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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

城市，让生活更美好吗？

Better City, Better Life?

A study of attitudes regarding ecology, urban development and risk
among university students in Shanghai

-

A Minor Field Study
August – November 2010

Author: Anna Kvist
Master thesis: SOCM11, 15 credits
Internet
Spring 2011
Supervisor: Birgitta Ericson

Abstract

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Background: The People's Republic of China is one of the world's largest countries, whose approximately 1.3 billion citizens make it the most populous nation state on Earth. It is also one of the world's most powerful and booming economies, and biggest polluters. As such, the PRC's actions aimed at continuing industrialization and urbanisation play a key role for future ecological development all around the globe. In attempts to promote sustainable development and environmental awareness among China's vast population national campaigns and NGOs alike target the young. What are the environmental attitudes of China's youth and how do they view the future?

Aim of thesis: To study the opinions and attitudes regarding ecology, urban development and risk in a group of university students from China's largest and most populous city Shanghai, and view these findings against the theory of world risk society as presented by sociologist Ulrich Beck. Is Beck's view of contemporary society as a risk society and the view that this society is culturally rooted in individualism, diversity and scepticism applicable to non-western groups?

Conclusion: Beck's theory of world risk society is found to be too deeply rooted in Western concepts of society and the welfare state to be readily applied to explain the attitudes and experiences of the group of studied individuals. In fact, attitudes of interviewees participating in this study showed great discrepancies with the risk society worldview presented by Beck – with interviewees relating the power of action to groups rather than individuals, portraying high levels of belief in expertise and technology, and trusting the national government to make the right investments for the future and to bring about change.

Keywords: students, Shanghai, ecology, urban development, Ulrich Beck, risk society, Minor Field Study

Better City, Better Life? – A popular introduction

We live in a globalized world. Today's societies as well as how we as individuals associate with each other are all the more often described with adjectives such as *joint*, *linked*, and *interconnected*. We are all dependent on and effected by decisions and events that take place far beyond our own corner of the planet. Communication, economy and politics are no longer bound by national borders; nor are individuals, goods or markets. This breaking down of borders brings about that not only benefits and positive outcomes, but also threats and negative impact to a large extent are shared across the world. We are surrounded by risks, whose outcomes we cannot be sure of but we must relate our actions to.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck has aimed to explain and shed light on the underlying structures and outlines of this society in his theory of *risk society*. Beck describes the concepts of *individualization*, *diversity* and *skepticism* as main traits of the risk society, and regards the individual, not nation states, as the central actor therein. He also emphasizes that one of the largest and most important issues faced by risk society is that of the environment; to find a balance between non-renewable natural resources and the hunger for development, between today's profit and what will be left behind for future generations. As the People's Republic of China is one of the world's most populous and rapidly developing countries, it poses an interesting setting for a study involving comparisons between Beck's risk society and attitudes regarding environmental issues.

This thesis aims to analyse Beck's theory of the risk society in general and the concepts of individualization, diversity and scepticism in particular viewed against the background of personal interviews with a group of university students in Shanghai, China regarding risk, environment and urban development. The interviews were conducted on site at three major universities in Shanghai as part of a minor field study. The attitudes expressed in the interviews depict rather significant discrepancies between Beck's main concepts and the opinions of interviewees' on several major accounts. The findings thus indicate that culture and locality as well as political systems, economic development and social structure must be taken into account when aiming to formulate theories addressing global concerns. Considering all these factors in theory construction might be a step towards to a truly interconnected world.

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List of content

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. BACKGROUND.....	2
2.1 GREAT COUNTRY – GREAT CHALLENGES.....	2
3. AIM OF THESIS.....	3
4. RESEARCH METHODS.....	5
4.1. A QUALITATIVE APPROACH.....	5
4.2. THE LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
4.3. THE EMPIRICAL STUDY.....	7
5. THEORY.....	11
5.1 RISK SOCIETY AND REFLEXIVE MODERNITY.....	11
CRITIQUE.....	13
5.2 INDIVIDUALITY.....	13
5.3 SCEPTICISM.....	16
5.4 DIVERSITY.....	17
6. FINDINGS.....	19
6.1 TRADERS OF TRUST – TECHNOLOGY & THE MEDIA.....	19
6.2. NATURE AND HUMAN SOCIETY.....	24
6.3. AGENTS OF CHANGE; GOVERNMENTS, NGOs AND INDIVIDUALS.....	28
7. CONCLUSION.....	33
7.1 ANALYSIS SUMMARY.....	33
FINAL REMARKS.....	34
REFERENCES.....	35
APPENDIX I – INTERVIEWEES.....	38
APPENDIX II – SELECTION CRITERIA FOR INTERVIEWEES.....	39
APPENDIX III - INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	40

1. Introduction

We live in a time where the risks and challenges we face are no longer tied to our imminent geographical or social surroundings. Effects and decisions' reach have widened; intended or not, our actions (or our choice to refrain from action) and what they bring about are now of global concern.

The major points of global interest today are usually considered to be economy – which on a wider scope today very commonly is referred to as 'the global economy'; the question of conflict and peace – such as the question of atomic bombs and which nation states are sanctioned by the international community to legally possess, maintain and develop the technology for sustaining it; and the state of our environment, climate and natural resources.

How do we handle these questions and how, in a situation where we are evidently dependent on and subject to the actions of other actors in the same field, do we protect our own interests? How do we handle these risks and decisions that we are faced with on a daily basis? And what are they and what tools do we have to make sense of them?

