First, I want to thank Heather Ford for organizing this roundtable. I would like to plunge right into the question of “Asian Commons.” I think it is productive to raise the question precisely because there is a lack of consensus on what “Asia” means, let alone finding an answer to “what Asian commons” may mean. But the Q of Asia is important because it pushed us into thinking about alternative frames of identification. This exercise will help strengthen our common goal – i.e., promoting CC in Asian jurisdictions. I have a modest proposal to make which may help us build solidarity without having to romanticize the notion of a homogeneous Asia. I am a firm believer that solidarity can only be built on our mutual understanding of each other’s difference. If difference is acknowledged and respected, then common ground will naturally emerge.

Before getting into my proposal, I’d like to make a quick aside on “Asia” as a discursive entity.

As a discourse, “Asia” is a loaded term. There has been a long train of critical scholarship on the historical formations of Asia as an imaginary discourse. In fact, every Asian country offers its own historical account of “what Asia means.” The richness of “Asia” as a reality is resistant to any attempt to unify it - even at the discursive level. I agree with Lawrence Liang that “there can be no easy mapping of the history of the commons and its practice onto Asia.” In fact, pan-Asianism” has created its own issues & problems throughout history. A more practical approach would be for us to seek alternative frames of reference that can build some tangible solidarity.
I propose that we think of “Asia” along a dual track of identification – let’s think about Asian developing countries/regions on one end of the spectrum, and developed countries and regions on another end. I think regional divisions – whether we are talking about Asia or Europe or Latin America - are not entirely meaningful. That’s because the challenges of promoting CC in Asian developing countries are different from those in affluent & post-affluent jurisdictions in Asia. If we have to group ourselves, the structuring principle should rest on the following criteria - the economic structure of a jurisdiction, its infrastructure for information technology, and its culture of intellectual property rights. Seen in that context, two obvious, large groups emerged - developing regions and developed regions. There is no one-size-fits-all approach because the issue of the digital divide posed more problems to some regions than others.

What do we do in China? Our promotion plan reflects the challenge that a developing country faced. For Mainland China where the digital elites are a minority, we felt compelled to design projects that target the socially marginalized groups in rural and urban China. Apart from digital elites, we want to reach out to two large targets - (1) the vast number of the relatively well-to-do” households (known as 小康)—they are a cut below the middle class (approximately 500 million); (2) rural communities and migrant workers in urban China (700 million). Our larger goal is to come up with CC models that are scalable within China’s vast hinterland, and which may be useful to and replicable in other Asian developing countries. The countryside, in other words, is as important a target for us as the metropolitan & urban centers. Building a CC presence and CC infrastructure in rural China is thus a long-term goal to which we are deeply committed.
Let me give you an example of a rural project we will launch next year. I call it West China NGO project that target small, homegrown NGOs located in West China. This project grew out of a four-way collaboration - CC China Mainland, MIT, and two other Chinese universities. It is not a licensed-focused approach but it dovetails with the open content spirit of CC. We will accomplish three tasks simultaneously– (1) we will build and maintain a new software platform that combines the strengths of Web 1.0 and 2.0 for capacity building of targeted NGOs. We will give the platform to NGOs for free; (2) we will design and develop CC-licensed training materials on Web 2.0 culture and 2.0 applications (3) we will hold three training workshops a year to introduce the platform & the training materials. We believe that social media technology and applications can help those small NGOs accomplish a lot.

I won’t go into details. I do want to note that this project was designed with grassroots NGOs in mind. (They should be distinguished from GONGOS, adequately endowed governmental NGOs, which are well plugged into the government.) The model itself is scalable and replicable. MIT and CC China Mainland will be very interested in working with other Asian-developing country-jurisdictions to develop a CC model that serves the grassroots organizations in the rural hinterland. I’d like to emphasize that grassroots in the developing world carries a special meaning that refers to the underprivileged - those sitting on the lower social strata. The two keywords for developing countries are poverty and the digital divide. I can’t emphasize enough that the fundamental concern for the weaker peoples need to be put on the agenda and be incorporated into the CC world view and into our CC practice.
Back to my proposal – the idea of a homogenous “Asian Commons” will not work well. On the other hand, Asian developing country-jurisdictions are a natural grouping in itself and already shared a lot in common. It will be fruitful to not only build coalitions of Asian developing countries (I am aware that there were already such coalitions in existence), but to substantiate those symbolic ties with projects that are not necessarily license focused but which intersect meaningfully with what we do for CC.