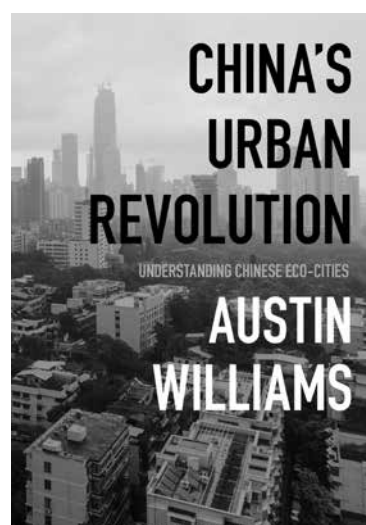


‘...is China’s new eco-urban phenomena simply a contemporary form of Sinospecific green washing?’

Andrew Law on Chinese ecologies



China's Urban Revolution: Understanding Chinese Eco-Cities

by Austin Williams

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Reviewed by Andrew Law

China's Urban Revolution: Understanding Chinese Eco-Cities is divided into nine chapters. The preface states that the author, wishes to take an anti-Manichean approach that will reject simplistic moral, political, and economic dualisms for a rationale of complexity. Thematically, Williams reveals that the object of his analysis rests with China's new 'Eco-urban phenomenon' (p. xi) and associated issues relating to the country's urban development; *implicitly*, the preface to the book seems to pose two critical questions: does China's new eco-urban phenomenon, including the

rise of Eco-Cities, represent a turn in Chinese urban development? Or is China's eco-urban phenomena simply a contemporary form of Sino specific green washing?

Chapter One begins with the question 'What is an Eco-City' and Williams makes the suggestion that China has its own indigenous conception of the term; thus, Williams proposes that from a Chinese perspective the concept of the 'Eco-City' is read as 'ecological cities with Chinese characteristics', a vague definition that is 'considerably open to determination' (pp. 20–1). Chapter Two changes tack and focuses on the city of Lanzhou (Gansu province) and two urban zones known as Lanzhou New Area (LNA) and Lanzhou New City (LNC); interestingly, Williams contends that in order to build these new urban zones, the Chinese authorities have lopped off over 700 mountain tops 'to fill the valleys and create a plateau on which to build' (p. 30); captivantly, Williams indicates that locally the truncating of the mountains is viewed as a real exemplar of 'environmentalism with Chinese characteristics' (p. 29) – how is this conceivable? As Williams skillfully points out, this conceptualisation has been endorsed by the authorities because: 'by removing the pesky mountains – an encircling barrier to the free flow of air [...] natural ventilation breezes will have unimpeded access to blow away the irritating pollutants and create a cooler, fresher, cleaner city' (p. 31). However, rather than falling back into Western eco-moral condemnation, Williams maintains that the rationale

for such a strategy reflects an indigenous Chinese environmental model, where 'people's natural health [is] the primal target of green development' (p. 32).

Chapter Three explores the concept of growth from a 'Chinese' perspective; in this chapter, Williams points to the difference between Western and Chinese versions of growth, where in contrast to the West, the idea of growth in China has not been a 'cognitively dissonant concept' (p. 49); that said, Williams does not claim that China has been as 'environmentally profligate as is sometimes assumed' (p. 56); instead, Williams contends that while aware of the problems of 'growth at any cost' (p. 65), 'China hangs on to the idea that environmental issues should be addressed in order to revamp productive growth' (p. 68). Chapter Four deals with the urban/rural divide and particularly Williams looks at a range of issues under this thematic banner including:

urban living and issues relating to air pollution and water quality; the idea of affluent middle-class 'Chinese drop-out[s]' who are seeking to leave big cities for 'simpler' and less polluted lives (pp. 82–3); the growth of a new Village Beautiful programme, which has involved the upgrading of the infrastructure of rural settlements for the purposes of urban tourism; the growing beautification of Chinese cities with the rise of urban parks and green space (p. 90); and a discussion of the Hukou system, which Williams defines as the 'formalised expression' of the 'urban/rural divide' (p. 93).

Like Chapter Four, Chapter Five brings a number of seemingly disparate (but related) themes together, loosely relating to Chinese discourses of civilisation, traditional Chinese philosophy and ecological morality; the chapter starts with a discussion of Kelamayi or Karamay (a city in Xinjiang province) and moves onto an examination of governmental discourses of 'ecological civilisation' (*Shengtai wenming*) (pp. 104–5); interestingly, without mentioning Foucauldian theory, Williams discusses the role of discourses of civilisation in the disciplining of subjects, so that they may 'Speak in a civilised manner' [and] 'act in a civilised way' producing a language of moral understanding (p. 105); then, Williams analyses Daoist and Confucian thought and points to the way the latter has played a useful role in 'political modernisation' and the 'ecological agenda' (p. 107); importantly, and in the process of creating 'moral capital', Williams notes that discourses of ecological civilisation and neo-Confucianism are 'used as a native philosophy to rival the imported [Western] concept of sustainability' (p. 107).

