"Sustainable urban development for whom?"

A comparison between two experiences in China

Giulia C.Romano – CERI-Sciences Po/Asia Centre

Introduction

- Research topic: analysis of learning processes and "added value" of the transfer of concepts of spatial planning for "SUD" (read "eco-cities") from Europe to China

- Focus on the case of Yangzhou among different bilateral initiatives

- Question: what are the emerging trends of "eco-city" development in China and are alternatives possible?

"Added value"

- From Claire Colomb's (2007) framework of analysis

- "added value" is the capacity of cooperation projects "to tackle specific strategic spatial issues at a new scale and in a better way than without cooperation" as well as their capacity to "solve spatial planning problems which were previously addressed in an inefficient way" (2007: 347)

- Many projects are international initiatives which main aim is "to help China" in its climate change battle, in improving the quality of its cities, etc.

Eco-city development in China (why the search for alternatives?)

- Exploration of new concepts for more "sustainable" urban/cities' development

- Embedded in policy discourses, government programs and in bilateral and multilateral partnerships with Western countries and not only

- Several initiatives

- Dubious and/or erroneous interpretations of sustainability from several points of view, included that of social justice

Eco-cities in China as "failures"

- A burgeoning literature on this topic (Caprotti *et al.* 2015; Zhuang 2015; Chang and Sheppard 2013; Chien 2013; Joss and Molella 2013; Pow and Neo 2013; Wu F.2012; Sigrist 2009; May 2008a, 2008b, 2007)

- Focus on translations and on results in the pursuit of low-carbon and sustainable paths

- General consensus (shared also by the official literature – Qiu *et al.* 2012) on qualifying eco-cities in China as "failures"

- Main examples: Binhai, Caofeidian, Dongtan, Huangbaiyu

Why failures? Criticisms on the purposes of eco-city development

- Eco-city as means of economic development and place branding in a context of interurban competition (Caprotti *et al.* 2015; Chang and Sheppard 2013; Chien 2013; Joss and Molella 2013; Sze and Zhou 2011)

- Examples of "green entrepreneurialism" (Pow and Neo 2013)

- "Old wine in the same bottle" – local governments found another way to pursue their strategies of land commodification (Chien 2013)

Major problems in eco-city conceptualisation

- Doubts on the ecological component (Dongtan !?!?) (Chang and Sheppard 2013; Qiu *et al.*2012)

- Doubtful relation with the surrounding environment (Caofeidian) (Zhuang 2015; Joss and Molella 2013)

- Car-oriented eco-cities (Tianjin) (Caprotti *et al*. 2015)

- Conceived in a **modernist top-down matter** (what about people?)

- **Omission or neglect of the social dimension** – "eco-cities for whom?" – and construction of "**ecological enclaves**" (Hodson and Marvin 2010)

The Chinese eco-city- source Peng 2010 - 中国生态城迷失？ (Chinese eco-cities got lost?)
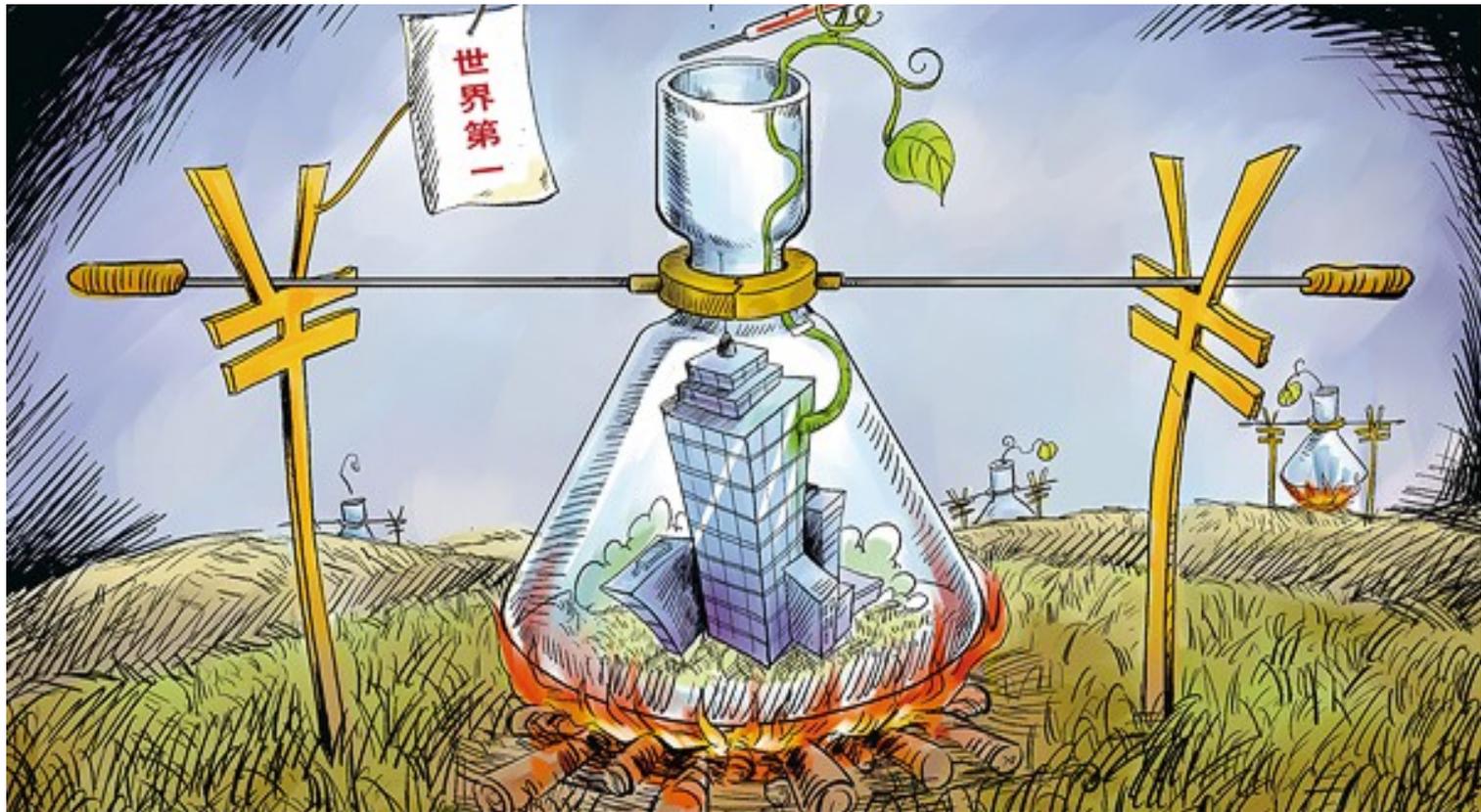
Car-oriented eco-cities (Tianjin)

