

***Identifying and Surpassing Contextual Barriers in Cross-Border Research Collaboration:  
The Case of the Sino-Swedish Project Shanghai Local Interaction Platform***

By: Dr Alexandros Nikitas & Prof. Ulrike Rahe, Division of Design & Human Factors,  
Department of Product and Production Development, Chalmers University of Technology

The complexity of reforming, through research and user-centred practice, the transportation identity of emerging urban environments that have been recently experiencing a rapid increase of population and industrialization of lifestyles, is a challenge that calls for approaches that differ from many conventional planning and design norms. These approaches cannot be addressed within traditional disciplinary and sector boundaries, but only through bringing together expertise that appreciates the need for interdisciplinary cross-border collaboration founded on knowledge sharing and transfer mechanisms. It is widely acknowledged that developing cities have lessons to learn from developed cities as regards roles of new technologies, forms of institutional management and the long term consequences of different de facto policies toward the automobile (Gakenheimer, 1999).

More specifically, research focusing on the multifaceted urban needs of a mega-city like Shanghai, which looks to be in the frontier of sustainable and inclusive urban growth, should provide answers on how to manage mobility and access in an efficient way (Nikitas & Rahe, 2013). Mobility is becoming more and more an invaluable societal resource, for cities as densely populated as Shanghai. This is because mobility is the medium that provides the right of urban access to all the destinations and activities that an individual needs in order to have a productive standard of living within a cohesive society. Degrading conditions of urban mobility and thus accessibility in developing countries is an important policy issue. The rapid trend of motorization is likely to make the situation worse (Acharya, 2005) generating inequities and dysfunctionalities closely associated with a severely car-oriented transport system; problems that the western world has already faced. Research negotiating therefore inventive but yet realistic methods to encourage more sustainable mobility patterns for inner-city traveling and raising consciousness about the social benefits of their use, should be the base if a voluntarily rather than a regulatory modal change is the goal to be attained (Banister, 2008). This is something that has been done extensively in Europe in general and in Sweden in particular.

This abstract is discussing the cross-cultural research barriers referring to the themes of urban mobility and access as they have been framed for the interactive Sino-Swedish programme named Shanghai Local Interaction Platform or SHLIP. This is an interactive cross-country platform initiated by MISTRA Urban Futures (MUF), an international centre based on Gothenburg, committed to support sustainable urban development. MUF utterly accommodates a diverse research-industry-governance/society co-production programme with five different case study platforms around the globe (i.e. LIPs in Gothenburg, Greater Manchester, Kisumu, Cape Town and Shanghai) that is negotiating themes referring to sustainable urban growth. SHLIP in particular is devoted to update the current understanding of how Shanghai can safeguard social inclusion, urban mobility and eco-friendly design using as a vehicle cross-cultural knowledge exchange.

More specifically, China's 25-year plan indicates a commitment to sustainability with an emphasis on mobility and transport innovation. China has for a long time sought Swedish cooperation on these issues. MUF is explicitly highlighted in the recently renewed and signed twin-city agreement between Shanghai and Gothenburg, with the purpose to strengthen the Sino-Swedish relations in the field of future urban development.

SHLIP presents a collaboration programme, which is based on the capacities of a truly interdisciplinary group of researchers and practitioners set to adopt a predominantly human-centred approach to provide concrete answers to some of the most urging urban mobility and access

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challenges that Shanghai is facing. The academic personnel coming from the Division of Design and Human Factors of Chalmers is the cornerstone of this research initiative. The platform's primary collaboration function means to embrace the sustainable design expertise that is part of the educational and research legacy of Tongji University and its College of Design and Innovation, in particular.

The Swedish advanced knowledge in integrating within a vastly car-oriented transport system a new (or improved) breed of sustainable public transport operations, complemented by the Chinese ability to speedily support urban design innovation that could take even city-wide transportation systems to new heights, guarantees a contribution to mobility research of excellent scientific quality. More specifically, the team at Chalmers is running prototype studies in Gothenburg and assists to construct the study's research framework in China. They also provide guidance throughout the duration of the programme in China and will be responsible for analysing in depth the results and subsequently collaboratively develop concrete design solutions to be tested. Tongji researchers are responsible for the day-to-day progress of the activities in Shanghai.

Having in place a well-tested know-how mechanism to overcome cross-cultural differences between distant research philosophies is the most important hurdle in any scientific collaboration between Sweden and China and could be vital for the success of the programme, despite the best of scientific intentions and planning. After almost two years from the initiation of SHLIP, a consistent mechanism that will promote cross-border communication and the philosophy of shared responsibility is slowly but steadily taking its final form. Practice showed that this was and still is a task that needs consistent efforts and long-term commitment from both parties.

Close communication and knowledge transfer on a continuous basis between Chalmers and Tongji researchers is the key factor to make the programme sustainable. This is realized through regular skype meetings between the closest collaborators and frequent (even daily) e-mail correspondence. This communication is not typical and entirely professionally bound. It is well appreciated by now that in order to have the Chinese participants motivated close interpersonal bonding should be achieved in order to gain their trust.

A virtual interactive platform that has been already initiated will eventually enable the creation of a real-time knowledge exchange arena that will speed up cross-cultural communication even further. Enabling Chinese researchers to actually work on a semi-permanent basis in Gothenburg has been acknowledged to be a vital ingredient of the collaboration; its lack could produce issues of inefficient homogeneity. In addition, co-creation is supported by frequent visits of the Swedish researchers to China.

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