International Experience: Reflections on China

Though I had lived abroad previously, spending two months in China working for Hebei Qimei Agricultural Sciences and Technology Co., Ltd. was unlike any other experience I’ve had. The company is an organic agribusiness company that provided produce to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Although performing the duties of my internship was rather difficult at times due to language or cultural barriers, the experience illustrated a lot of the common problems in working with international development. With three other interns, we were able to collaborate and perform the research we had set out to do.

While I was in China, I lived in Handan, Hebei at the company headquarters. We were able to live and eat on site, which was great at first. However, the company’s concern for our safety resulted in an intercultural divide where they believed it would be best for us to not leave the property without having a member of staff with us. Seeing as staff members were always working, this meant that there was a great deal of time spent on site. The other interns and I tried to make the most of it by getting to know the people there and help when we were allowed. We had our translators teach us Mandarin, though it was quickly discovered how different Western languages are from Eastern languages. It was difficult to hear the correct intonation and then mimic that yourself. For this reason, I returned to America with only a few phrases in my pocket such as being able to count to five, “I’m too full to eat more,” and “I don’t understand.”

Another activity that we tried to pursue on site was practicing Tai Chi. One of the employees was a master of the craft, and he was happy to give us a demonstration. In his version,
there were 24 steps in a specific pattern. Along with the cooks who also practiced regularly, we would spend evenings going through the steps and practicing using fans. This was actually a great bonding experience and after that, we spent a lot of time with cooks even though they did not speak any English.

Our actual experiments were focused on studying soil health. We implemented three, though we were unable to finish our fourth project of hosting farmer workshops. The biggest problem with Qimei farms is that they have very low quality soil. It was frequently dry and cracking. Our first project put in place was the cover crop trials. We planted seven plots measuring six by two meters with a different species to study how it established in the soil. The species selected include: amaranth, rye, sweet clover, hairy vetch, crown vetch, milk vetch, and an unidentified local broadleaf. One issue that arose was irrigation. When asked what was usually used, we were told to use a well at the far end of the field. However, we did not understand that they intended to use flood irrigation with ditches guiding the water. After rolling out around 100 feet of plastic tubing to make the water reach the fields, we had to quickly dig guiding ditches along and in between the plot beds. This may have caused some of the plots on the end of the row to overflow and float seeds out of planting pattern. After observing for two months, we found that amaranth was best suited for the area and suppressed weeds most effectively. Rye and hairy vetch were less able to do these, but are still options worth considering.

The second experiment implemented was judging the impacts of using compost in fields. We used three different fields that were all growing a type of soybeans. The fields varied greatly in size. We chose to use manure as our compost and applied to half of each field. After three weeks, the average height of plants in the composted half was taller than the average height of
plants in the noncomposted half. After we left, measurements were still taken up until the harvest. Our final experiment was soil testing. By performing these tests, we had hoped to come up with ideas to address the issue in a culturally relevant way. We collected samples from five separate fields and took compaction data with a penetrometer. A report on the findings is currently being written to send the company the results.

The best experience I had in China was when we were able to spend a week living in a small village to collect data at the nearby fields. Each morning, a friend of our translator would cook us meals and we would talk to the elderly as they went out for their morning walk. After breakfast, we’d walk for one hour to the fields, stopping to meet people as we walked. Being American in China makes you a quick target for locals, many of whom have never seen a foreigner before. The most exciting part for me was when young children would visit our temporary home. There was a small group of girls who had learned very basic English phrases and were excited to learn more. I took tiles from a Scrabble game we had brought along to teach them how to spell new words and their names.

Though there was difficulty in learning a new culture, spending time in China allowed me to really tackle the more difficult aspects of living abroad and made me feel prepared for future long-term projects abroad. I also had the chance to really live inside of another culture for the first time, as opposed to my previous times traveling where I primarily lived with only Americans. The internship is considering changing to spend more time in the mountain village, which I believe will make future experiences even more beneficial.
Picture 1: Front shot of Hebei Qimei Agricultural Sciences and Technology Co., Ltd.
Picture 2: Qimei interns at aquaculture farm in Wu An county (from left to right: Catherine May, Theo Pritz, Quinn Kolar, Erika Hooker)

Picture 3: Touring hillside farm of one farmer contracted with Qimei