As one of the biggest polluters in the world, a contender for the title of the leading world economy, and the most populous and third biggest nation on Earth, The People's Republic of China offers a very interesting site of study in this matter.

Official decisions on a national level influence the lives and living conditions of more than one billion individuals. Decisions and policies with international aim influence the whole world.

As in all countries all around the globe, China's young are playing a crucial role in the country's future, and therefore impacting the future of the world. What are their views on the relationship between humans and our environment? How do they regard the roles of media, technology and education? What risks and opportunities do they see and experience, and how do they imagine the future?

2. Background

2.1 Great country – great challenges

The People's Republic of China (henceforth China) is one of the biggest countries, and so it happens, polluters, in the world (Gustafsson & Rodhe, 2009). Although today several different energy sources are used, the massive nation's tremendous industrial and economic development the past thirty years is closely linked to cheap – and dirty – energy such as coal. The country's large population is also an environmental factor. Alongside its industrialization China has witnessed extensive rural-urban migration, and the growing urban populations are increasing both the environmental and socio-economic challenges for cities. Also, the outcomes of these challenges are not only of national interest. Considering the vast size of both China's geographical territory and its population, it is not hard to imagine that the environmental effects of heavy industrialization paired with urbanization will echo far beyond city limits. The way developing countries in general – and China with its dominant size in particular – cope with industrialization and urbanisation, play a key role for future ecological development. As Chen, Jia & Lau (2008) emphasize in their study of Chinese compact cities,

[...] there is rising recognition of the fact that, as the country holding one fifth of the world's population and undergoing a rapid rate of urbanization, the success or failure of Chinese urban development policy will impose significant impact on global environmental profile... (p. 29).

The need for efficient – current and future – environmental and urban policies in China is a highly relevant matter globally as well as locally and regionally.

As the country's largest city, Shanghai, stood host for the World Expo May to October 2010, issues regarding sustainable development have climbed to the top of the city's to-do-list. The theme that was chosen for the Expo was 'Better City, Better Life', and aimed to represent "the common wish of the whole humankind for a better living in future urban environments" (Expo 2010 Shanghai China, 2008) with sustainable urban planning as a key element.

When aiming to make the development of Shanghai and other mega cities sustainable, getting the whole population - and especially the young - interested and involved is a crucial aspect. When the city presented its three-year environmental action plan in December 2008, environmental experts and researchers were invited to comment on the report. Several of the experts present stressed the importance of informing and engaging the youth in decision-making regarding environmental processes, or as one expert put it: to “Move from the 1.0 to 2.0 generation” (Shanghai’s environment; the way forward, 2008). Pan Yue, vice minister of the Environmental Protection Bureau in Shanghai Municipality, similarly stated at an environmental conference in September 2009 that “the new era of environmental protection must be the full wisdom and strength of the grassroots” (Shanghai Environmental Protection Bureau [SEPB], 2009).

3. Aim of thesis

The departure point of this thesis is in the understanding of risk theory as presented by Ulrich Beck (1994, 1995, 2001) applied on the lived experiences of a group of university students in Shanghai, China. Beck argues that due to globalization all our actions, relationships and choices affect other people around the world. We are daily faced with information, images, decisions, and disasters that we need – indeed have – to make sense of in order to carry on our everyday lives. We are confronted with things that although they might occur on the other side of the world still will affect us, be it in a positive or negative way. As we cannot know the outcome or start to grasp the potential effects of such events, it would be faulty to perceive them simply as threats – as the outcome might very well be a positive one. Instead, argues Beck, they should be thought of and considered as risks, where the outcome can prove to be both positive and/or negative. And, as the (potential) effects of risks are global, humans now live in a global, cosmopolitan society.

University students’ attitudes and concepts of sustainable urban development and ecology make up an interesting area of research for several reasons. Not only are they a key-group of consumers; they also make up one of the target groups the city of Shanghai hopes to commit to its environmental action plan, and as well-educated young adults they will play an

important role in China's future as the academics, politicians, and white-collar workers of tomorrow.

The aim of this thesis is to study the opinions and attitudes regarding ecology, urban development and risk in a group of students from China's largest and most populous city, Shanghai.

Research questions:

- What are the attitudes concerning the relationship between human urban development and the environment among highly educated young adults from a large urban area in China?
- Is Beck's view of today's global society as a risk society and the view that this society is culturally rooted in individualism, diversity and scepticism applicable to non-western groups?

Interesting work addressing research questions with some similarity to the first research question expressed in this study has been made by Ruff & Olson (2009), who have studied design students' knowledge of and attitudes towards the concept of sustainable development. However, the perspectives from which the subject is viewed are quite different. Instead of targeting sustainable development in education and practise among design students at Scandinavian universities (Ruff & Olson, 2009), I wish to focus on attitudes concerning ecology, urban development and perceptions of risk within a group of Chinese students studying at different educational facilities within different majors in one of the world's largest and most rapidly developing areas.

4. Research methods

The findings of this thesis are based on 1) a literature review of secondary sources and 2) an empirical study of interviews with 9 young urban males and females, who are students at three of Shanghai's largest universities (China Eastern Normal University, China International Language School, Shanghai University).

4.1. A qualitative approach

“Narratives can be analysed to discern the ‘themes’ and roles that guide an individual’s behaviour/.../how they choose to frame their lives” (Hobbs & Wright, 2006, p.113).

