

Chinese Connections.

A personal account of the China-UK summer school on the regulation and governance of emerging biotechnologies.

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Since its launch in 2002, the Research Councils UK has supported numerous initiatives which aim to promote academic links between UK and foreign institutions. China has been identified as a crucial partner, due to her increasing commitment to science and technology development and the impressive growth in research output. In 2007, to strengthen international cooperation, the RCUK established its first foreign office in Beijing and facilitated the organisation of workshops, meetings, summer schools and staff exchanges in different academic fields.

In June 2009, I was lucky enough to travel to Beijing to participate in one of these networking events: a two-week summer school on the governance and regulation of emerging biotechnologies, sponsored by the RCUK and jointly organised by the UK Genomics Network and the Institute of Policy and Management of the Chinese Academy of Science.

I arrived in Beijing on a hot, bright day with my friend and colleague Kai, along with other doctoral students and staff from the other centres in the ESRC Genomics Network. After a spectacular flight over the vast Siberian lands and the Mongolian plateau, the British Airways plane gently landed at Beijing International Airport. The first impact with China, however, was rather disquieting: a team of masked paramedical staff boarded the aircraft and checked the body temperature of each passenger for swine flu symptoms.

As I was later told, the Chinese government is greatly concerned with biosecurity issues since the public health crisis which followed the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003.

After the biosecurity check and border control, a quick bus drive brought us to the campus of the Chinese Academy of Science in the Haidian district, where the school building and our hotel were located. The Haidian district lies in the northwest area of the capital and is one China's most intensive technological zones. Here are the sites of the old Peking and Tsinghua universities, but also the offices of Western high-tech corporations and a cluster of technology start-ups and retail shops. A few blocks away from our campus, the imposing building of Microsoft Research Asia cast its shadow on the wide stretch of Zhichun Road, one of the main arteries of the district. A bit further northwest, the magnificent architectural complex of the imperial Summer Palace bears witness to a traditional society which has long been swept away by the relentless advance of modernity.

In the following days, the school activities ran smoothly. We met Chinese students and researchers, who welcomed us and made us feel at ease with their politeness and helpfulness. Professor Mu Rongping, the director of IPM-CIS, gave an introductory lecture on the development of China's research policy in the past 20 years. Then, the school proceeded in the conventional format, including staff and student presentations on ethical and regulatory issues of biotechnology. Yet the opportunity to draw a first-hand comparison between the Chinese and the European perspectives was unique, especially in regards to bioethics.

While in some Western countries, and most notably in the UK, empirical rationality has become the mainstream approach in evaluating bioethical issues, in contemporary

China debates about biomedicine have been largely guided by the moral principles of Confucianism, in line with the wider resurgence of this old philosophical tradition after the persecutions during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and the 1970s. Professor Qiu Renzong, one of the most prominent bioethicists in China, explained that Confucian thought envisages a “relational view” of human persons, which gives more emphasis to care, bonding and interdependency in contrast with the Western atomistic understanding of personhood. As a result, debates about the social implications of biomedical research and practice tend to consider human beings not as individuals, but as part of the wider community to which they belong.

In the past few years, the governance of biotechnology in China has also included some initiatives of public engagement and involvement into policy making, as a participant pointed out in her presentation. Indeed, the recent launch of a number of public consultations indicates that a process of science democratization is slowly getting under way in the broader context of China’s ongoing political reforms.

In addition to lectures and discussions, the summer school also offered the opportunity to visit some biotechnology research centres in Beijing and neighbouring areas. Under a torrid sun, we were driven to the futuristic surrounding of Langfang, a district located midway between the cities of Beijing and Tianjin, which in the last decade has become a hub of high-tech industries. In the second week, we visited laboratories focused on plant biotechnology and experimental fields of genetically engineered crop. It is worth mentioning that China has been leading the GM revolution among the emerging economies and is developing the largest plant biotechnology capacity after the United States.

Finally, on the last day before our departure, we discussed and set up the bases to carry out collaborative research projects with our Chinese colleagues. In keeping with the spirit of the school, we tried to find shared interests and possible convergence between our diverse research areas. Posters about these projects will be displayed at the next EGN Conference in Cardiff in October.

In sum, the long trip to Beijing was definitely worth it. Not only did we expand our knowledge on the governance of biotechnology in China and Europe, but we had the opportunity to take a glimpse into the culture and society of this fascinating and fast-changing part of the world. The establishment of enduring connections and collaborations with both our Chinese and UK-based colleagues, moreover, will add further value to this productive and rewarding experience.