

*If you are interested in supporting the grassroots community in China...  
If you want to locate local partners or grantees on your own...  
If you don't have a seven figure operating budget...  
And if you don't speak Mandarin or have not been to China...*

## **If You Are Thinking About Going to China...**

*An Elementary Guide to Visiting the Grassroots Community in China*

By Humphrey Wou, AIDS Relief Fund for China

Penetrating cultural and language barriers remains the single most challenging obstacle for those who want to work directly with China's grassroots community. I cannot offer language lessons. However after five years of visiting China's NGO community, I have begun to see patterns in the practices of grassroots activists. By sharing my observations, I hope that you may find the process of seeking reliable grantees or local partners less mystifying.

### ***It's elementary, my dear Watson...***

Seeing China and meeting activists first-hand is an irreplaceable experience. No travel agency can line up appointments for you. So you will have to do some detective work beforehand. Get in touch with intermediary grant-making organizations in the U.S., like the Global Fund for Women, the Global Greengrants Fund or the AIDS Relief Fund for China. These groups work with small grants and have large numbers of grantees. Maybe they will be able to share their contacts with you. Most of China's grassroots community activists are well connected. Once you have a couple of names, they can lead you to others while you are in China.



Attending activist gatherings or conferences is a great way to network. Otherwise, don't rely on traveling with a large group to find potential partners. Whenever I travel with a large group, meetings tend to be formal. On the contrary, when I am alone or in a small group, people are more open with me. Routine conversations often turn into creative discussions.

### ***Good help is hard to find...***

While globalization is rapidly engulfing China, most natives, especially outside of coastal urban centers, do not speak anything but Chinese. When visiting minority autonomous regions, it is not uncommon to have two interpreters in order to understand the local language.

A friend of mine once had an interpreter who was so lazy that she only translated half of the time and refused most of the invitations without his consent. I have also known other interpreters who were so meticulous that they translated every word which made a simple conversation laborious.



Needless to say, a good interpreter is a must. Most professional interpreters are trained for commerce. Make sure that your interpreter has a basic knowledge of your area of interest. There are translation services and foreign language colleges in Beijing and Shanghai where you can hire one to travel with you. The cost varies from \$50 to \$150 a day in addition to travel expenses. One of the best ways to find an interpreter is to ask someone living in China for a recommendation. Ask a bilingual friend to help you interview candidates.



### ***Making appointments...***

Every person in China seems to have a cell phone. I have seen Tibetan monks carrying cell phones under their robes. People in China don't tend to make appointments too far ahead of your arrival in China. But they will expect you to call them AFTER you are in the country. In the U.S., an appointment rarely last more than an hour. In China, people will give you half a day, if not the entire day. Very likely, you will be invited to lunch or dinner.

But don't expect this protocol to work with international organizations stationed in China or groups that are accustomed to receiving Americans. My visits with these groups are usually about an hour before they politely tell me that their next appointment has arrived.



Hint

Don't forget to bring your business cards with an email address. Business cards can be made quickly and inexpensively in China. If you can put your name and affiliation in both English and Chinese, that will be very helpful. Hand out and receive business cards with two hands.

### ***First, listen...***

Sir Martin Gordon, of Barry and Martin's Trust, has been funding China's AIDS work for nine years. His advice is "be humble and listen." Funders Concerned about AIDS also makes "Listen to potential beneficiaries" one of their best practices considerations. One of the guiding directives of the AIDS Relief Fund for China has always been to support community-based solutions.



Respect the local leaders. They are much more knowledgeable about their own laws and culture than we. Their strategies are often more workable in their social context. For example, political protests are impractical in China and can be highly destructive to local communities. Yet, negotiating with government officials at a banquet may yield quicker and more desirable results.

### ***Don't fall in love at first sight...***

Many of us are running on a limited budget and time when traveling in China. We often hope to find good grantees within a week or two. When we meet our first English-speaking grassroots leader, we think that we have hit the jackpot.

In fact, most activists who can speak English are already well connected and well funded. They tend to be in Beijing which attracts social activists and researchers and is a gateway to most foreign funding. Meanwhile, the places and the people who really need help rarely get much support.



In My Opinion

### ***Go easy...***

Begin a partnership slowly. Instead of letting the potential grantees know that you have buckets of gold to share, just tell them that you are interested in working with them on a small project or contributing to a small portion of their program. After six months to a year, when you have a chance to review their progress  
Don't promise too much too soon, and don't make overly bold commitments for the future. There is always a possibility of generating hurtful feelings when one party does not deliver.

### ***Before***

## *you show them the money...*

I have run into two cases in which I was asked to make grants for setting up an office. Neither of them had an action plan. While I understand the need for having a stable base of operations, I would begin with supporting a special project that has a clear set of objectives. General support grants may come after we have established a trusting relationship.

