

First Workshop on Commons held in China!

The Commons Workshop on Enhancing Water Governance and Policy

Tsinghua University, Beijing

14 – 15 October, 2017

Earlier this month (October), Yahua Wang, Professor in the School of Public Policy and Management and Vice President of the China Institute for Rural Studies at Tsinghua University, in Beijing, Chaired the highly successful first workshop on commons to be held in China. The workshop took more than a year to organise, requiring permission from the government as well as agreement from the University. The IASC was proud to be able to support the workshop which enabled Professor Wang to secure the necessary permissions.

In his opening speech Professor Wang noted that the study of Commons is a relatively new research field in China which can only be traced back to the year of 2000, when Prof Mao Shoulong, from Renmin University, organized the translation of Elinor Ostrom's book into Chinese. Since then more works around Ostrom and Commons in China have been published by Chinese scholars and in recent years, papers around commons study in China have appeared in international journals. Professor Wang also noted he had been a visiting scholar in Indiana University working under Elinor Ostrom when she was awarded the Noble Prize, and she subsequently visited Tsinghua University in 2011.

The focus of the 2017 Commons Workshop was 'water governance and policy'. Water is of special significance to both ancient and modern China and the country is facing new challenges arising from water shortage, pollution, rising demand, and inter-basin transfer of water. Professor Wang also noted that the workshop marked the beginning of a 'Chinese Commons Study Network' to link scholars across China working on commons issues.

John Powell, President of the International Association for the Study of Commons (IASC), and Frank van Laerhoven, Chief Editor of the International Journal of the Commons (IJC) both participated in the Workshop, giving opening remarks and later on in the conference, keynote addresses. Just over 80 participants took part in the event with a wide ranging set of presentations from senior and junior academics from across China and further afield (including Singapore, Pakistan, the USA, the UK and the Netherlands). Presentations addressed issues relating to new policy developments (for example 'River Chiefs'), water markets and pricing, water transfer, analysis of the relationship between agriculture and water consumption, and the growing urban demand for water, particularly in the North. Several of the participants were former research students of Elinor Ostrom (Nobel Prize for Economic Science 2009), including Prof. Shui-Yan Tang, Prof. Yahua Wang, Eduardo Araral, and Frank van Laerhoven.

Professor Ye Qui (Director of the Brookings-Tsinghua Centre for Public Policy, Tsinghua University) Chaired the opening session and discussion with four key note speakers. Asit Biswas (Visiting Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore) gave a presentation at the opening session of the conference noting that china had made huge advances in water management but despite this faced major water scarcity problems in the future. He suggested that south to north transfers of water would only 'buy 10 – 15 years of time' for China before significant water shortage would again rear its head. Professor Biswas suggested that the 'much cited' global water shortage was more a case of poor resource management than lack of water itself. He argued that a stronger focus from academics on the synthesis of existing knowledge and improved application of knowledge, linked to integration of new technology could solve many of the water problems in China, and other parts of the world.

Professor Shui-Yan Tang (University of Southern California) drew on work undertaken from 30 years of studying irrigation and other water related problems (such as groundwater management) to address the potential application of Elinor Ostrom's principles for collective action to China's water problems. He noted that although the current state of the commons research provided a good micro-analytical framework, a missing link in designing water governance regimes was the lack of attention to the macro-institutional framework. He argued strongly for greater focus on the nature and scale of problems before designing governance institutions to achieve policy objectives. He drew some interesting observations from a comparison of USA and Chinese governance systems, noting that neither system was perfect. He contrasted the capacity of the USA to create long enduring institutions (and long-term failure to reach agreed solutions), with China that has the capacity for rapid resolution of problems in the short-term but faces difficulties in creating long-term and enduring solutions due to the administrative approach that regularly moves officials to different locations and posts, resulting in a loss of experience and knowledge.

Eduardo Araral (Vice Dean of Research, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore) finished the keynote speakers session with a critique of Elinor Ostrom's work noting the difficulties of applying her principles to large-scale commons problems, and suggested that her critique of private property rights needed to be re-visited. Several scholars stayed on for an extra two days to partake in field studies around Heng Shui, a new city to the south of Beijing in Hebei Province, an area experiencing both surface and ground water problems but one where innovative solutions are being applied.

The Workshop was a great success and we look forward to seeing commons concepts being applied to a wider range of issues in China.

John Powell, President IASC