

**From eco-cities to sustainable city-regions: China's uncertain quest for an ecological civilization**

Chen, Yawei

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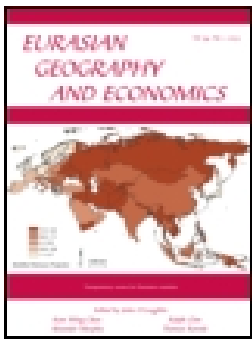
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## From eco-cities to sustainable city-regions: China's uncertain quest for an ecological civilization

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Yawei Chen

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## BOOK REVIEW

***From eco-cities to sustainable city-regions: China's uncertain quest for an ecological civilization***, by Ernest J. Yanarella and Richard S. Levine, Cheltenham and Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2021, 288 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781839102776; £31.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781802208399 The eBook version is priced from £25.00 from Google Play, ebooks.com and other eBook vendors, while in print the book can be ordered from the Edward Elgar Publishing website.

The pursuit of eco-city initiatives has been a critical strategy of China's sustainable path to an ecological civilization. *From Eco-Cities to Sustainable City-Regions: China's Uncertain Quest for an Ecological Civilization*, by Ernest J. Yanarella and Richard S. Levine, casts light on China's current experiment on developing its eco-cities and draws lessons for the development of sustainable city-region models.

The book starts with an introduction explaining the book's structure and the various concepts used for this book. Chapter 1 *Theoretical foundations of sustainable city-region* explains the theoretical foundations in developing the so-called sustainable city-region concept. The authors specially addressed several contradictions and contestation around sustainability development regarding definition, measuring indicators, and conceptual framework. Furthermore, the authors show the advantages of using the Sustainable Area Budget as indicators and the Sustainable City Game to analyze the multi-stakeholder process. Besides, the authors stressed the importance of society and citizen participation in forming sustainable city-regions.

Chapter 2 *Eco-city development strategy in Beijing and China's cities: top-down/bottom-up dynamics* seeks to explore the origin and development of China's eco-city logic and investigate how Chinese leadership and local initiatives address the ecological type of city-building. The chronological transition in economic development and the concept of eco-cities as well as the national organizations implementing policies regarding the eco-city concept were documented in detail. The authors suggest that China is motivated more by a technocratic mentality, prefers to use eco-indicators for measurement, and has weaker civil society influence in the operationalization process.

Chapter 3 *Suzhou, Wuxi, and China's twenty-first century eco-city program: from austerity ecology to eco-scientific plenty* traces the historical development of the two cities and the current eco-city development in the two cities. The authors used the observation of the local urban planning exhibition to explain the eco logic of Wuxi New District. Despite interesting observations, the proof of eco-logic using the function of museums and the urban planning exhibition hall remains questionable. It can be insightful but does not make a sufficient constructive argument why they are valuable toward the building up of the eco-city logic of the two cases. It remains unproven how significance these edifices represent/define the eco-city logic of the locals. Some of the historical development of the two cities could have been shortened and the focus place mainly on the most critical information.

Chapter 4 *New Kunming/Chengong eco-city-district: city surrounding the countryside?* discusses how the World Horticulture Expo and the 2003 strategic development

framework facilitated the Chenggong Eco-District. Compared with the previous chapter, Chenggong's story is more focused on the relocated villagers' experience, the effort to reproduce public space and historical identity. The authors dedicated their effort to the findings of three conflicting interpretations of the rural reconstruction movement, including land-lost peasant attitudes toward state expropriation of rural lands, village land expropriation and the condition of the village peasants after land expropriation. The introduction of a new project SUCCESS sits a bit awkwardly in the conclusion, suggesting the involved cases are often divorced from "place-centered and culturally-informed land attribution" (102).

Chapter 5 *Shantou: a metropolitan coastal garden-city in the making?* uses three concepts: assemblage, mobilities and mutations, to explain how a strategic development plan assembled and adopted the various stakeholders involved in making the Eco-garden program. The question unanswered is to what extent the international interaction facilitated the eco-philosophy of the locality.

Chapter 6 *Beyond the Dongtan debacle: Tianjin and global showcase urban sustainability* explores the different studies regarding a well-known and often discussed eco-city case in Dongtai, in Shanghai's Chongming Island. Sze (2015) considered the eco-capitalist commodification process and Chang (2015) explored how the eco-concept and policies travel and circulate in the Chinese context in the so-called actually existing sustainability. In comparison, the authors explore the development of the Sino-Singapore Tianjin-Bin Hai Eco-city based on the research from Caprotti in the experimental city and its application in Tianjin and their field trip. The authors have a more convincing argument on the role of leadership in social sustainability as a "local, informed, participatory, balance-seeking process". While the authors appreciated the use of the Symplantations game in the application of spatial intervention, it would be interesting if the authors could indicate what spatial interventions are really rooted in local-traditional philosophical concepts as the interventions in the case can be described as foreign.

