Richard de Grijs – Peking University, China - Semester 1 2017.

Richard exploring Abel Tasman National Park near Nelson

Where you have come from and what do you teach?

For the past 7 1/2 years, I have been based at the Kavli Institute for Astronomy and Astrophysics, an international research institute at Peking University in Beijing, China. Originally, I am from the Netherlands, but as so often happens, a career in science has taken me across international borders a number of times, with postdoctoral positions in the US and UK, followed by a faculty position in the UK before being appointed to a professorship at Peking University.

At UC, I teach a special topic at 300/400 level in the Department of Physics and Astronomy. In essence, I teach a slimmed down version of a course I developed in Beijing on the basis of a high-level textbook I published in 2011, which focuses on the physics of a wide range of methods of distance determination in astronomy, from the nearest stars to the edge of the Universe.

What interested you in the Erskine Programme/Why did you want to come to UC?

I had heard about this scheme from a former Erskine fellow, so when I ran into colleagues from UC at the 2015 International Astronomical Union's General Assembly, which was held in Honolulu, Hawaii, that year I took the opportunity to bring this up. Following some discussions, it appeared that my expertise and research interests matched well with those of the astronomers at UC.

Visiting NZ had always been a strong desire, so I'm glad I had the opportunity to visit this wonderful country! I am particularly enjoying interactions with the students and staff, but more generally with Kiwis I meet anywhere, really. Everyone is so friendly! I hoped that we could establish scientific collaborations with local UC astronomers, and I'm pleased to say that a number of discussions about possibilities have been ongoing. The University's Mt John Observatory at Lake Tekapo is of particular interest in this context; I visited it twice already, but that was mostly for scientific tourism reasons. I hope to be able to use actual data from the observatory sometime soon though.

What have you been doing at UC?

In addition to the course I'm teaching and scientific brainstorming discussions with a number of colleagues, I have taken the opportunity of largely uninterrupted, quality time to focus on writing a main chapter of the book on the history of science I am currently writing. Without visits to my office by my research students and having no administration duties to take care of, in the past four weeks at UC I managed to finish a 56-page chapter of the book, specifically a brief overview of the history of cartography. This is one of two introductory chapters of the book, which focuses on the determination of longitude at sea in the 17th Century. Having finished this chapter, all that remains is the final introductory chapter and an appendix. An additional benefit of pursuing this here in Christchurch is that my internet-based research proceeds faster than at my home institution, where the presence of the Great Firewall is a bit of an impediment at times...

What have you most enjoyed about your time here at UC/Christchurch?

The incredibly friendly Kiwis! Plus the interactions with colleagues, students, members of the Canterbury Astronomical Society where I gave a public lecture, etc. And the abundance of fresh air (remember, I am usually based in Beijing, where the air quality occasionally deteriorates to a level that prompts news reports around the world.... Fortunately this doesn't happen very frequently, but still). I also enjoy being able to indulge in food that is a bit more difficult to access in China, including cheese and liquorice!

I have had the opportunity to visit friends elsewhere in NZ, and so I managed to see some of this beautiful country and experience their great hospitality. This definitely calls for more, and my wife (who couldn't join me this time owing to her own busy schedule as an academic) is insisting that I take her to NZ for a vacation soon!