

A SUMMER OF TRACKING THE GLOBAL ECONOMY



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Profile

- Yale Herb Scarf Summer Research Opportunities (HSSRO)
- HKU Overseas Research Fellowship (ORF)

During the summer of 2017, I worked as a research assistant (RA) for Yale University Professor Samuel Kortum. It was under the Herb Scarf Summer Research Program organised by Department of Economics of Yale, with me being one of the two student RAs from HKU.

In the meantime, the Overseas Research Fellowship Program at HKU Faculty of Science provided me with generous support. In addition to financial support, I had the opportunity to work with an

internal supervisor, Professor Guodong Li, and was guided to plan and organise my research.

The research project aimed to explore and understand the factors behind the global trade collapse and subsequent recovery during the Great Recession. To me the discussions about US-China trade war, and also the elegance of the models used were meaningful experience.

Naturally, and without much prior experience in economics research, I was expecting making “ground breaking” discoveries with just a few taps in a software or a few equations on a white board. To my dismay, one of my first tasks was data cleansing and visualisation. It turned out that in research, patience was essential. Before rushing into the complicated economic indicators, one had to read through the documentation of data collection and organisation, for the clarification and accurate interpretation of concepts. After that, small treatments to data were also critical, and sometimes we might spend days to figure out the exact calculation. Mundane as it might seem, working on the data gradually led me to understand the economic concepts better; and understanding of the data available later became a source of inspiration when additional research topics were considered.

As we continued, I was more and more aware of the similarities between research and story-telling. There can be numerous ways, many of which are correct, where one can combine and present data. Therefore, finding the right perspective to approach, analyse, and illustrate an argument is crucial. Every time, as I was waiting for the computer software to visualise

some newly defined or calculated variables, it felt like digging into an unknown cave of treasures.

Another memorable lesson was about being detail-oriented. Throughout the research programme, I always had the ambition to make “major discoveries”. It served as a source of motivation, but also made me ignore small details when some seemingly major “observations” occurred. One time, I drew a graph whose pattern was almost contrary to the common view. It was an early morning and I rushed to my professor’s office. We were reading through the program line by line, with my hands shaking slightly because of excitement. Suddenly, I realised that the “discovery” was caused by a mistreatment for certain cases! It did not take long to correct the mistake, but it was a good lesson about the importance of details.

Last but not least, I was inspired by my professor’s passion and dedication to his work. Despite his busy schedule, my team often received his advice early in the morning, and almost never did I see boredom or tiredness on his face. In addition, Professor was knowledgeable on issues ranging from theory to data structure, and was always patient to teach. I was impressed by these qualities, even when it had been almost one year since I left Yale.

I am grateful to be a member of the HKU Faculty of Science community, and appreciate all the support and opportunities this platform has provided. As I am currently exploring other possibilities in career, doing research at HKU and abroad was for sure one of the happiest and most fulfilling experience in my university life.

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I am not throwing away my shot

–Hamilton the musical

