

Article for the ‘New Zealand Geographer’ about Second Global Economic Geography Conference in Beijing 2007, by Steffen Wetzstein

“In (Pre-) Olympic Spirit: Assembling the Global Economic Geography Community in Beijing, China”

This article is a brief summary of my personal conference highlight in 2007, the Second Global Conference on Economic Geography held from the 25th to the 28th of June 2007 in Beijing, China. Almost 400 members of the international economic geography community, representing 40 countries ranging from Australia to Vietnam, came together in a location where - in one year’s time - the global sports community will celebrate the next Olympic Games. Jointly organised by the Institute of Geographical Sciences and Natural Resources Research at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (co-chair: Weidong Liu), and the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore (co-chair Henry Yeung), this event was a timely successor to the first global conference that took place in Singapore in 2000. The overall objective was to discuss and debate current and new research agendas in economic geography as well as to rethink the relationship between this sub-discipline of human geography and the wider social science community.

More specifically, the conference aimed at providing a forum for constructive cross-regional dialogue among economic geographers from all regions and countries as well as an opportunity for economic geographers from outside Asia to interact with geographers from within the host region. According to the organisers’ website, it was envisaged that this conference and its associated activities would enable economic geographers from outside the Asian region to experience first-hand the dynamics of economic transformations in China and East Asia. Beijing 2007 for me personally was about both, presenting my doctoral thesis findings on economic governance in Auckland to a global audience of geographers, and making use of interesting networking opportunities in my academic field.

The conference was very well organised. Given the overall resource constraints and the considerable language barriers, things went surprisingly smoothly. I really enjoyed being there. What stood out for me was the friendliness of the ordinary Chinese

people and their willingness to help whenever possible. With generally limited or no English language skills, they tried every possible way to ease my anxieties around mundane activities such as finding my way around and figuring out meeting places and times. It was a particular pleasure to deal with Chinese geography students. They not only proved indispensable in supporting activities such as registration, general information provision, and organising functions and events during the conference, but they did their work usually with a big smile on their face. Bustling Beijing was an intriguing backdrop for intellectual debate. Hot and dusty and full of activity and noise as it prepares for next year's Olympic Games - this city is one giant construction site. The futuristic looking 'Birds Nest' Olympic Stadium could be seen directly from my daily breakfast venue. To be able to mix with the always friendly and welcoming local people, to explore nearby ancient sights such as the Great Wall and to experience the exotic food of China's 16 million Capital was in itself worth my travel expenses.

The conference gave me new enthusiasm for thinking, researching and teaching 'Economic Geography'. My favourite conference topics were the role of location in firm strategies, inner city re-development (e.g. Beijing, Singapore), sustainable strategic urban and regional planning, a critique of Richard Florida's concept of the Creative Class, effects of accelerated urbanisation, global cities, 'buzz' and face-to-face interaction (F2F) in economic activity, research on the applicability of the cluster concept, a multi-angle take on neoliberalism, geographies of global talent, and the many fascinating presentations by Asian researchers who introduced the interesting theoretical, empirical and policy challenges of their home countries and regions to a global audience. I also had the chance to experience face-to-face (and thus to contribute to what a recent literature strand terms 'buzz') 'household names' in Economic Geography such as Peter Dicken, Gordon Clark, Cathy Gibson, Gernot Grabher, Harald Bathelt, Meric Gertler and Amy Glasmeier. The final key note presentation by Gernot Grabher, made a great impact on me, and a desire to improve the style of my own academic performances. I also greatly enjoyed meeting and catching up with my German speaking colleagues.

The field trip to the Beijing Economic and Technological Development Area (BDA) highlighted the different scale of industry promotion and firm assistance activity in

China compared to New Zealand. But I also became more aware of the heavy social and environmental costs of China's rapid industrial progress. In order to host the Olympic Games, I learnt that roughly 1.4 million people have been displaced by the colossal transformation of Beijing's urban landscape. And the environmental conditions - such as Beijing's dust- and smog-filled air that I could experience myself - are a problem which policy makers and social scientists including geographers are increasingly paying attention to.

For me, the conference highlighted two important wider issues for the work of New Zealand Geographers. New Zealand is an integrate part of an Asia-Pacific region that undergoes substantial economic transformation at the moment. A key task for Geographers then is the exploration of the spatial implications of these changes for a small and open economy such as New Zealand's, and contributing to policies that adequately respond to new economic challenges. The recent migration of manufacturing jobs (Fisher and Paykel) and service jobs (Air New Zealand) to northern parts of the region may be a timely wake up call. The conference also made me think about the state of the discipline of Economic Geography in our country. Recent administrative changes around Departments and Schools of Geography seem to have favoured researching and teaching about spatial problems that are framed in environmental and physical terms and somewhat undervalue the study of economic or economic development policy related aspects of our changing world. Yet, Economic Geography does matter. We need more students who can engage in complex problem-solving by bringing perspectives, skills, methodologies and international case-study knowledge derived from being thought in this intellectual tradition.

Visiting the People's Republic of China and attending this conference was personally very satisfying. Having grown up in East-Germany, I felt a bit uneasy at entering a so-called communist country again (including chasing a visa in Auckland). But meeting these nice people, and experiencing their willingness to make my stay pleasurable, helped me to get rid of one preconceived idea, and left me with one less fear. This very positive experience, besides the new intellectual stimulation I got, the new contacts I made and the associated fun I had at this Second Global Conference on

Economic Geography, will remain at the heart of what I have taken away from Beijing 2007. Let's look forward to great Olympic Games next year.

Steffen Wetzstein
School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences,
Victoria University of Wellington