

ANP 429

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Fieldnotes #1 --- Spring Gala in Wharton Center

Saturday, Feb.3rd

The jottings of this fieldnotes were taken during the event on Feb. 3rd, while they were re-organized and polished later with the information provided by CUSA members during various interviews. All members included in this fieldnote will use pseudonyms.

I arrived at Wharton Center around 7.30 in the morning as one of the backstage assistant crews. There had already been quite a lot CUSA members in the theatre, due to the previous message sent by the leader of Programming department the other night, all staffs should be arrived prior to 8 am, and it was fascinating to see the number of people in the theatre, despite the fact that that was Saturday morning, the heavy snow showed no signs of stopping, while the sun barely showed up. I still could see how tired some of the members were when we greeted each other, yet none of them complained on the schedule, since we all understood the work ahead was going to be intense: we had a whole Gala to prepare in one day.

Quite different from my previous Gala experiences, this time I was merely an assistant for backstage crews. One thing was I had resigned from CUSA earlier the fall semester and this opportunity of working as a staff was something I specifically requested from the current president. The other thing was, working as an assistant would have relatively more free time, which could allowed me to both observe and participate in this event. Also, due to the two recruitments during the past few months after my resigning, most of the members attending the event were strangers to me, which was a good thing: it felt more natural and less awkward to work with them with an additional role of an ethnographer.

I was greeted by L, the current leader of Programming department, and one of the persons in charge of this event, a slim, energetic girl, with a slightly yellow dyed hair. Later I found out through conversations with other members that L was the first arrived at Wharton this morning - around 6.30, which to me was really impressive, especially considering her full makeup and the way she organized. I was then asked to wear the CUSA suit, a red t-shirt with CUSA logo on it, an order that every staff attending the event should follow. Several members I spot later would ask L or other Programming members for the CUSA suit as soon as they arrived. A few people who did not have the suit for various reasons - either theirs hadn't arrived yet, or they were friends of some members who tried to help as "outsiders", would look quite strange among the others. This is quite interesting, they felt reluctant to interact with the rest of staffs who wore the suits, or simply gathered around the stage or corners of backstage, having conversations within themselves; later when they wore the suits, they would naturally stepped into the conversations with the rest, and became more active when each head offered tasks. There seemed to be an invisible thread connect people with that suit, even though it nothing but a red shirt with a CUSA logo, but I guess that can pretty much explained why.

There were four heads, or persons in charge, throughout the event: One took care of the stage light & music, one led the backstage team and all the equipments, one took charge of contacting with each performer and the whole rehearsal, and the one who were responsible for organizing the whole process. The staffs attending were assigned to each crew with different

tasks and roles either during the rehearsal process or the Gala itself. Things getting heated up quite quickly as soon as the rehearsal began. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, yet there was a certain consistency in their action: they were trying to do as best as they could, even though many of them hardly had any experiences of holding such huge event. This is the time when one could feel the huge atmosphere commonly seen in those typical "Asian work places", for instance, a random office in the commercial district of Shanghai. Those casual conversations were replaced by discussions over rehearsal sections and emergencies. The relationships among members started to shift to those of common work places - an employee-employer relationship, simply answering and executing missions. While the whole process was in fact, highly efficient, which was quite impressive considering they were just common college students without any professional experiences of organizing such huge event. It was also amazing to see there were nearly no quarrels or conflicts among staffs throughout the whole rehearsal, they might argue over certain details, like the sequences of shows and how to arrange the stage equipments in a most efficient way, but no, there were no bad feelings or personal quarrels. They tried to make the rehearsal as organized as possible, everything was supposed to be QUICK and "according to the previous plan".

However, there were indeed conflicts among staffs and performers, mainly about issues over rehearsal time. Not like CUSA members, the performers were asked to arrive a little be later, each should arrive 30 minutes prior to their assigned rehearsal time. While there were a few groups of performers who came later then they should, and the momentum of the whole rehearsal would therefore be disturbed, and rehearsal time would often be rearranged. That being said, some performers had to shorten their rehearsal time or even gave up the opportunity. I overheard some conversations among one group of performers that blaming CUSA members to be too "bossy": "...as if we were inferior, they were like this all the time, just like last year's Gala, and the year before that..." It's true, I would admit it if I was one of the performers, since CUSA members were lack of hospitality and intimacy in that situation, and they were quite aware of that. In a quick chat with few backstage staffs during the break, one of them said: " They shouldn't complain about this, we don't have other choices... you know what? I don't give a damn about whether they were satisfied with the rehearsal time or not, the only thing important right now is to make the Gala as perfect as we can, let's see who will whine like a baby if they screw this up..."

There were not much to say in regard to the Gala itself: an indeed spectacular event. CUSA staffs kept their "Asian work place" spirit and high efficiency until the end. The turning point came near the end of the last performance " Unforgettable Night" (the original and traditional finale for the CCTV Spring Festival Gala), where staffs were supposed to gather into the middle of the stage, with those red CUSA suits, took a picture as a whole, and yelling "Happy New Year!" The whole atmosphere changed during that process, everyone was encouraged to participate, some were even pushed (in a good mood though) to the stage. Even those who had not assigned with CUSA suit would eventually get one. And then, the former serious, solemn, intensive working-place atmosphere were no more. Instead, the only feelings one could sense from the stage was the pure passion, an outburst of joy, the celebration of the new year, drowning in that red wave and the melody of "Unforgettable Night".