An explorative aim

In their study of how socio-economic factors affect littering practises and attitudes in the Palestinian city of Nablus, Al-Khatib, Arafat, Daoud & Shwahneh (2009) emphasize the importance of conducting environmentally linked studies “on site” as the environmental situation as well as inhabitants’ attitudes and approaches are “region- and culture-dependent” (Al-Khatib et al., p.450).

The authors also mention that while a great deal of research concerning environmental issues, waste management and the preventing of pollution have been (and is) conducted in developed countries, similar issues in developing countries are still relatively scarcely researched areas (Al-Khatib et al., 2009). As the subject of this study is a relatively scarcely researched one, the fieldwork was conducted with an explorative approach. The aim of the study is to gain understanding and provide an overview of the attitudes of Shanghai university students regarding sustainable urban development, and for this I regard qualitative methods to be a preferable tool. Applying quantitative methods to this field of research might be limiting and restricting as the type of data they render is so largely dependent on the ability to pose the ‘right’ questions. As I was still unsure which questions were the most relevant for my chosen field of study at the point of setting out, an approach that allowed for the discovery of themes and the posing of questions as the research progressed was ideal. The qualitative method of exploratory analysis/grounded theory as described by O’Brien (2006) seemed to offer the right tools for this (O’Brien, 2006). O’Brien’s take on grounded theory “treats research design

as an on-going process and emphasizes discovery rather than verification”, as well as it “attaches considerable importance to the subjective experiences of interviewees and regards shoe-horning evidence into ‘ill-fitting a priori categories” as a grave limitation and mistake (O’Brien, 2006, p.28). He also emphasizes the importance of being open to the knowledge the interviewee possesses:

Like good journalists, we ought to arrive in the field with an area of interest and some hunches about how a social process is unfolding, but then be ready (and eager!) to let our informants redirect us by telling us what concerns them the most (O’Brien, 2006, p.29).

The method’s focus on interviewing and O’Brien’s successful previous employment of it when doing fieldwork in China (O’Brien, 2006) contributed to my view of it as an appealing approach for my study.

4.2. The literature review

A main part of the facts used in this study were acquired through secondary literary resources. The initial research took place on the site of the fieldwork in Shanghai, China but was added too and concluded in Sweden.

As many of the smaller public libraries in Shanghai exclusively carry books in Mandarin Chinese, and my Mandarin reading proficiency was on a rather basic level, I was referred to the city’s main library, Shanghai Library, in order to find specialist literature in English. As the Shanghai Library hosts an impressive amount of literature, references, and statistics in several languages I was very hopeful when my application for a library card was approved and a card issued for me within hours of finding the library. The card would not only allow me to check out books, but also to access different reading rooms and other facilities.

After some exploring I found a section with books on the subjects of social science and sociology. However, as I attempted to check out my first book it proved that there were some important points in the system of lending that had not been explained to me; foreign books can only be checked out by individuals that have added a 1000 RMB deposit (approximately the same fee in Swedish kronor) to their library card. The 100 RMB I had deposited granted me access to the otherwise restricted foreign languages reading room and check-out privileges of Chinese literature from the other departments, but not the right to remove the foreign books

from the reading room. As I was unable to pay the 1000 RMB deposit I was therefore restricted to the reading room when reading the literature, which regulated and somewhat obstructed my access to the literary sources.

My parallel access to the Lund University Libraries' electronic platform for scientific articles and books (ELIN) was therefore a great compliment and source of readily accessible and relevant facts.

Once I was back in Sweden I also had full access to the libraries of both Lund and Malmö University.

4.3. The empirical study

The fieldwork for this study took place during autumn and winter 2010 on location in Shanghai. I was a permanent resident in the area during the full academic year as I combined my studies in sociology with mandarin language studies at the Shanghai Theatre Academy.

Interviews

The main body of research material for this thesis consists of personalized, semi-structured interviews. The only preliminary selection criteria (see Index II) for interviewees were that they were Chinese and currently a student at one of Shanghai's universities; exchange students from abroad attending the same schools were not considered.

As there are some differences in the type of majors and courses available at the city's universities, selecting informants from only one university might result in a narrow view. In order to gain access to a potentially more diverse group of informants I therefore approached students from all three different universities to participate in the study.

Accessing interviewees

Contact with the interviewees involved in this study was established through the help and contacts of Mr Jackee Ren, former colleague of a good friend of mine and himself Shanghai University alumni. Mr Ren works for a large multi-media production group, where he is mainly in charge of the production of after-effects for movies. Through mentoring university students involved in graphic design, having studied in Shanghai himself, and his own

relatively young age (Mr Ren is 29 years old), Mr Ren had plenty of contacts at different universities in Shanghai and after learning about this thesis kindly offered to be my guide.

I first met Mr Ren at a social event one year prior to this study. My good friend and roommate at the time was working as a camera man and had met Mr Ren at an event they both were covering for work a few months earlier. At the party Mr Ren and I quickly realized our common interest in environmental issues and Chinese culture, and when I expressed my thought of perhaps writing a thesis on the subject he offered to help me in any way he could.

Almost a year later, I again found myself in China about to start my project, and remembered Mr Ren's kind offer and without hesitation took him up on it. I wrote him an email explaining my idea and immediately received an enthusiastic response.

