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Viewpoint

Confucian ecological vision and the Chinese eco-city



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ABSTRACT

“Living in harmony with nature” is the slogan of the Chinese government’s campaign against the environmental crisis and has become the target of many mega eco-city projects which have emerged in China during the last decade. A number of papers in Chinese journals attribute this slogan to the government’s revival of the Confucian ecological vision, combined with western technology. This paper first compares the concept of nature in these mega eco-cities and the Confucian concept of *tianrenheyi*, the unity of Heaven and Humanity, suggesting that the human–nature relationship in eco-cities is essentially a consumer–commodity relationship, which is void of the sacredness or moral association of the human–nature relationship in the unity of Heaven and Humanity. Secondly, drawing on the theory of ecology and interconnected systems and noting that the failure of eco-city projects lies in the separation of the eco-city from the city itself, I suggest that the eco-city’s approach of taking nature as a guinea pig of technology in a “vacuum space” is quite opposite to the Confucian idea of the unity of Heaven and Humanity which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all inorganic and organic forms. In conclusion, I evoke Wang Shu’s practice of sustainable architecture to illustrate a more authentic, up-to-date interpretation of the Confucian ecological vision—investigating the relational reality, developing one’s moral nature and cultural intuition.

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Introduction

While few industrial nations in the world can lay claim to having developed economically without leaving behind a trail of ecological damage, environmental degradation in China has become so severe that it threatens public health and poses an acute political challenge to the Chinese government. From the 1990s, the government has put forward a series of ideas in the form of fashionable national development strategies: ranging from “sustainable development,” to “Green GDP”, and from “two-orientated” (resource-conserving and environmentally-friendly) society to, most recently to “ecological civilization.”

At the core of the ecological civilization strategy is the concept of people living in harmony with nature. Initially this strategy appears to resonate with the Confucian idea of “*tianrenheyi*,” i.e. the unity of Heaven and Humanity. Following the 17th and 18th National Congresses in 2007 and 2012 respectively, both the Chinese Communist Party reports and academic journals in China were filled with references to the party’s concepts of “harmony between man and nature” and “ecological civilization” (Chen, 2008; Shang,

2009). These concepts were seen as the government’s revival of Confucian ideology, or, as a creative interpretation of the old philosophy now augmented by modern science and technology.

In practice, to promote the building of an “ecological civilization,” the Chinese government took a series of actions among which the eco-city was considered as the key instrument for realizing harmony between man and nature. Differing from one of the pioneers of the eco-city movement in the West, Richard Register’s idea of “rebuilding the city in balance with nature” based in Berkeley (Register, 1987), China’s eco-cities are prominent large-scale new cities designed from scratch. And quite different from most eco-cities’ grassroots approach, the mega eco-cities of China are mostly transnational top-down development projects, supported both by the Chinese government and by multi-national planning companies.

Dongtan eco-city project on Chongming Island, Shanghai was launched in 2005. It was a flagship project built by Arup, a global planning, engineering and design firm based in London, and commissioned by the investment arm of Shanghai municipality, the Shanghai Industrial Investment Company (SIIC). The project was backed by the then top leaders of the two countries, Hu Jintao from China and Tony Blair from Britain. Since 2005, China has witnessed the rapid growth of eco-cities across large areas of the country. Most of these eco-cities purported to be cities where people live

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Fig. 1. The deserted “bird’s nest,” Wanzhuang eco-city Exhibition Centre. Illustration in Peng (2010a), “Wanzhuang Eco-City, ‘Money Spinner’ or ‘Hot Potato?’” *Southern Weekly*, Nov 25, 2010. Photo by Peng Liguo.

in harmony with nature. For example, Wanzhuang eco-city¹, the second cooperation between SIIC and Arup, based in Wanzhuang Town in Hebei Province, committed to achieve: 100% renewal of energy; 100% water recycling; 100% waste recycling; everyday used water and mud reused for electricity and heat generation; public transportation within 400 m in a city of 80 km² and 400,000 people by 2025. As the director of Arup, Peter Head put it, “It [Wanzhuang] will take the lead in Hebei province and in China to initiate the ecological age.” (Peng, 2010a)

