Environment

For Humans Only: China's Quest for Sustainable Urbanization

Nov 28 , 2018

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In her award-winning short novel Folding Beijing (2016), sci-fi author Hao Jingfang envisions a grim future for the Chinese capital. She describes a city made of three different spaces, each occupied by one social class. These self-contained parts of the city unfold at different times, as if they were elements of a giant Rubik's cube. The city is orderly and efficient and yet unjust and discriminating, while natural elements−sunlight, soil, water, plants, animals−appear to be all but a vague memory for most of her inhabitants. As a matter of fact, they are hardly mentioned throughout the novel.

The dystopian vision portrayed in Folding Beijing echoes can be seen as a literary representation of the Chinese expression 'urban disease' (chengshi bing), referring to issues of social inequality, overpopulation, and environmental degradation. With its unprecedented magnitude, China's urbanization epitomizes the ambivalence inherent in modernization processes. Indeed, urban development can both ameliorate and exacerbate some of the most pressing issues facing China: the fight against environmental degradation and climate change, the battle for greater social equality, and the sustainable provision of essential services for all.

Chinese leaders have long faced this conundrum. The first steps towards sustainable urbanization were made as early as 1989, when the City Planning Law was adopted. Three years later China signed the UN Agenda 21, adhering to principles of integrated territorial planning. Since then, a plethora of government initiatives have been launched to incentivize cities to become greener, environmentally safer, and more resource-efficient. The mantra of 'sustainable urbanization' has however only gained momentum in the last decade. This has been partially the result of increased public awareness and activism. In fact, the main engine of China's urban sustainability transition is the restructuring of her political economy towards a post-industrial, service based, consumer-oriented society, in which cities play a central role.

China's efforts for sustainability are consistent with objectives of reforms and opening-up: increasing the nation's prosperity through an efficient use of natural and human resources, assisted by technological and institutional innovation. In fact, this very tension towards material progress−tempered with awareness of the Earth's limits to sustain growth−informed the One-Child-Policy, arguably China's first policy for sustainability. The same principles underlie the New Type Urbanization Plan, launched in 2014 to offer comprehensive guidance to urban development nationwide. The blueprint establishes guidelines and success indicators for the allocation of human capital, a gradual expansion of socioeconomic benefits to vulnerable classes, and mitigation of environmental pollution.

So far, China's efforts for urban sustainability have yielded mixed results. A recent study on a large sample of megacities − home to more than 10% of the Chinese population − shows a

as well as in waste management. The economy has kept growing at a steady pace and for the first time in decades the increase in income gaps has slowed, if not halted altogether. Progress has been made in the provision of welfare services, a long-standing issue for urban social policy. China's major cities are building a cleaner and greener environment, conducive to greater prosperity for the majority of their population.

And yet all that glitters is not gold. The ecological footprint of cities is huge: urbanization has caused enormous biodiversity loss and damaged ecosystems' vitality. Despite the increase in public green space, commodification of nature is widespread. Lakes, woods, and mountains in urban and peri-urban areas are treated as economic assets. They serve the logic of city branding, aimed at attracting wealthy residents, tourists, and hi-tech companies. Cultural heritage is in peril, as city planners seek to exploit tangible and intangible legacies for the expansion of the service industry. One of the most notorious examples of this is Datong, whose ancient walls were reconstructed from scratch as a tourist attraction. The survival of traditional cultures rooted in places is endangered by relocations, frequently employed to make way for urban renewal and environmental remediation. Such displacements tear apart the social and cultural fabric of communities and their relation with the natural environment.

Against this background, progress towards more ambitious sustainability goals may be difficult to achieve. While environmental quality, resource efficiency, and socioeconomic development all find space in the mainstream efficientist paradigm, other criteria are more difficult to bend to the simplification of cost-benefit analysis. Culture, social relations, sense of belonging, and caring for nature are things we can hardly put a price-tag on. Alternatives to this dominant paradigm do exist in China. Seeds of change have been planted by wilderness enthusiasts such as bird watchers, whose numbers have grown in recent years. Community supported agriculture farms and eco-villages have been established on the outskirts of big cities. These initiatives prove that ecological awareness is mounting, and people are refusing to buy into a logic of pure extractivism of natural resources. New values are sprouting in Chinese society, as in the rest of the world, adhering to a vision of socio-ecological wellbeing, where both humans and nature can thrive.

Yet the current state of affairs does not give optimism to supporters of such 'strong' sustainability. In fact, even in the unlikely scenario that these positions become more diffuse within society, channels available to Chinese citizens to influence territorial decision-making are insufficient. Authorities tolerate participation as far as it does not deviate from the overarching political priorities. Even the introduction of innovative sustainability solutions is generally driven by political and corporate interests – rather than by bottom-up initiatives – in line with the paradigm of 'environmental authoritarianism'. In this context, the use of SMART technologies to produce instant feedback about public transportation or energy consumption is certainly positive. But demands for ecological integrity in areas key to

For the time being, meaningful societal participation, an ecologically aware empathy towards nature, and cultural diversity are not likely to find space in China's urban planning. All in all, Chinese cities are bound to become a gentler version of Hao's Folding Beijing, whereby individuals are allowed to indulge in desires for an environmentally safer and wealthier future, occasionally enjoying sunlight.

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