The sampling method used for this study was the snowball effect (May, 2001); a technique based on the networks of personal connections. After inquiring about the aim of the study and any informant criteria Mr Ren offered to ask around among his friends for current students that could be interested in participating in an interview. After a short time he notified me that he had indeed located three individuals, all students at different universities, that wanted to partake. These three functioned as my gatekeepers to their respective universities, and when I met with them they in turn had found friends also willing to participate.

As Mr Ren only performed the introduction between me and the initial three interviewees, I do not believe that he as a contact influenced the selection of informants beyond that point. Regarding how his presence may have influenced those who knew him, I believe that his status was perceived more that of a friend or mentor rather than a teacher among the interviewees. All three interviewees familiar with him greeted him happily and referred to him as *Jackee*; Mr Ren's English name and also his colloquial nick-name. Indeed, one of the interviewees, who shares Mr Ren's interest in motion graphics, at one point even called him *Jackee Gege*; Older brother Jackee.

With the permission of the interviewees all interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Writing during interviews was kept to a minimum in order to allow both the interviewee and myself to focus on the dialogue; only occasional notes regarding follow-up questions or interesting side-track conversations were taken.

Interviews were recorded on an iPhone, via the sound recording program included in the phone's software. Using an iPhone as the recording instrument was in fact the inspired idea

sprung from technical problems discovered on the morning of the first interview; the MP3-digital recorder I had commonly used for recordings of this kind turned out not to work properly; despite tests the previous day. The sound quality was poor and ‘tinny’ – supposedly there was a problem with the microphone. As Mr Ren and I were already on our way to meet the first interviewee I shared my concerns with him. His suggestion was that I simply use the recording device available on my phone – which I had neither considered as an option, nor used before. (Apparently Mr Ren frequently uses this iPhone feature himself for work). However, this solution turned out to be nearly ideal and therefore stayed on as permanent – the sound quality was perfect and the interviewees seemed more at ease with having a mobile phone lying on the table across from them instead of a less everyday object there solely for the purpose of recording the conversation.

As all interviews were conducted in the homes or dormitory rooms of the interviewees, background noise caught on the recordings was minimal, and posed no problem in the transcription process. Also it hopefully contributed to the interviewees feeling comfortable with the interview setting.

Interviews lasted approximately between 40 and 75 minutes, depending on the talkativeness of the interviewee. The occurrence of communication difficulties due to language was low, and in my opinion did not pose an obstacle for the interviewees to express themselves, nor for them to understand me. On a few occasions electronic on-line dictionaries were used to look up a specific word or expression not readily translatable to the other language.

All interviewees were promised anonymity. In order to respect the privacy of interviewees only fictitious names are used throughout this thesis.

When deciding to use my personal phone as the recording instrument I felt the importance to safeguard the interviewees’ privacy weighing on me; being an object of everyday use a mobile phone is more readily available for instance to persons visiting my home than an object simply used for recording interviews would ever be, and it is undoubtedly more attractive to pick-pockets or the like. Immediately after each interview the information was therefore downloaded to my personal computer, stored on two separate memory cards (kept safe in my home) and thereafter deleted from the contents of the phone.

That all interviewees except one were female is an interesting point of consideration. This selection was not intentional – the selection criteria did not express any preference between males and females, however only one male (Shan) ended up participating. Noteworthy is that

two interviews that were originally planned but that the interviewees in question later deemed they were too busy to participate in were both with males.

Since Mr Ren initially introduced me to three interviewees, two females and one male, who in turn introduced me to individuals they know, I do not regard this uneven sex ratio as related to Mr Ren.

5. Theory

In order to provide a context for the interpretation of my findings this section aims to give a short overview of the theory of risk as presented mainly by Ulrich Beck (1994, 1995, 2001). Also, some main points of critique are addressed and the concepts of individualization, diversity and scepticism central to my interpretation of the findings are introduced and discussed.

5.1 Risk Society and Reflexive Modernity

Risk society theory was originally dominated by Ulrich Beck but now Anthony Giddens is nearly as a prominent figure. Giddens has defined risk society as: “industrial society which has come up against its own limitations” (Giddens, 2009, p.6). Both Beck and Giddens refer to the era where risk society is at work as *reflexive modernity* (Beck 1992, 1999, 2000, 2003; Giddens (1999), and both emphasize the differentiation between reflexive modernity and postmodernism. The postmodernism that Beck and Giddens usually distance their own definition of reflexive modernity from is that presented by Foucault, and others. Unlike postmodernism that views modernity as something passed, reflexive modernity is still modernity, but a modernity that considers and criticizes (and sometimes worry about) itself as a concept; hence its reflexivity.

The triumphant procession of the industrial system causes the boundaries between nature and society to become blurred. Accordingly, destructions of nature can no longer be shifted off onto the ‘environment’ either, but as they are universalized by industry, they become social, political, economic and cultural contradictions inherent in the system (Beck, 1994, p.154).

“Reflexive modernization [...] implies coming to terms with the limits and contradictions of the modern order. These are obvious in new domains of politics associated with social movements” (Giddens, 2009, p.8).

The risk in risk society is constituted of several different kinds of risks; such as technological risks (Chernobyl), environmental risks (climate change), international (terrorism, BSE, bird and pig flu) and personal (choices in life such as education, what diet to keep, where to live, economical investments, etc.) (Zinn, 2008).