Alternatives: looking at the less wealthy pockets

- What happens when housing addresses less wealthy families?

- Cases of Huangbaiyu village and of Yangzhou old city retrofitting/upgrading

- Comparison to address the question of social justice in eco-city partnerships in China (for whom are these partnerships/ interventions run?)

- Both cooperation projects started in the early 2000s (time dimension) -> provide useful lessons for ongoing cooperation initiatives (Qingdao and Wuhan)

- Carefully reflect on the "added value" (normative) of cooperation and on the place of people in these projects of international cooperation

Huangbaiyu case

- Initiated by the China-US Centre for Sustainable Development (CUCSD) in 2002: construct a model ecological village for 1500 people

- Plans entirely drawn by the architectural and planning company McDonough+Partners on the basis of the concept *Cradle to Cradle*

- Technological vision and conceptualisation of sustainability assumed to fit local life-style and local socio-economic needs (top-down planning)

Huangbaiyu – the concept

- Architecture based on the use of local renewable material (hay and pressed earth) easy to recycle and reuse -> *cradle to cradle*

- Energy concept: gas from "waste" combustion and centralised energy provision (ensure the smallest energy loss) and solar panels

- Realisation of a "community" through gathering families in a compact village to increase "the goals of "convenience and comfort'" (May 2008a: 242)

- Street layout oriented to favour car use and provision of garages for each house

- Sustainability to be reached through commerce rather than regulation: develop industry to transform 1,529 villagers into industrial workers

Yangzhou case

- Started with the Sino-German environmental conference (2000): GTZ "Eco-city Planning and Management Program"

- Selection of Yangzhou (one of the first SEPA – now MEP – eco-cities): strategies for urban sustainability

- Focus on the upgrading of the old city (5.09 sq km) as a place for living (decaying, overcrowded, lacking of infrastructures) under the concept of "careful urban renewal" (*Behutsame Stadterneuerung*)

Yangzhou – the concept

- Housing renewal/retrofitting to be conducted "step-by-step" with the participation of residents and in accordance with their wishes and economic capacities

- Replacing the idea of "project" with that of "rehabilitation process"

- Planners and architects to work in contact with people: collect ideas, concerns, learn about the problems of the area and what is of paramount importance for residents

- Participation in planning, implementation and monitoring phases

- Cheap solutions to improve housing, included ecological solutions ("winterproofing" - *Winterfest machen*) and proposal of other ecological measures (according to people's pockets and wishes)

Huangbaiyu vs. Yangzhou: sustainable development for whom?

- "sustainable city": village of Huangbaiyu according to common wisdom (and planners' wisdom – Neuman 2005)

- What is the "sustainable city"? A reified object or a process?

- Planners' answer: the sustainable city does not exist (Neuman 2005)

- "Sustainable city": the result of a process of incremental learning and experimentation characterised by contested negotiations among decision-makers, planners and the civil society (Campbell 1996)

- The city is not a "static product of a developer's marketing campaign" but a living thing (Neuman 2005: 22)

Huangbaiyu: for the benefit of whom?

- Gross error of planners "to centralise the experiences and worldviews of the locals" (Sze and Zhou 2011: 220)

- Housing was perfect for an urban lifestyle without urban employment going with it

- Cost of houses (3,500 US$ -> 12,500 US$)

- People forced to move – cut from subsistence means

- Biogas plant: corn stalks and cobs as "waste"

- Replace "inefficient" and "backward" energy uses in Huangbaiyu: but inefficient for whom?

- Energy costs unbearable for locals – trade-off with other priorities

Yangzhou: the old city has still many needs but work **slowly** goes on

- Public administration study on a subsidy program to encourage residents to renovate

- Basic renovation around 80,000 yuan (max subsidy 25,000 yuan)

- Issuing of several policies and regulations

- Further application in other areas beyond the pilot and exploration of ecological measures in traditional buildings (pilot) -> development of a subsidy program (50%)

- Old city gasification replacing coal briquettes (no evidence of energy poverty, but cost of gas tanks quite high for families, they hope to obtain piped gas ; some households use electricity, often sold at subsidised prices)

Discussion and conclusion

- Huangbaiyu led by a "project" mentality (and not a "process") where people were not asked **at all** about their needs and aspirations

- "low-carbon development" and equity: carbon accounts equalise American consumers' carbon emission with that of Chinese villagers

- Rhetoric "what if China consumes like us?" justifying this type of interventions in the name of "sustainability" and where "present hierarchies are naturalised" (May 2008a)

- Reasonability of Yangzhou strategy, though hard, still not institutionalised as fraught with conflict (interests) and with emerging tendencies of government-led gentrification

- Danger of inappropriate redevelopment (path dependency) and inappropriate use of "participation"