Such trumpeting of the eco-city concept not only responds directly to the CCP’s state policy of building an “ecological civilization” which, in the words of Changhua Wu, The Climate Group think tank in Beijing, “brings everything back to the relationship between man and nature.” (Brahic, 2014) The eco-city rubric also appears to resonate with leading Confucian scholars’, such as Tu Weiming, anticipation that a Confucian ecological vision would have significant implications for China and the world in dealing with the modern environmental crisis (Tu, 1998).

At the time of writing this paper, most eco-city projects, including the major flagship projects, Dongtan and Wanzhuang themselves, have failed (Peng, 2010b; Pow & Neo, 2010; Sirgrist, 2009; Sze & Gambirazzio, 2012).² Looking at the life course of an eco-city, one observes a pattern of conception, birth, growth and death.

The conception process for an eco-city is principally an agreement among the government, the investor, and urban planners. Local people are normally separated from this process of conception (French, 2009; May, 2007; Peng, 2010a, 2010b). Sometimes the local government has an international competition to bid for projects (e.g. Arup at Dongtan); sometimes the bid is by direct

invitation (e.g. Singapore government at Sino-Singapore Tianjin eco-city) (Caprotti, 2014; Pow & Neo, 2010).

The birth of an eco-city is the procedure that receives most publicity via media circulation of the opening ceremony and the public announcement. It is during this birth stage that local people in China receive coverage of relevant information (Peng, 2010b).

The growth of the eco-city varies from zero (e.g. in Dongtan), to one landmark building, such as the “birds’ nest” in Wanzhuang (Fig. 1), to the completion of first-phase construction such as in Caofeidian in Hebei province. The growth stage of the eco-city is vulnerable to complex problems, including radical power changes (e.g. in Dongtan, the arrest of the Shanghai mayor, Chen Liangyu), disputes between developers (e.g. Arup and Shanghai Industrial Investment Corporation, as to whether the Dongtan project was to be truly car-free, and who was going to pay for the car-free project), changing national policy on land acquisition (e.g. Dongtan), failure to obtain permission for appropriating arable land (e.g. Wanzhuang), the clear lack of progress on technological innovation (e.g. Caofeidian), and the high cost of living in the eco-city exceeding local farmers’ income (e.g. Huangbaiyu) (May, 2008; Peng, 2010a; Sze & Zhou, 2011).

Death: these eco-city projects are then halted. As of 2014, Dongtan has not been built and it might never be. In Huangbaiyu, most of the expensively built eco-houses lie empty on land that the villagers previously farmed (May, 2007); Part of the Wanzhuang eco-city was fenced and left waiting for investments and part of it was quietly transformed into a golf course (Peng, 2010a). Caofeidian eco-city (starting construction in 2003) is now called a ‘ghost city’ as buildings are left unfinished or empty of residents (Sabrie, 2014). The intended result of harmony ends in landscapes of disharmony.

There have been a number of discussions on the failure of eco-cities from different perspectives (Caprotti, 2014; Cheng & Sheppard, 2013; May, 2008; Pow & Neo, 2010; Sirgrist, 2009; Sze & Zhou, 2011). While some associate the eco-city with failed modernist urban renewal, others have viewed it as an example of

¹ http://www.arup.com/Projects/Wanzhuang_Eco-city.aspx accessed 10-07-14.

² One exception is Tianjin eco-city, jointly backed by the government of Tianjin and Singapore. Starting construction in 2008, the city aimed to house more than 300,000 residents upon completion in the early-to-mid 2020s. 10,000 residents were expected by the end of 2012. However, the resident number was only about 6000 by the end of 2013 and the city is still empty of hospitals, schools and shops (Caprotti, 2014).

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