“Surveying Shanghai”

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CEO Reflection Project
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Danting is a rising junior in Columbia College, majoring in Biology and minoring in Hispanic Studies. This summer, she was the Patient Services Intern at United Family Hospital (UFH). In this journal, Danting will document her work at UFH, which consisted largely of surveys, as well as her adventures in Shanghai, which consisted largely of surveying (the different parts of one of China’s largest cities).
THE “PRE-WEEK 1” WEEK 1:

As per the Columbia Experience Overseas (CEO) program requirements, I had (finally!) arrived in Shanghai on a Thursday morning in early June. Though work would not officially start until the following Monday, and despite the fact that I had 4 days to adjust to the time difference, culture, and being in a foreign city alone for the first time, I had already begun to panic. The first day seemed to slip by ever so quickly as my jet lag continued to resist the occasional boost of overpriced coffee and highly affordable bubble tea (which is quite contrary to what I had become used to in New York City, the land of good, cheap coffee). Relief first came in the form of a short excursion to one of Shanghai’s main “luxury” shopping districts with two other Columbia students. Throughout our hour-long walk and spontaneous Chinese lessons, most of which revolved around how to order food, I began to adjust to this new city and to the new, temporary lifestyle. The weekend continued in this blurry haze of sleepiness, excitement, and nervous anxiety for what to come on Monday.
THE REAL WEEK 1:

I was understandably a nervous bundle of anxiety when I stepped out the hotel door on Monday morning. My calculated commute would be over an hour and a half long (including the 40 minute walk that Baidu Maps had predicted), the hospital would be in the outskirts of the city where transportation runs much more rarely, I would be put into an unfamiliar setting, and on top of it all, I had to make a good first impression. Though I would be at an international hospital in which the majority of staff are from countries other than China, working in China seemed to be quite a daunting task. I had very little understanding of the Chinese work culture, and furthermore, I wasn’t sure of what to expect as an intern, both in the sense of what my coworkers would expect from me and what the specific details of what my project would be.

The majority of my worries were lessened after speaking to the department supervisor, Florence, at the Patient Services Department (or ‘客户服务部’ in Chinese, if you will). Florence explained a number of the newest initiatives that members of our (uncharacteristically small) department are taking, as well as the services that they provide to the wide range of international patients that they see every day. I learned about the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which provided the hospital with an overview of patients’ satisfaction and also had the added advantage of serving as an indicator of a doctor’s standing to the average patient, about the measures taken to ensure safe and comfortable services, and about the different ways that different hospital staff can contribute to the physical and mental well-being of patients. My main project, as Florence explained, would be to create an online survey that mimics the paper versions already being used, and to make a user-friend algorithm to interpret the data.

Florence had suggested that the first week should be spent shadowing my many coworkers to get a better sense of the hospital and how it functions. By Tuesday, I had also taken it upon myself to look over past data in hopes of better understanding how it is used and how I could make my project more efficient and useful to the department. In the latter half of the week, I began work on the online survey, looking at models that the other branches in Beijing and Guangzhou used.

Though my work had been going well, I had realized that I was caught in somewhat of a limbo in regards to my interactions with my colleagues. They had become accustomed to summer high school volunteers that would work for a week before returning to their summers, and to each other. As a college student, I fell somewhere in between the “high school student” level and the “mature, working adult” level. In addition, my status as a Chinese American also seemed to be a cause for confusion, with my Chinese colleagues not knowing how to act around me and what mannerisms to use.
WEEK 2:

The second week seemed much like an extended version of the previous Friday – much of the work was the same, and not much had changed. The long holiday weekend was much appreciated and gave me a chance to escape from work for a while. When we returned, I still did not have a permanent seat in the office due to the lack of space (many of my colleagues also rotated between desks depending on which seats were unoccupied), but I made use of the department couch and the extra seating in the department next door when necessary; the couch was surprisingly comfortable and I enjoyed sitting there much more than my coworkers had expected me to. I had also become more confident in speaking to my colleagues, especially my American colleagues who were more familiar with the culture of interns and what college students from the States are capable of doing.

I began to meet more frequently with Florence, giving her updates on the progress of my work and asking what specific details she had wanted. By the end of Thursday, I had completed the first draft of the English version of the survey and began work on the Chinese version, which proved to be much more difficult.