Zinn also emphasizes that since its introduction, theories regarding risk society have been numerous and the field grown so considerably that today it is relevant for theorists to define what definition of risk they adhere to. Zinn continues:

The most general assumption shared by all approaches on risk is the distinction between reality and possibility. As long as the future is interpreted as either predetermined or independent of human activities, the term “risk” makes no sense at all. The concept of risk is tied to the possibility that the future can be altered – or at least perceived as such – by human activities (Zinn, 2008, p.3).

This view is reflected in Giddens’ approach to reflexive modernism (and risk society) as a societal state post-tradition and post-fate. If one believes that all is predetermined; then what use is action? But if action is believed to cause effect, and even be able to influence the outcome of the state (and fate) of the world as we know it, then action – and actors – suddenly claim centre stage spotlight.

To Beck, the reflexive modernity of risk society is a self-critical society. It has realized that the industry and technology that brought it about, and that is indeed one of its foundations, is also the source of many of the major problems it is facing. Also, it has understood the bias present among its experts and scientists – whom previously during industrial modernity were viewed as if not all-knowing then at least above criticism.

The theoretical self-concept of science implies that the sciences cannot make value judgments with the authority of their rationality. They deliver so-called ‘neutral’ figures, information, or explanations which are to serve as the ‘unbiased’ basis for decisions on the broadest variety of interests. [...] these are anything but neutral decisions. In other words: the sciences have developed their steering abilities independently of and beyond explicit value systems (Beck, 1994, p.174).

However, this relationship between the need for technology and science and the scepticism toward it is not an unproblematic one. Risks are, in the words of Beck; “threats that require the sensory organs of science – theories, experiments, measuring instruments – in order to become visible and interpretable as threats at all” (Beck, 1994, p.62).

Critique

In his work *Ulrich Beck, A Critical Introduction to the Risk Society* Mythen (2004) questions what he refers to as Beck's simplified view of the concept of risk; risk is not only something negative but also something that can (and according to Mythen, historically already has) result in great advances and gains. Although Mythen acknowledges that Beck previously has attempted to address this double nature of risk and chance, he finds that Beck's emphasis still clings to the negative aspects of risk, and the view of risk as a threat (Mythen, 2004).

Mythen is also of the opinion that Beck's view of risk society as contributing to a weakening of 'traditional' groupings such as class and social inequalities is in fact reversed, due to the difference in people's ability, tools and assets with which to face risks and their consequences; "...the dispersal of risk invariably reinforces rather than transforms existing patterns of social inequality" (Mythen, 2004, p.181).

Addressing the claimed globalism of the risk society, Mythen claims that adequate consideration has not been given to the fact that although the effects of some events may indeed be global in their nature, the perception and naming of them as 'risks' need not be so. "People do not share the same life experiences. Ergo, they cannot possibly share the same interpretations of risk" (Mythen, 2004, p.181).

Although Beck mentions that the self-fulfilment of the 'me-generation' is a distinct characteristic of Western society (Beck, 2001), he nonetheless continues to speak of *world* risk society and *global* risk society, and maintains that individualization is one of the main cultural and societal traits of said society.

If we stretch the risk society over the global geographic, yet more bumps and cracks will appear /.../ taking a global perspective, risk should be understood as a polyseme, not as an essential and immutable category. Given that local experiences are cultivated and situated, we must be aware that the meaning of risk will always be fixed in the eye of the beholder (Mythen, 2004, p.182).

5.2 Individuality

To Beck, the individual is at the centre of reflexive modernity. This is the case at both personal/social level and political/legal. "The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and

achievement is the most powerful current in modern Western society” (Beck, 2001, p.9). What he refers to as the me-generation has been criticized, but Beck believes that the individualism of the me-generation is “moral and political in a new sense” (ibid, p.9).

Beck does not want to equate his individualization with individualism. Nor with what he calls “institutionalized individualism” (Beck, 2001). He views individualization as closely tied to the welfare state and a distancing of the political, legal and societal away from the collective towards the personal/individual. He names three main arguments for the change:

Firstly, most rights and entitlements of the welfare state are designed for individuals rather than families. Secondly, employment often means education has taken place prior to employment, and both of these commonly presuppose mobility. Third, thus people are encouraged to form and think of themselves as individuals, “to plan, understand, design themselves as individuals and, should they fail, to blame themselves” (Beck, 2001, p.9).

Mythen (2006) agrees; by signifying all individual decisions a part of the life project “the individual, not society, becomes the primary site of risk management, and the ‘good’ citizen is the responsible and prudential one” (p.65).

Beck means that this is a breach from the foundations of rights and freedoms of the ‘first modernity’, which was based on systems of inclusion and exclusion of groups (such as ethnic, gender, socio-economic strata etc.) to the access to rights, to the reflexive modernity’s focus on (the) individual(s) entitlement. The old systems building on the collective over the individual are so to say out of sync with the ‘me-generation’. Political democratization (the democratic state) and social democratization (the welfare state) bring about cultural democratization – foundations of family and intimate life change. The challenge is how combine the wish for family life and the need for individual freedom (Beck, 2001). Therefore Beck views many of the concepts and values of the first modernity aged and inadequate for the wants, needs and life projects of the present time individual.

“People are better adapted to the future than are social institutions and their representatives” (Beck, 2001, p.10).

To Beck, the masses of individuals in a society of such diversity and mobility form a social entity similar to a cooperative; “thinking if oneself and living for others” (Beck, 2001, p.11). Beck stresses that individualization does not mean isolation – he sees individual living as living close to and in constant exchange with other individuals. How then, in such a society, can a sense of belonging be created?