When I meet someone with a project that I am interested in supporting, I offer a fixed amount based on the local living standard, irrespective of their budget. The grant may not be enough to cover the entire project. I leave room for them to seek other funding. I am not trying to make life difficult for my grantees, but I don't want to create dependency.



In My  
Opinion

### ***Dependency***

Our wish is to see grantees become less dependent on foreign aid. Zigen Foundation has a good practice of funding only 50% of a budget. AIDS Relief Fund for China encourages its grantees to explore various fundraising strategies. Although some Chinese NGOs consider any means of fundraising other than getting grants to be "impure," I have to point out that some environmental NGOs, like the Greenriver and the Global Village of Beijing, have survived and flourished because of their ingenuity and business acumen. They conduct eco-tours, sell books and post cards, charge fees for producing documentary videos and collect membership dues. Many of these organizations have become first rate Chinese NGOs.

### ***Smoke and mirrors***



Watch Out

Beware of jargon. Words like "capacity building," "accountability," "sustainability," or "transparency" may not mean exactly what you think. This western terminology is frequently invoked in the activist circle in China. So when someone tells you that they need money to build capacity and enhance accountability for their operation to be sustainable and transparent, do ask "Huh?"

Don't be fooled by emotions or statistics. While some activists may become very emotional, others will overload you with background information on how AIDS is dangerous to the society, or how illegal dumping poisons their water supply. But they are very skimpy on the specifics of what they will do to address the issues.

Don't be seduced by heroes. More than once, I was given magazines with a close-up picture of the activist on the cover, a business card with ten titles printed on both sides, or a view of the trophy case. Maybe these are over-achievers. But it may also mean that they will have very little time to spend on the project that I am interested in supporting.



Not Cool

Beware of people who cannot or will not give you any contacts. I once asked someone whom we might fund in Beijing. His answer was "me." He then proceeded to tell me why his work was the only worthy game in town and how his NGO was the umbrella organization for all other groups (or in the Chinese lingo, a platform group.) He either knew very few people or he was not a collaborator.



### ***Leaders are not all created equal...***

In my opinion, activists can be grouped into four types:

1. The replicators: They are inspired followers. As long as someone has done a project somewhere, they can be effective in reproducing it. This kind of activist will help perpetuate the movement.
  2. The "What can I do?" type: They are great at telling you what is wrong with the world although they may not be able to offer solutions. These activists tend to be very emotional and are very good at inspiring the masses.
  3. The "What can't I do?" type: These are dynamic individuals who seem to want to correct all wrongs in a society. They can be very effective as long as they don't burn out. They often have devoted followers who may have a hard time filling their shoes.
  4. The solution people: They spend more time telling you how than why. They don't just tell you why you should protect endangered species. They also tell you how to protect them. They think out of the box. Their methods are unorthodox, solutions elegant.
- AIDS Relief Fund for China supports all these different types of activists.

Once in awhile, I run into what I call "solution people." Their ideas are so brilliant that you just have to hit your forehead and say, "Wow, how come no one else thought of it?"



Cool

Last April, I sat across from a quiet young man from the gaychinese.net, talking about the gay rights movement in China. In China, the gay pride parade is not an option. Public assembly is against the law. In many cities, there isn't even one single bar, café or bookstore where gay people can get together. This quiet young man said, "I thought of creating an annual gay kite flying day..." That was so brilliant that I had to hit my forehead. Kite flying is a common pastime. People flying rainbow kites all over China is hardly controversial. And one doesn't have to be out of the closet to take part in this. One day in a year, gay people can have a clear symbol of pride high in the sky.



Cool

Meili Mountain in Yunnan is littered with trash left by people on pilgrimage to the holy mountain. This October, a maverick activist Wang Xiaogang of ECO is leading a team of volunteers on a ten day journey to pick up garbage. This kind of cleaning campaign is hardly new in China. But Wang does it with a flare. He has invited three living Buddhas to lead this effort. And he makes sure that there will be plenty of media exposure inside and outside of Yunnan. His goal is to make the Tibetan Buddhists and tourists aware that the holy mountain is a sanctuary. He turns an environmental campaign into a religious practice.

### ***It's an art...***

The philanthropic community in the U.S. is very professional. Most foundations are guided by a set of finely honed principles and well rounded experiences. I will skip discussions of maintaining communication, evaluation and accountability, etc. for my background is too limited.

I see grant-making as a social investment. We may win some, we may lose some. We win when our contribution makes a positive impact on a society and moves it forward. We lose when our activism causes the society to become more closed. Like any investment, this is not science. There is no right way or wrong way. We can only proceed with good intention and hope that we make the right decision to do the right thing with the right people.