Chapter Six is thematised around several issues including: ethnicity, transport, infrastructure, connectivity, distance, urban sprawl, migration and regional economic disparities; the chapter begins with a confabulation of Xingjiang province and its capital Urumqi before moving onto the subject of ethnic identity and the status of ethnic minorities in China;

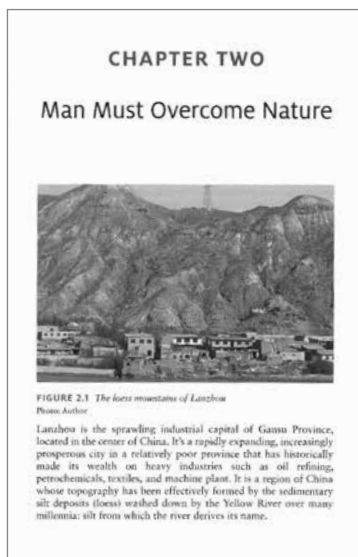
particularly, Williams notes that new forms of economic strategy and transport infrastructure (that link the West to the East of China) are being utilised to 'stave off Uyghur minority separatism' (p. 127). Having explored these issues, the chapter then moves onto to investigate urban sprawl and city regions (including 'Eco-City' Nanhui new city, located outside Shanghai) before turning to the government's 'Go West' campaign and its attempts to encourage development within poor inland regions; as Williams contends the upshot of these processes is that 'by developing the interior, the greatest concentrated annual migration of humanity every year will be significantly reduced' (p. 136).

Chapter Seven makes a thematic shift and explores issues around authenticity, originality, and plagiarism in China; moving beyond Western sneering, Williams contends that the art of copying is a time-honoured practice in China that has its roots in 'centuries of Confucian-esque rote learning' (p. 143). From these insights, Williams suggests that China's copycat city-regions including 'Shanghai's Anting German Town, Thames Town in Songjiang or Pujiang's Italian Town' (p. 143) also belong to this indigenous tradition and should be read as 'an expression of Chinese global confidence and [...] magnanimity' (p. 144). The chapter then develops these themes through a discussion of the 'authenticity' and/or 'inauthenticity' of Chinese Eco-Cities; while Williams gives examples of bogus, exaggerated

and unrealised Eco-Cities, he also claims that there is a 'general tendency [...] to make an effort to provide decent environmental conditions – whether by constructing new, creating satellite cities to a higher standard or by refurbishing old urban areas' (p. 161); in this regard, Williams seems to imply that although the credentials of Chinese Eco-Cities might well be exaggerated, China is certainly not shirking away from higher quality urban environments.

Chapter Eight deals with the theme of urban experimentation and innovation; after a critique of the role of 'foreign architects in Chinese megaprojects' (p. 171), Williams makes the point that ecologically branded technical innovations in China – brought in from the West – are simply technical improvements, as opposed to ecological ones (p. 172). Then, Williams deals with several indigenous innovations in the country relating to: big data, smart cities, low-energy desalination, soil engineering and 'desert greening' (pp. 174–6). The final sections of the chapter involve a series of commentaries on the *future* of indigenous urban experimentation in China; these include reviews of urban quality and mass housing, gated communities, architecture, prefabricated buildings, environmental targets, sponge cities (relating to drainage) and the role of high tech areas/centres (such as Tianjin Eco-city).