His answer is cultural democratization and political freedom (Beck, 2001). Beck regards the citizens of (western) society today as what he calls “freedom’s children” – the freedom in question most likely referring to the era of peace in Europe after the two world wars – and says they are the first “to live in a post-national cosmopolitan world order” (Beck, 2001, p.13). These individuals are members of the ‘me-generation’, their rights and responsibilities are viewed by themselves as well as by the state as individual, and they are play the main role in their life projects. As mentioned previously, however, they often experience discrepancies in their interaction with national and social institutions. According to Beck, these incongruities are visible for example in the question of politics and civil commitment to various issues. Issues that the younger members of the population consider important and rally around, are more common than not regarded as not as central by the national governments (Beck, 2001). This in turn undermines the ‘me-generation’s confidence in, and the authority both the nation state and its hierarchical institutions, as they see themselves required to seek out and join other forms of associations – such as NGOs “which work both inside and outside the boundaries of the formal political arena” (Mythen, 2004, p.163) – to make their voices heard.

We have been witnessing a global erosion of the authority of nation states and a general loss of confidence in hierarchical institutions. But at the same time, active intervention by citizens has been growing more common and breaking the bounds of past convention – especially among younger and more educated sections of the population. [...] Young people are moved by issues that national policies largely rules out” (Beck, 2001, p.14).

“...NGOs have impacted upon the structure of politics, contributing towards the development of novel ways of enhancing public involvement” (Mythen, 2004, p.163).

Beck views the individualization of reflexive modernity and risk society as similar to the releases of individuals from other previous structures of society into something new, the likes of which has been described in the works of classical sociological theorists such as Durkheim, Weber and Simmel (Beck, 2001). Instead of being released from “corporate, religious-transcendental securities into the world of industrial society”, reflexive modernity has meant release “from industrial society into the turbulence of world risk society” (Beck, 2001, p.75).

This also introduces the step away from the collective towards the individual concerning rights and responsibilities, living and work. This can of course be both positive and negative for the individual; there is full freedom, but little or no protection to be had from group associations.

The opportunities, hazards and ambivalences of biography which once could be coped with in the family unit, in the village community, and by recourse to the social class or group, increasingly have to be grasped, interpreted and dealt with by the individual alone (Beck, 2001, p.75).

Beck therefore argues that the individualization of risk society constitutes a breach with prior, traditional categories of belonging such as class, nationality, and socio-economic stratification. The individual is the central character in a society whose emphasis on mobility and diversity has lessened these categories' importance. The individuals are "for the sake of economic survival [...] now compelled to make themselves the centre of their own life plans and conduct" (Beck, 1994, p.92). In this way, personal gains and successes as well as social inequalities are personalized, tied to the individual; "...problems of the system are lessened politically and transformed into personal failure" (ibid, p.89).

Beck identifies individualization as expressed as control of different aspects of the individual's life; "one's own money, time, living space, and body. In other words, people demand the right to develop their own perspective on life and to be able to act upon it" (Beck, 1994, p.92). This results in a balancing act between freedom and loss of stability.

5.3 Scepticism

Scepticism is the second part of the risk society trinity, closely linked to diversity and individualization. Beck argues that scepticism is central to risk society due to the prominent role of science and technology in reflexive modernity. Indeed, he regards the (world) movements of civil (political) association that spring from the discrepancies between national and civil interests mentioned earlier as based on scepticism and expressions of "cosmopolitan common sense" (Beck, 2001, p.18). More precisely, it is the scepticism towards "national egoisms masquerading as universal necessities, and scepticism about the mistakes and defects on national bureaucracies" (ibid, p.18).

Beck argues that considering how little we actually know – and indeed can know – of the effects of our (and others) actions, choices and lifestyle, we must maintain a degree of scepticism towards the world of experts, but at the same time be careful not to lose our trust in mankind completely (Beck, 2001). Citizens of the risk society daily face a double challenge; they must show scepticism both when it comes to dealing with risk and dealing with information regarding risk.

Science and technology, with its field of experts, is a part of the societal system, playing the roles of both ailment and antidote in reflexive modernity. “Science is no longer concerned with ‘liberation’ from pre-existing dependencies, but with the definition and distribution of errors and risks *which are produced by itself*” (Beck, 1994, p.158, my bold). Therefore scepticism of this system is healthy, and possibly necessary. This scepticism is present not only among individuals, but as mentioned earlier built into the world of science and administration. However, this relationship is a complex and not an unproblematic one as risks are “threats that require the sensory organs of science – theories, experiments, measuring instruments – in order to become visible and interpretable as threats at all” (Beck, 1994, p.162).

5.4 Diversity

Third and finally, Beck mentions diversity as the completing factor in risk society. As he does not provide a specified definition, it seems he indicates diversity in general; among individuals, institutions, political forums and their interests.

The case of young citizens commonly caring about issues largely ignored in national politics, work as a hot house for groups and individuals coming together all over the world to fight for global and local questions (Beck, 2001). They are part of a rising global civil society;

These movements form a ‘world party’ in a threefold sense. First, their values and goals have not a national but a cosmopolitan foundation: their appeal (liberty, diversity, toleration!) is to human values and traditions in every culture and religion; they feel an obligation towards the planet as a whole (Beck, 2001, p.17).