Chapter 7 *Conclusion* summarized the lessons from the previous discussion and takeaways from the cases used in the previous chapters. The previous eco-city cases show how the eco-city concept is transplanted into Chinese soil with more independent and homegrown strategies, despite the involvement of international organizations in each of the eco-city projects examined in the book. It is a pity that the summary of findings has been very brief and focused chiefly on party-state context and various political perspectives rather than the merits and shortcomings of the shared cases. Some of the critical policies recommended are: getting inspiration from the ancient wisdom of Chinese philosophies and religions; choosing brownfields instead of the green field as a focus area; addressing sustainability in the heart of the city rather than its periphery; more bottom-up process and citizen participation; using the sustainable area budget instead of eco-indicators; and institutional reform and policy experiment to accommodate the transition from eco-cities to sustainable city-regions.

There are several strengths of the book. First, the authors project various alternative views to understand ecological modernization and Chinese cities' eco-park strategies. The sustainable Area Budget as a measuring indicator and the focus on human development in sustainability are all important elements that can contribute to the improvement of China's eco-park development. Second, the authors advocate the human perspective and address human development when evaluating sustainability efforts in Chinese cities, one key aspect that needs to be added or represented in Chinese eco-park development. The authors reveal the individuals in the ecological transition process and the missed opportunities in achieving social sustainability in the eco-park

development (e.g. Sino-Singapore Tianjin-Bin Hai Eco-city). Third, the authors rightly point out the possibility of borrowing from China's rooted historical philosophy and tradition for possible sustainable answers. Fourth, the authors incorporate different researchers' perspectives in discussing each eco-park project. The interpretation from different angles gives the readers a more comprehensive picture of how eco-parks development should be understood.

There are also several areas for improvement in the book. First, the book needs a section to address the methodology that defines the whole study in this book, especially how the case studies are designed and examined. Currently, it is difficult to grasp the logic behind the selection of cases, the logic of the order, and why the focus and the way of the case description are so different. As not all case studies are based on first-hand information, some cases are illustrated more concretely. In contrast, others are more abstract or depend mainly on the observation from other studies, making the comparison less convincing. Sometimes the authors positioned some researchers as natives of the case location in order to sound more convincing, but after close examination the cited researchers are not actually native to the area. Second, the authors approached the eco-concepts and explored the eco-park cases from a more political and anthropological perspective. For readers with urban or environmental planning backgrounds, the information used to construct the cases leads to the overestimation of the influence of the historical power struggle and political and party-state issues. In the description of the exemplar cases, it is not easy to see the links between political issues and the eco-park cases' development. Some political accusations are popular statements in Western society and have not been backed up by solid evidence. However, they are stated by the authors more like facts. Third, the authors are interested in the rural reconstruction movement and civic territorialization politics but these are discussed under the cover of the more timely jargon of "ecological civilization". Readers who have more expectations about sustainability strategies or ecological development may find a limited connection in some chapters (e.g. the lengthy historical political and party struggles or the focus on the museum and urban planning exhibition hall to explain the ecological development in Chapter 3), making the argument even less convincing. Fourth, there is a relatively weak argument regarding the summary of findings that resulted from the examined cases. After reading the book, the question remains to what extent the historical events (colonial, party struggle, corruption allegation, and other historical anecdotes) contribute to the understanding of the eco-path chosen by the locals. There needs to be more argument in the case studies about how the lack of Chinese philosophy influences the process of Chinese eco-park development. The under-developed summary of findings in Chapter 7 means that some of the recommendations for policy improvement lack a solid foundation.

Despite the Western origin of the concept, no city or city district in either America or Europe has claimed the title of eco-city. China's eco-park experiences provide an interesting testing ground for how these West-generated concepts can be implanted in Chinese soil. The authors demonstrate the various efforts to operationalize the concept and localize the development strategies in a specific local context and the difficulties and controversies along the way. After reading the book about China's eco-park experiences, many questions remain: How local is local when cities develop local-based sustainable strategies? To what extent should the proto-sustainability be preserved, and to what extent should this proto-sustainability fit the reality of social-economic-environment changes? How much difference does the Chinese political party-state context have impacts on China's eco path when compared with the countries in

a different political context? What is the appropriate path for the urban-rural relationship and the rural restructuring process?

Overall, this book provides good insights into China's sustainability effort, the development logic, and various controversies in China's eco-park development. The various cases provide a vivid view of how Chinese cities search for their path in ecological modernization and the bumpy roads they experienced when attempting to transplant the sustainability concept into the local soil. It can be used as a textbook for undergraduates or graduates to understand sustainability debates and its operationalization process in different political-economic-societal contexts. It can also provide researchers on sustainability and eco-park development with rich information and provocative reflections on the global sustainability debate.

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Yawei Chen

*Department of Management in the Built Environment, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands*

 [Y.Chen@tudelft.nl](mailto:Y.Chen@tudelft.nl)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6904-7654>

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