

Final Report: Student Research and Study Stay at Peking University

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“Hydropolitics in Transnational Water Conflict and Cooperation: Sustainable
Development of Water Resources in the Mekong River Basin”

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Thanks to the mobility program of the University Alliance for Sustainability (UAS) that offered me an opportunity of a research stay at Peking University (PKU), I was able to conduct research for my master’s thesis. My master’s thesis examines the sustainable development of water politics, taking the Mekong River as a case study. In doing so, my research focuses on the conflict and cooperation of transboundary water management between China and downstream riparian states of the Mekong River (namely Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam).

During my one month stay at PKU (May 1 to June 2, 2018), I was able to accomplish my main objectives of collecting Chinese sources related to my research, and with the aid of my supervising professors from PKU, I was able to get a more thorough understanding of the topic as well. Furthermore, my research stay enabled me to examine transboundary water management in China within the broader framework of sustainability.

As for my supervision at PKU, I contacted Prof. Chen Shaofeng from the School of International Studies, whose research interests are energy policy and energy security, regional integration in Asia, especially China’s relations with ASEAN, and global economic governance, asking for his supervision. Prof. Chen kindly accepted my request, and I am grateful that he shared his knowledge with me. He advised me to look at hydropolicy and international water management in China from a new perspective. When dealing with this topic it is important to not only consider Western theoretical approaches to international relations, but also to incorporate Chinese academic sources, that are – compared to the Western debate – more focused in cooperation of water management of the Mekong River than conflict. Subsequently, I gained valuable insights into the approach of my thesis research.

One of my professors at my home institution, former UAS fellow Prof. Eva Sternfeld recommended me to meet with Prof. Zhang Shiqiu from the College of Environmental Sciences and Engineering. Her areas of specialization focus on environmental economics and environmental management and policy. I was able to meet Prof. Zhang despite her busy schedule and she offered me important insights from her own research. I genuinely appreciate her taking the time to discuss her point of view regarding transboundary water resource management of the Mekong River within the framework sustainable development with me. In addition, Prof. Zhang advised me to take civil society as a stakeholder into consideration and what implications the civil society's activities have for policy making.

The discussions with Prof. Chen and Prof. Zhang proved very helpful in getting a more thorough understanding of China's transnational water management and they provided me the opportunity to look at this topic from different perspectives. In my master's thesis, I will consider their approaches. I once again want to thank them both for their advice and supervision. In addition to the meetings with them, I spent most of my time self-studying at the PKU's main library, which offered me an abundant source of information. With the aid of the library staff, I was able to get access to many Chinese papers and books I would have otherwise not known about.

Beyond my research related activities, I was also able to take part in the student life at PKU. Using PKU's facilities for one month made me quite familiar with the campus environment. When I arrived at PKU, I was lucky to experience PKU's 120th anniversary (1898-2018). The whole university and its staff and students were full of enthusiasm, reflecting the vibrant student life. For the last week of April and the first week of May, PKU held big celebrations on campus: Performances were organized; PRC President, Xi Jinping, came to give a speech; many student clubs offered several activities; and alumni reunited. It was a treat to have witnessed such an important and impressive series of events. Moreover, I enjoyed the beautiful campus with its both modern and classical Chinese architecture.

In addition, I visited a few university campuses in Beijing and Shanghai, for instance Beijing Normal University, East China Normal University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Thus, I realized that Chinese universities attach great importance to the development of green campuses. Furthermore, during the time I spent at PKU, I received strong impressions of the Chinese university structure and high-quality academic learning and teaching. It was evident that PKU provides its students and professors the best possible overall academic environment.



Weiming Lake at Peking University in May 2018 © Dieu Linh Bui Dao.

Besides Prof. Chen Shaofeng and Prof. Zhang Shiqiu, I particularly want to thank Ms. Katrin Risch (Program Manager at FUB), who helped me with the initial administrative challenges, and patiently answered all my questions about the UAS program and living in Beijing. In addition, I also want to thank Mr. Chen Wei (Program Coordinator at PKU) and his student assistant for warmly welcoming me at PKU and arranging all administrative work. I am deeply indebted to Mr. Chen, as he provided useful information about accommodations in Beijing. Furthermore, I also appreciate Jan-Philipp Laurinat (UAS 2016 fellow) for introducing me to his network and helping me with housing. Thanks to their support and excellent work, I had a successful and productive research stay.

Even though my one-month stay was too short to achieve all my research goals, my research stay was nonetheless very fruitful for my master's thesis. I benefited immeasurably from this experience – personally and academically – and felt genuinely fortunate to spend one month at PKU as UAS fellow. Lastly, I want to again thank the University Alliance for Sustainability for providing me this great research opportunity. I am indescribably lucky for the experience I had at PKU.