Beck sees individualization as something of a hybrid between a product of and a reaction to the labour market’s demand for education, competition and mobility linked with the spreading of diversity. Personal mobility and weakened nation states contribute to a distancing away

from traditional group separations such as class, neighbourhood, housing as well as living arrangements. He argues that this results in a greater diversity in both societal and cultural areas, and the weakening of the social relations within them (Beck, 1994). “Thus, traditional forms of community beyond the family are beginning to disappear” (Beck, 1994, p.97).

This means that the individual must construct and maintain its own networks and relationships; a task for which everyone might not have been equally prepared. According to Beck – referring to class sociology – this ability is learned, and depends on social background (Beck, 1994). Thus, inequality remains, but in the new form of “inequality of dealing with insecurity and reflexivity” (Beck, 1994, p.98); essential skills for managing life in risk society.

6. Findings

The conducted interviews mainly centred on issues of ecology/ 'nature', urban development, views of the world and its problems and possibilities, and interviewees' personal hopes and fears for the future. The categorization of the below findings is mainly for overview's sake, as no such clear boundaries were reflected in interviewees' answers.

The three large categories presented below can be regarded as main areas of society and life where diversity, scepticism and individualization might be exercised and expressed. These three concepts form the background against which the subsequent areas will be viewed.

6.1 Traders of trust – Technology & the Media

In the risk society described by Beck, media and technology (closely linked to expert society) are two of the main agents of influence and power. The modern individual is dependent on both of these agents in order to cope with everyday life and make sense of her/his information intense world, but is at the same time required to develop a mode of navigation in order not to be overwhelmed by the floodgate of often contradicting information emanating from these agents. In Beck's view this is done by the individualized citizen developing a 'healthy' sense of scepticism regarding the omnipotence of media and technology, and being ready to critique their channels of power; "Critique is democratized" (Beck, 2001, p.79).

Attitudes of interviewees, however, present a somewhat differing view.

The role of media

China being a country where a strong governmental censorship dictates what can be heard on the radio, viewed on TV, read in newspapers, and accessed via Internet, the separation between media and politics is often blurred. This makes internet and internet access an especially interesting topic in China, as internet here is both the symbol of youth and technological progress and a main tool for the government to exercise control over what websites and forums citizens are able to access. This constitutional practise of censoring – often referred to as the *Great Firewall of China* – enables the automatic blocking of any websites containing data considered harmful by the government; whether it is the social forum

Facebook or Google searches on ‘sensitive’ subjects such as ‘*Tian’an men Square 1989*’. As the one global channel of communication the national invasion of it is a hot topic both in China domestically and abroad.

Therefore it is perhaps not so surprising that the internet is the one topic on which all the interviewees expressed clear criticism towards the government and its actions. Zhenzhen expressed the frustration of being cut off and held back from this source of global communication and interaction, and implied that the governmental censorship is having negative effects on China’s reputation in other countries:

Up to now, we could not Facebook, could not Twitter... [Grimaces and laughs] I really hate this situation. For the government, they should let every channel run smooth, and balance the resources between East and West, especially in China. The government should do more, like cancel these censorships – it’s really rubbish! We are adults, we could judge. If you just block that, people will think ‘Why have you blocked? Why do you block?’ If you think you are doing right, why not just open it? Perhaps more people would stand on our side. (Zhenzhen)

Viewed against this background Beck’s claim “freedom’s children are the first to live in a post-national cosmopolitan world order” (Beck, 2001, p.13) seems pulled a little thin when being applied to China and her citizens. The nation state is here a strongly felt presence; it is not some abstract political label, but an everyday reality that enables and disables individuals to act. However, internet and interactive social networks seem to play a central part in individuals’ reaching out towards cosmopolitanism as social networking is based on individuals coming together in the global realm of internet.

Towards other channels of the media interviewees display more mixed feelings of trust and doubt. Newspapers and news broadcasts on radio and TV-channels are generally regarded as the most accessible and important sources of information for the large part of the population, although interviewees are certain that internet is the medial tool of the future. As the close link between the government and the media is well known, many news stories featuring bad news, such as accidents, are presumed to have been down-played, and many news stories featuring good news, such as the successes of the Shanghai World Expo 2010, are presumed to have been exaggerated. This double-faced nature of media struck Chifen as both tiresome and dishonest; “Media is tools, we should control it to express the true things” (Chifen). Similarly, depending on the nature of the news and the amount of attention it gets, several

interviewees stated they might be inclined to double-check with other – non domestic – sources the reliability of the information.

Considering the overall scepticism toward medial information it was interesting to find that *all* interviewees believe and trust medial reports when it comes to environmental issues and the threats of climate change. And even more surprising, this belief seemed to cover a few other issues such as labour migration, education and proper behaviour as well. In these cases media was viewed as both reliable and helpful; “It is a good thing to use it to inform the public and to help them take a stand” (Xiaozhi).

Sometimes they aware us of these issue and how seriously they are. I would say most of my knowledge of environmental comes from media, some from classes, and some from my NGO experience. To this extent, media do play an important role in making the truth known (Chifen).

Even Zhenzhen, that expressed such frustration with the government regarding censorship and how it restricted her internet access, was all for media as an educator of the people and creator of public opinion; “Media works like a guide, they try to give you a direction. They try to warn you, and the media in China will try to illustrate some good examples abroad like the US...”