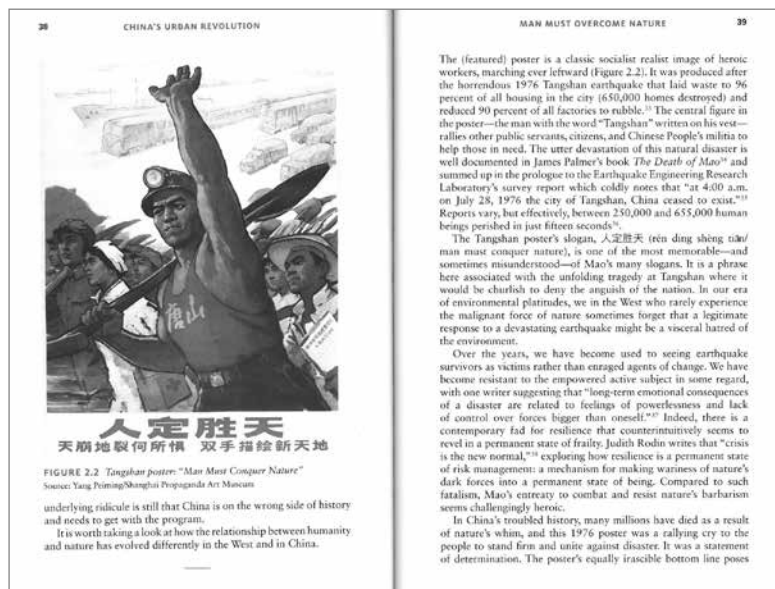
Finally, in Chapter Nine, Williams concludes the monograph with an analysis of the contradictions surrounding the idea of Chinese Eco-Cities and returns to the implicit questions set out in the preface. Strikingly, Williams suggests that Chinese Eco-Cities 'are not built where there are ecological problems nor even where there are many people already living' (p. 189); but, despite these issues Williams concludes that Chinese Eco-Cities are 'innovative', 'experimental', 'socially challenging', 'quirky', and 'necessary' (p. 189). Other sections of the conclusion also explore the West's hypocritical denigration of China's ecological credentials (p. 194); as a riposte, Williams notes that China's environmental-technological development demonstrates innovations in wind-energy, solar panels, and hydro-power. Finally, in further



2a–c Spreads from China's Urban Revolution. 2a



2b



comebacks to Western critique, the conclusion also includes a section on the Chinese model of governance and the flaws of Western democracy; with these issues in mind, Williams makes the very controversial suggestion that ‘many are seeing something in the Chinese model precisely because there is little to offer in the Western one [...] It is China’s ability to get things done [...] and its lack of democratic hindrance that catches the eye of many’ (p. 210).

Williams’ book is a useful addition to the general literature on Chinese urban development and Eco-Cities. A strength of this work is its persistent critique of Western perceptions of China, including both moralising environmental critics and naive architects and designers who perceive China as an ‘urban laboratory’, a ‘giant sandpit’, or (quoting Western Eco-City advocate Eero Paloheimo), ‘a tourist attraction for designers’ (p. 18). It is for this careful critique of both these moralising and naive Western voices, that Williams’ monograph deserves our attention; furthermore, Williams’ use of his subject matter to bring up critical debates surrounding western ideas of democracy is also interesting in a contemporary moment, when Western liberals have been frustrated by the outcomes of the democratic system: including most notably Brexit and the inauguration of US President Donald Trump.

Despite these uplifting features, Williams’s book has some shortcomings; firstly, *China’s Urban*

Revolution is no easy read; while Williams gives us a number of insightful ideas, concepts and case studies, frustratingly, many of the chapters seem to sprawl off in different directions (particularly, Chapter Six). As a result of these complex and sprawling chapters, arguably some of Williams’ interesting argumentation gets lost – especially in relation to the concept of the Eco-City. But, a more problematic feature of the monograph, relates to the way Williams fails to explore categories such as ‘China’ and ‘Chinese people’ 中國人; consequently, the book unwittingly falls into a classic essentialist trap, a fallacy that seems to be repeated in much contemporary Western writing on China, such as that by Martin Jacques,¹ where interlocutors in the West are critiqued because they have failed to understand ‘China’ or a ‘Chinese way of viewing the world’. Such a position has serious problems in that it ignores the plurality of voices within China and the diversity of the Chinese people. In Chapter Two, when Williams seems to defend a *Chinese view* of the environment – ‘environmentalism with Chinese characteristics’ – we are left wondering whether this is in fact a general Chinese view, or the perspective of the Chinese government. In Chapter Six, Williams does in fact discuss ethnic minority groups (pp. 125–6) and acknowledges the existence of Han Chineseness, (the majority ethnic identity) and ethnic minority positions, including Tibetan, Mongolian, Hui, Uyghur, and Kazakh minority

ethnicities; however, arguably the complex relationships, politics, and hybridities of these ethnic positions could have been further explored. Furthermore, in positioning Western discourse against an ‘indigenous’ view of China, Williams also unwittingly constructs a further essentialist view of the West that also ignores the diversity of opinions, beliefs, ideas, cultures, and ethnicities that run through the vast number of regions and spaces that are labelled and fixed through this signifier.²

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these limitations, this monograph certainly makes an excellent contribution to the literature and will be of use to scholars and indeed academic teachers who are seeking to run courses on Chinese urban development within geography, urban studies, town planning, and architecture.

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Notes

1. Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2013 [orig. pub. 2009]).
2. Alastair Bonnett, *The Idea of the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

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