrated in class.

Aside from the English lessons, most of my work at RIA consisted of translation around the office, including some grant contracts needing to be translated from English to Chinese. Towards the end of my stay, a couple of the staff members attended an English speaking program in Beijing where they were not allowed to speak any Chinese. I also helped them communicate in Chinese and English with the rest of the staff. By the end of my internship with RIA, my Mandarin speaking skills had greatly improved. Some of my basic office skills improved, like typing in Chinese.

The highlights of my internship experience include spending time with the kids and parents at the end of my stay. The weather had gotten so hot that many parents stopped bringing their kids to class. Only a handful of families continued to come and I often spent the long lunch hour with them. I also participated in an outreach program that was set up by RIA volunteers to reach out to the disabled community of Hefei where I met an old grandma who can’t see or hear well. She’s not able to go out by herself, so I would spend Sundays taking her to church or just hanging out with her at the house.

AOS

While in Fuyang, AOS kept me busy for 3 weeks. I joined a group of University of Michigan students and one other Hampshire student to plan community center activities for AOS kids. I was assigned to the art group and we had to prepare an arts
and crafts lesson for 4 days out of the week. We also repainted and refurnished the foster home for the 5 AIDS orphans. Generally, all the volunteers would take turns repainting the orphan’s classroom, teaching them the ABCs, and reporting to the office for translation or teaching English work.

During the first week of this leg of my internship, I started to get a clear sense of how AOS functioned. I started understanding the meaning of MONGOs after being at AOS. This is Zhang Ying’s NGO. She runs the organization and therefore, everything needs to be run by her. Communicating clearly with everyone in the office, especially Zhang Ying, was key to keeping tensions low and spirits high. We all wanted to make the most out of the situation, but we had several miscommunications which resulted in ZY getting unhappy with the volunteers. Most of the tension was due to conflicting interests. Volunteers wanted to work with the orphans and community center kids as much as we could while, ZY wanted us to teach English a few afternoons out of the week to her friend’s children. The refurnishing and repainting of the foster home also caused some conflict because ZY felt that this wasn’t what the children needed. At first, she supported the project but as the weeks went on, she saw that we spent an ample amount of our time at the house. She told us later that they didn’t need a mural, they needed an extra caretaker; they didn’t need a new sofa or tables either, they need medicine. ZY explained that even though, it may not look like much to us, the living standards at the foster home were many times better than where the children were living before.

For a couple weekends, I was invited to accompany ZY and some other staff members to visit various rural families affected by AIDS. A trip to the city would be too expensive for them; therefore, AOS goes out to visit them. One weekend, the local
government officials had eight families go to the city hall where AOS staff members surveyed each household about their personal health and hygiene. How often do you wash your hands? How often does your child get sick? Where do you throw the garbage? AOS staff members also talked about good basic hygiene because all the kids had HIV/AIDS and needed to be especially mindful of their health. (During the conference, a couple of the fathers were smoking indoors, but no one talked about not smoking around one’s child. It’s a cultural thing.) The second weekend, we were supposed to go to another rural area to see a different group of kids, but many of the parents were fearful that neighbors would find out that their children had AIDS, so we had to visit a couple individual families and find out about their circumstances.

There were a few events that all the American volunteers were asked to attend at which I felt that my foreignness was being exploited to gain recognition for the NGO. Some of the local Fuyang volunteers came to these events as well, but were never introduced like the American volunteers. AOS’ work helps a lot of families, but this kind of administrative tactic was something that I didn’t enjoy nor want to be a part of.

Final Thoughts

I found that planning ahead was better than expecting an organization to dole out all these little tasks for you. I think it would also be beneficial for the future RRASC interns to factor some projects into their budget, i.e. buying construction paper, glue, disposable cameras etc. Even if you think you can get simple items like this, it’s difficult to find decent things, especially in a smaller city like Fuyang. I find that preparing more than necessary is a lot better than being under prepared.
All of my China-related classes helped prepare me for these past couple of months. I was always speaking and using Chinese. My Chinese government course helped me better understand a work unit and how responsibilities are distributed.

Both of the internship sites fueled my desire to continue to work with children. I’m just not sure if I want to work for an NGO in China because I still have much to learn about Chinese culture and how people do business there. I hope to continue this kind of work but not necessarily as a career.

My internship experience has been more beneficial than my initial expectations. I thought that I would be going to work and train at each NGO. I didn’t think that things could get so complicated. During our RRASC internship training, some other interns had expressed a concern for drama in the workplace. At first, I was pretty surprised. The thought had not crossed my mind and I felt very sure that I was not going to experience any of this so-called drama because that’s just for people who enjoy gossiping. I didn’t expect that “drama” would rear its ugly head in many different forms. (At RIA, there was a dispute among the teachers and some of them threatened to quit their jobs if the staff members didn’t resolve the problem. At AOS, there were a lot of conflicting interests.) Although, I’m glad that drama occurred because I learned how people should and should not deal with situations. I also learned that I am not exempt from this drama, especially if I want to be considered a part of the workplace.

Overall, I really enjoyed both internship sites. They were very different in targeted population, organization, habits, and goals. RIA is a small scale NGO. They don’t plan on becoming a large scale NGO, while AOS has gone from helping a few families several years ago to helping 500. Both have the potential to survive though they
have different means of staying alive. One serves as a local branch to help local children with disabilities, while the other is branching out further and further. Right now, a couple of the orphans are not even from Anhui province.

I did learn more about social justice issues. Of course I know that social change doesn’t come easy but working with both NGOs has shown me exactly what kind of struggles organizations go through in order to reach its goals, especially AOS. They want to provide permanent care for children with AIDS, make sure that they all have medicine and a safe social environment. The Fuyang government is still not willing to allow ZY to buy a piece of land to build a permanent community center because they are fearful of more attention about AIDS in Fuyang. But ZY and people affiliated with AOS are hopeful that with the increasing positive recognition of the organization, the government will become more supportive in the future.

Though both of the internships differed from my initial expectations, I still gained a lot of experience with how a couple different NGOs are run. Communities have varying needs and I cannot apply my U.S. standards to them. I learned and have to continue to learn about cultural and economic values and how the communities function in order to better create social change.