The work itself was not complex, in fact, I was able to complete it fairly easily. The main difficulty was due to the inadequate internet connection that I was tasked with using. The Chinese firewall, or more fondly referred to as ‘The Great Firewall of China,’ blocked many sites and slowed down traffic on various foreign sites so as to increase demand of domestic sites, thereby generating a greater degree of interest in Chinese software. The Great Firewall, however, seemed to only prevent me from completing my work, and by the end of the week, the IT technician knew that whenever he was called into our office, the likelihood of me asking him to speed up my internet connection would be high. Nevertheless, progress was made!

How I had imagined the “Great Firewall” while waiting for a page to load
WEEK 3:

Monday was perhaps the most exciting of days in a very long time period. Not only did the Human Resources department finally give me an official ID badge (after a nontrivial amount of badgering, of course) and door key, but I also had a meeting with Florence and Florence’s equivalent from the Guangzhou branch of United Family Health. We discussed many technical details on how to most effectively use the survey and the ways that the hospital’s resources could be potentially useful to us. I also got the opportunity to show my tech-savviness by suggesting a few changes to Guangzhou’s current system and offered to share my work, as long as Florence agreed to “share her intern.”

Florence, Melissa (whom Florence appointed as my direct supervisor, and who would take over for Florence during her vacation), and I discussed a timeline of which to send out the initial survey, after which, my days became much more hectic and work seemed to be endless. I had also fallen into a routine: after getting off the 7:15am bus at 8:15am and walking for another 15 minutes to the office, I would come in, check my personal email, check my work email, and make my to-do list, after which I would begin my work for the day. It felt rather surreal that these habits closely mirrored Melissa’s work habits, an indicator that I had successfully adjusted to the work life.

Friday was a rather small victory day: after three weeks of struggling with internet, various meetings with other branches, many more meetings with Florence, and many questions about what I was doing (many of my Chinese coworkers had difficulty understanding my explanation of what I was doing due to my poor technical Chinese vocabulary), the surveys were finally sent out and all that was left to do was to wait for responses!
WEEK 4:

Perhaps the most awkward (and terrifying) moment that an intern can possibly imagine facing is when one’s supervisor alerts one to a likely failure of his/her project. In my case, Florence had just so happened to visit one of the doctors for an appointment the day before the survey was sent, and should therefore have received the survey via email. When she still did not receive it on Monday, the sheer level of embarrassment and bafflement that I had was unimaginable. Even after carefully looking through all my work, I could not find a single error. Luckily (and perhaps, not so luckily), the problem was due to the firewall and internet service being reliant on a functioning Virtual Private Network (or ‘VPN’, the savior to my own email woes). After a few hours in the office, Florence finally received the email and I could have sworn seeing fireworks go off at that moment. We decided to contact yet another branch to ask for any similar issues - this time calling the Tianjin office. My own diagnosis of the issue was similar to the problems that Tianjin related to us, and so, my fate depended once again on the IT technician.

In the meantime, I took on another project at the request of the nurses’ department. Alarmed by the drop in satisfaction ratings during the month of May, the Head Nurse asked for a detailed breakdown by department and an analysis of what there is to be improved upon. After a brief analysis of the May data, Florence also asked me to complete a similar task for the month of June.

Closing out the week, I sent Grace, our contact at the Guangzhou branch, an updated model to improve the efficiency of the surveying process.

*A non-internet related struggle: trying to eat as many xiaolongbao as possible with the other CEO interns*
WEEK 5:

As my internet problems became solved one by one, I continued to work on other aspects of the survey, mainly, the data interpretation aspect. I had noticed prior to beginning my work that the data analysis methods did not vary much from month to month. My work therefore consisted of creating a way to efficiently measure large quantities of data with minimal work necessary.

During this week, it had struck me how work would come in waves, and at times, leave many of my coworkers either inexplicably bored or undeniably exhausted. The summer months in particular were magnets for such “low” periods of little work, completely reversing my assumptions of all hospitals being hectic places full of tired workers. Despite the more relaxed nature of this hospital, it does not feel too different from the American hospitals that I have previously volunteered at, though, the lack of some standardized policies was duly noted by both staff and patients. At times, it seemed that the nurses’ and general staff’s training was inconsistent, thus becoming the root cause of many complaints and flaws in the hospital.

I did also notice that some patients seemed self-righteous and believed themselves to be entitled, perhaps as an effect of a hospital culture that places patients on pedestals and of attending a private hospital in a country where most utilize public hospitals that charge a fraction of overall sum that others would pay at a private hospital. Many of my coworkers learn early on that while most patients are very kind and patient, a number of others can be very poor-tempered, and if triggered, even in the slightest of ways, will use the hospital staff as the targets of their (often unjustified) anger, though, to be fair, this is a common occurrence at any hospital. What particularly alarmed me was the poor attitudes towards the lowest level Chinese staff, including the kitchen staff, the janitors, and the security guards. The extent to which they suffered as a result of the language barrier and some miscommunication was disheartening, though their persistent attitudes were well worth complimenting.

