

A Memorable Conversation with Ms. Miller

By Ping Yi

Over the weekend I put up trellises for the beans, enjoying the row of blooming peonies lining the driveway and the riot of wild daisies in the back yard. My daughter practiced for her recital Tuesday night, when I realized that I needed to write a NACOTA/COTA story before my departure to China for a couple of international conferences.

The story goes back to the early months of 2008, when a series of winter storms affected large portions of southern and central China with heavy snows, ice and cold temperatures causing extensive damage and transportation disruption. As the President of NACOTA, I organized the Board to start a campaign to solicit all kinds of support to the disaster relief effort in China, especially in the City of Changsha where heavy-duty snow plows were badly needed.

After numerous web postings and email distributions, a phone call came in from a local transportation equipment company which also operated a branch office in China. We set up an appointment to discuss details in my university office.

A slim lady in her late 30s, Ms. Miller spoke with animation describing her company business in the separation of flow as water descended a cataract.

“I suppose you haven’t heard much about the event, so let me give you a quick overview of the problem in China.”

She nodded slightly, encouraging me to proceed.

I explained, a large dome of cold air enveloped most parts of China, causing much precipitation in the form of heavy snow west of the coastal areas, where the temperature dropped to slightly below the freezing point. The provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Henan, Shandong, Jiangsu, Anhui and the municipality of Shanghai were hardest hit.

“Snow accumulation in the City of Changsha has been a few feet high in certain areas. The city badly needs snow plows to clear the streets and roads but they have never needed and thus don’t have any heavy-duty equipment for snow removal.”

To my surprise, after I finished my synopsis Ms. Miller immediately pulled out a cell phone from her purse and called their China branch office located in Shenyang, at 4 a.m., Beijing time, requesting her subordinates in China to start arranging relief activities.

I offered to give her the contact information of the Changsha government for compensation of shipping and using their equipment, but she turned it down and said, “At this difficult time of your country, this is the least we can do to help.”

I invited Ms. Miller to dinner at our university’s Faculty Dining Services, a dinner featuring shrimp appetizers; salad greens from a fresh garden; some cheese lasagna with fresh tomatoes, mushrooms and lean ground round; garlic bread; and a panoply of desserts ranging from the decadently chocolate to a rhubarb-strawberry compote.

I was satisfied with the quality of the dinner, a gesture for me to full-heartedly thanked my guest and extended my gratitude; however, I was more impressed by her conversation during the dinner. She leveraged a New York Times article on foreign affairs to address one of the many paradoxes of the consequences of the 9/11 attack on the United States. At that time, when the majority of nations held the U.S. in high regard, it was common to hear Americans ask “Why do they hate us?” Some 6 years later, with American esteem at new historic lows around the world, the question was seldom posed. On the premise that often the most dangerous question is the one you do not ask, Ms. Miller discussed the reasons for the decline in esteem for the United States, and proposed a series of steps to regain respect throughout the world, including the type of things she was prepared to do that afternoon for China.