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Summer 2015

Les Aspin '60 Summer Fellowship: End-of-Experience Report

This summer, I had the great fortune to be able to travel to the city of Guangzhou, China, thanks to the generosity and support of the Les Aspin '60 Summer Fellowship. While in Guangzhou, I completed a ten-week unpaid internship with the U.S. Department of State, working within the Economic/Political section of the U.S. Consulate General in the city. My proposed internship focused primarily on Chinese infectious disease control policy and its implications for U.S. diplomatic and security interests, and my work as an intern consisted primarily of drafting and editing sensitive-but-unclassified (SBU) diplomatic cables, which were circulated among all State Department posts in China as well as, in many cases, relevant U.S. government organs headquartered in Washington, D.C.

It soon became evident that I arrived in Guangzhou during a fruitful time in this respect: an outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), which had emerged in South Korea in early May, spread to the nearby Chinese town of Huizhou just as I was settling into the city. My supervisors at the Consulate, one of whom was a medical doctor pursuing a second career as a Foreign Service Officer, assigned me to closely monitor developments in the Guangdong provincial government's handling of the imported MERS case. This assignment included translating sensitive correspondence between Chinese Centers for Disease Control (CDC) officials and locally stationed World Health Organization (WHO) authorities, preparing briefing memos for officers within the Consulate, and ultimately drafting a diplomatic cable on the outbreak that was shared with the U.S. CDC, all State Department posts throughout China, and several other State Department bureaus in Washington. I contrasted the Chinese government's handling of what ended up being a lone case of MERS with its botched handling of the severe

acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003: this time around, Chinese officials responded swiftly and judiciously to reports of “pneumonia-like symptoms” of unknown origin, and prevented the emergence of a more serious situation likely to threaten the economic and security interests of foreign potentates stationed in south China.

The substantive aspects of my internship turned out to extend much further than my initially planned focus on infectious diseases. In addition to monitoring the MERS outbreak in China and Korea, I was also tasked with researching and reporting on various developments in south China’s environmental policies and cleanup efforts. Perhaps my most memorable experience in this regard was my final assignment of the internship: I traveled to Guiyu, a small village in eastern Guangdong province, as part of a delegation investigating environmental cleanup efforts in the area. The town of Guiyu is notorious for being one of the largest “e-waste” dumps in the world—and for its poor environmental track record. However, we found that notable progress had been made toward making e-waste recycling efforts more environmentally sound in the past several years. This facet of the internship was particularly enriching, as it allowed me to begin viewing environmental wellbeing as a core aspect of overall population health and elucidated how effective policy can bring about tangible health improvements.

In spite of my extensive previous experience in China, this summer in Guangzhou was unlike any I have had before—and one that I know will prove particularly useful in furthering my study and work in the fields of diplomacy, international development, and global health. Moreover, in addition to the academic and career insights it provided me, the summer also provided fertile ground to continue cultivating a lifelong interest in Chinese language, society, and culture. I am beyond grateful to the Les Aspin ’60 Fellowship award committee for providing the financial support without which this experience would not have been possible.