Again, the contrast between the tensions among CUSA members prior to and after the

ending was huge, and only this time as an outsider I was able to realize this fact. Indeed one could see indications of intimate friendship or "kinship" somewhere in between, while the intensity of this whole event were extremely high - it overshadowed that intimate relationship and replaced with the so-called "working-place dynamic". But the efficiency and proficiency indicated in CUSA staffs' organization and collaboration were indeed remarkable.

Fieldnotes #2 --- Weekly General Meeting

Friday, Mar. 23rd

I chose to attend at least one of the weekly general meetings held by CUSA since this is the fundamental activity that every member asked to attend each week. Each week's GM, usually held by current president (in this case would be S.L.), conclude the previous on-campus events, discuss future activities and offering ideas, or talking about some important incoming events, for instance, annual recruitment and election. The reason I chose the date Mar. 23rd is, CUSA just finished one of their on-campus events - an one-day basketball tournament a week before, the annual election will be hold in the following week (and I won't be on campus during that time so I will miss it), and one of the most important internal event for CUSA members - the annual banquet, will be held the week after the election, where most of the CUSA members (both current and former) on campus or living in Lansing area will attend. So, a lot will be covered in this GM, and for me is a perfect opportunity as well.

Even though everyone was supposed to show up before 6.10 pm, there were still many absences when I arrived at around 6.05 pm. The absence in fact was not a new thing, GMs I had attended in the past two years were also like this. It is reasonable - some might be late for five or ten minutes due to their time schedule, anyways we are all college students, and having a meeting at Friday night definitely doesn't sound that attractive. However I was still kind of shocked by the amount of people who absent/were late during this GM - like almost 10 people, which were way more than those I used to attend.

The GM was held at one classroom on the 3rd floor of Bessey Hall, a large room with those movable chairs. Therefore, it is always interesting to see how the people inside position themselves. In this case, it was quite easy to tell which department one belonged to by just finding out which "chair group" he sat with. Before entering the room, let's say, CUSA members might have a few chats outside with friends in other departments, while after the meeting start, everyone naturally found their own group and chose to "isolated" themselves from the rest. This is one phenomenon I always found interesting to see. The other thing regarding to the "chair positioning" was, the departments with relatively more people would naturally chose to move to the back of the room, and the rest department just followed them, sit slightly in front, but still maintained a certain distance between each group and the desk where the president stood. As a result, one could spot a very obvious hollow in the upfront area of the president, while the rest surrounding the desk like that Kiva room in McDonel Hall. However, the only thing different this time was, that "hollow" was slightly larger than those I used to see, in other word, that invisible distance between members and president was extended.

The current president, S.L., started her presentation after waiting for a couple of more minutes, despite the fact that there were still many absences. Even though I had known S.L. for almost three years and we just had an interview few weeks ago, it was the first time I ever attended a GM hosted by S.L. She was using that same style of talking and positioning like our last interview, sitting beside the presentation desk with her back straight up close to the chair; even though she was wearing casually, I still had that feeling that she was having one of those company interviews: absolutely formal and professional. She would not include casual conversations in her presentation, instead S.L. just went straight up to the essential topics for that day's General Meeting. Well, I would admit that that was some impressive speech. However, I still spotted that there were quite a lot people did not pay attentions to the meeting. Again, it was not something new, not every CUSA member treated GM as seriously as S.L. and other department leaders did, they would just pay attention to the parts that they concerned the most, for instance, most related to their departments, and spent the rest of the meeting reading cellphone texts or quietly chatting with people nearby. There were around three times during that day's GM, that S.L. stopped her speech due to someone chatting in the back, even though the noise was not loud enough to disturb the whole meeting.

The whole GM itself was quite normal comparing to the other GMs I used to attend, the president led the meeting, pointing out a few important topics, and a few small discussions among members over the upcoming events (those who participated were mostly department leaders or those relatively more active in their own departments, but the amount was just a handful). There were constant conversations both during the meeting and after, over the annual election in that upcoming weekend. Some sound excited, while the others sound a little bit worry or even stressful. Since after the election, the current leaders and president (that E-board group) would be replaced by someone else, and people always wished their best friends or someone they were familiar with would become the new E-board members. The most common way to start off a conversation that day was asking " who do you think will be your department's new leader? / Is XXX really going to enter that election contest?" There were also, quite a lot discussions over who will be the new president, and many were worried about the possibility that the president might be vacant due to the absence of suitable candidates. In sum, the conversations CUSA members had during and after that day's GM, including most of those quiet chats during the presentation, were solely focused on the upcoming election. That tension would melt away as soon as they walked out the classroom and the topics of conversations started to shift into more casual ones. Many of them was going to have dinner with each other shortly, and there were a few parties were planned sometime around midnight. At last, CUSA members finished the last bit of their "week day missions", took off those labels of "professionals" they had during that GM, and rushed into the night with a relaxing & entertaining weekend ahead, just like the rest of college students did.

*** There were still three interviews and one fieldnote left for these project, and most of them will be done during the annual banquet next week. Since it is one of those occasions that the whole CUSA will meet in the role of "friends" instead of "colleagues", and hopefully I can spot some interesting contrasts.