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Final Report: Junior Research Stay at Peking University, China

As a political scientist with a strong background in China studies, I was intrigued by the opportunity to spend a two-month research stay in affiliation with Peking University. In my dissertation I am exploring the changing role of the bicycle in urban China. When offered the chance to gather first-hand insights, speak to local experts and visit all those places that I had read about, I gladly accepted.

China has given rise to more bike-sharing projects than any other country in the world. I am interested in why an increasing number of cities are investing in bike-sharing. What factors have led to this quick up-scaling in recent years? Furthermore, I am analyzing how the introduction of bike-sharing has impacted the representation of cyclists' interests within political decision-making processes in urban transport.

How did I benefit from the stay at Peking University?

I visited China between October 25 and December 19, 2015. I spent the first week in Beijing in order to register with Peking University and to meet my local supervisor for consultation. Together we refined my case selection and discussed the research procedure I would apply during the following weeks. I also used this first week in Beijing to interview researchers at other relevant national level research institutions.

During the following seven weeks I planned to visit three different cities in Central Eastern China. Although I had lived in and visited China before I did not have the necessary network that could have facilitated my empirical research in these places. But I had many questions: With whom would I need to get in touch to get a clearer picture of the urban transport development in Hangzhou, Wuhan or Zhuzhou? Who were the central actors driving the recent revival of cycling through the development of bike-sharing in these different places?

My local supervisor, Prof. LI Dihua, and contacts I had made in Beijing helped me where they could in answering these questions. It was through their active introduction that I was able to meet and interview a host of different experts on the ground and in this way get a very heterogeneous picture of the motives and challenges of developing bike-sharing in China. It is also worth mentioning, that in some cases mentioning one's affiliation with one of China's top-ranking universities could already open doors.

What are the main results of my research stay?

The purpose of this visit was to gather insights about the recent development of urban bike-sharing projects in China. As a result of my eight-week research stay, I established approximately 70 contacts to relevant specialists in the field of urban transport planning, public administration, bike-sharing and cycling in China. I arranged field visits to three cities, conducted a total of 30 expert interviews and visited a bicycle conference in Guangzhou. The gathered information will form the basis for my forthcoming analysis.

What aspects of my research stay did I find most challenging or interesting?

My research stay allowed me to meet many different, interesting and inspiring people along the way. I decided to live with locals wherever possible. Airbnb provided a great platform for finding welcoming hosts in China. I lived in the traditional Hutong area in Beijing, with a Chinese family close to the West Lake in Hangzhou and with a Chinese-Taiwanese couple in the top floor of one of Wuhan's skyscrapers. These encounters taught me a lot about peoples' views on the respective city's transport development, how they commute and for what reasons they like to cycle compared to using other modes of transportation.

How did I interact with the university staff, students and sustainability initiatives?

Peking University is a great place for the study of environmental questions hands-on in China. The Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering for instance tackles Beijing's as well as many other cities' air quality problem. Another example for applied research is the Lincoln Institute at the School of Government. The institute's research aims to integrate transport planning and land-use management in quickly developing areas.

Due to the short duration of my stay in Beijing I only experienced a glimpse of what is being done at Peking University. I was lucky enough to have some good friends who are studying there. Their help made it fairly easy for me to get a feeling for Peking University's enormous campus, learn about interesting events and meet likeminded researchers. I made good contacts while in Beijing and am looking forward to deepen them in the near future.

How has the research stay influenced my future goals?

I am very grateful for the opportunity to visit different cities and learn about their strategies to address the metropolitan bicycle dilemma. Bike-sharing makes the bicycle more accessible for citizens in an increasing number of Chinese megacities. When introduced successfully, it has changed peoples' mobility behavior towards a more intermodal way of moving in cities. The more I learned, the more I wanted to apply this knowledge on the ground. Consequently, I applied and was offered a position at Malmö's municipal administration. I am currently preparing my move to Sweden. In that way, one could say that the research stay helped me to turn my "future goals" into a more immediate reality.