Nanjing Road, a crowded shopping street for tourists, shoppers, and food-lovers.
WEEKS 6 & 7:

At the end of week 5, Florence went on her annual leave and I was left with the task of finishing my overall project, adding in any last details that my other coworkers may task me with. These new improvements to my work included a hand-washing section for the nurses and doctors, a comments section, and an additional NPS section added to the surveys. The work continued to expand as I found new ways to add upon my previous work, taking large portions out of my day just to complete one minor detail as I continued to struggle with my internet woes.

Though largely uneventful, these two weeks provided me with adequate time to reflect upon my work and my impact on the hospital. Realistically, my impact could have been very minimal – most of the earliest results coincided with the data that my department would have received regardless – but, optimistically, this project was put on hold for large periods of time due to a lack of time and a ready understanding of the tools that were employed, which I had the opportunity to complete it with my current understanding of their technology. In addition, I aided a few other branches, primarily Beijing and Guangzhou, in improving their current systems and hopefully made their work more efficient.

Don’t be fooled by the beauty of these buildings! These are actually restaurants modeled after the buildings inside a private garden nearby (Yu Garden) dating back to the Ming Dynasty.
ESCAPING THE CITY:

No trip to the city would be complete without a moment of escape; for me, I traveled to the distantly near Zhujiajiao (朱家角) for a breath of fresh air and to embrace my inner tourist. Despite the temperatures being in the upper 90s° to lower 100s° Fahrenheit (that’s near 40°C!) and having to sit through almost 3 hours of public transportation on the bus and metro, I finally arrived at a beautiful preserved town in the outskirts of Shanghai. The blue skies, scenery, and lack of over-commercialization that I saw while there was highly worth the sweltering heat and 6 hour roundtrip transportation that day.

Despite having a small river dividing the houses, only the tourists used boats as their primary mode of transportation.

One of the many streets lined with shops selling local favorites, such as boiled pigs’ feet.
WEEK 8: The End

The last week of almost any internship is always one of the most hectic of all weeks. In the midst of wrapping up all the projects that I had undertaken and preparing documents that will help with the transition from me to my coworkers, there were minor changes that my direct supervisor, Melissa, recommended that I make. Working overtime became much more likely during the last week than it ever was and I routinely lost track of time as I worked. I often panicked when confronted with the reality of the lack of time that I had left, especially when faced with the amount of work that I perceived I had left. The work was eventually finished (thank goodness!) and I had enough time to explain to my coworkers how to use my programs, as well as how much data had been generated through my work.

I had been ready to return to school for some time, but the thought of leaving on the last day upset me quite a lot, especially since I had finally gotten comfortable with my work, the city, and the lifestyle of an employee. I realize that there were many things that I had yet to achieve with my internship, and that with an extra 8 weeks, would be beyond satisfaction. Despite some lingering sadness, I concluded my internship on a Friday evening in early August and said goodbye to my coworkers and promised to visit when possible.

Though I felt the desire to return home, it felt good, almost natural, to be back in the country of my birth, where I had family and friends (though, sadly, on the other side of the country), and where I automatically fit in. I cannot say that my stay was without a culture shock (and quite honestly, I would probably experience it again if I were to return), but the degree to which I could easily be accepted within the narrative of the Shanghai identity was a relief, and not an experience that I am accustomed to, even in the States, where I grew up.

Among the CEO group, there was a certain hunger that possessed each and every one of us by the last week. We craved the local street-food favorite, xiaolongbao, the rush of the cars, the energy of the city, the lights, and the interactions with the local people who finally began to see us not as foreign students, but as members of this bustling city. The work days were interchangeably long and short, but they were insightful nonetheless. We learned from our internships, but we also learned from the city and each other. Professionally, I have grown to be much more aware of what I hope to achieve with my career, and in particular, what I hope a career in medicine will be able to contribute to society. Health professionals may not always be rewarded for their work, but ultimately, it can be a very rewarding experience at any level. Personally, I felt a certain inner peace after 8 weeks and many adventures well spent in Shanghai. I may take a return to this city for granted, but I truly do hope that I would be able to do so in the future and mark what growth I see in myself then.

Until next time, Shanghai! 下次再见吧，上海!