...and went on to ask for more concrete examples from the media and environmental experts of how to tackle the climate question:

Is that...they always told you to be aware of the environmental problems, but they don't guide you how to. We always say; ‘it is important to protect the environment’. But; what should we do? What kind of things? Like what? We don't know. Like the school don't teach us. We always say ‘Ah, we should protect the environment!’ – So tell us how! It's weird. (Zhenzhen).

In the process of transcribing the conducted interviews I noticed what is clearly displayed above; it seems that interviewees neither react to nor are bothered by their at times clearly contradicting statements, something that struck me as very interesting. An explanation for this is offered in the highly remarkable work of Nisbett, Peng, Choi & Norenzayan (2001) regarding differences in cognitive processes between Westerners and East Asians. Referring to differences in world view, social structure and what was considered desirable qualities and

actions between ancient Chinese and ancient Greek culture (the two cultures Nisbett et al. consider to have profoundly influenced Eastern respectively Western culture today), Nisbett et al. argue that these differences are so profound that they have indeed shaped two distinctly different traditions of cognitive processes. To this day, for example, a wide scope of cognitive tests and studies show that Americans and Chinese view, approach, and solve the same problems differently. Nisbett et al. are therefore critical of the historically dominant view of cognitive processes as being universally normative, and instead argue that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural surroundings of individuals.

“[...] we argue that the considerable social differences that exist among different cultures affect not only their beliefs about specific aspects of the world but also (a) their native metaphysical systems at a deep level, (b) their tacit epistemologies, and (c) even the nature of their cognitive processes – the ways by which they know the world (Nisbett et al., 2001, p.291).

For example, ancient Greek society put great emphasis on principles of formal logic and the laws of non-contradiction, such as the statement $A \neq \text{not } -A$. However, this interest in formal logic was not mirrored in Chinese ancient culture;

The Chinese did not develop any formal systems of logic [or] anything like...an Aristotelian syllogism. Indeed, there was absence ‘not only of formal logical systems, but indeed of a principle of non-contradiction’. [...] In place of logic, the Chinese developed a dialectic, which involves reconciling, transcending, or even accepting apparent contradictions. [...] there is no necessary incompatibility between the belief that A and not A both have merit.” (Nesbitt et al., 2001, p.294).

This leads to the understanding that, to this day, two clearly contradicting statements regarding the same thing are considered a problem by most Westerners. The same is not necessarily true of East Asians, however, when they are faced with the same contradiction; as I noted among this study’s interviewees, a Chinese individual might very well hold opinion A to be as valid as the contradicting opinion B (such as criticizing the government’s censorship, but wanting the government and media to more firmly ‘guide’ citizens’ habits, beliefs and actions). Nisbett et al. argue that this is partly due to the ancient Chinese view of the world as holistic – everything and everyone are linked together in one way or the other – as opposed to

the Western, analytic approach that aims to explain the world through the practice of distinction and categorization (Nisbett et al., 2001).

Technology and expert society

To Beck, the risk society is a part of reflexive modernity, an era that frequently questions both itself and the industry and technology that brought it into being. As a result of this technology and expert society, although still in positions of power, have been nudged out of their ivory towers and moved into offices like everyone else.

Unlike Beck's sceptical individuals of the reflexive modernity, interviewees largely regarded technology as both benevolent and trustworthy. Also, not surprisingly, experts and their knowledge were still highly regarded and valued.

"I think technology plays vital part in, in...the future, what's going to happen, yeah. There must be a lot of new technology in...chemistry...some field that can help protect the environment...and the economic development." (Shan)

To Yanlin technology and continuing development were the key elements in a better, sustainable future:

Technology, industrial and the economic development are all important and should be in balance. The technology will help us balance the advantages of economic development against the disadvantages of environment pollution. The natural resources are limited; we should change our lifestyle, industrial progress to ensure an abundance of natural resources for future generations... I figure that the modification method and application in industrial progress will use less raw materials and labours. That will be help us decrease pollution and have low-carbon production. (Yanlin)

"Technology and science is signs of development... it is a modern tool that developed countries should use. It can help make their production...to make it more sustainable". (Mingyu)

I find the "*modern*" in Mingyu's statement to be central. Scepticism as it is described by Beck is an expression of awareness, a positive and necessary trait of the active citizen. The low

occurrence of comments of critique towards media, expert society and the government among interviewees display little similarity with this. Faith and trust in expertise and science was unperturbed among interviewees; the high level of scepticism that Beck desiderates is nowhere to be found. This is most likely due to the fact that the society described by interviewees is *not* the sceptical risk society belonging to reflexive modernity described by Beck, but an industrial society so busy developing and upgrading itself it has little time for anything else.

Additionally, it can be argued that the interviewees are largely mirroring the worldview they grew up with. Once again drawing on Nesbitt et al. (2001) proved an insightful and helpful resource. Like the matter of logic and contradiction, the answer is deeply rooted in history and culture. A look at the prominent position of debate and rhetoric in ancient Greek society and the lack of (indeed, sometimes avoidance of) the same in ancient Chinese society can help shed light on the relatively low degree of scepticism expressed by the majority of interviewees. While Athenians were encouraged to develop their critical thinking and even a farmer could challenge a king in a debate, the case was quite different in China;

Within the social group, any form of confrontation, such as debate, was discouraged. [...] there never developed a ‘spirit of controversial language’ nor a ‘tradition of free public debate’. So far from debate being encouraged in a society with such values, one person could not contradict another without fear of making an enemy (Nesbitt et al., 2001, p.293).

6.2. Nature and human society

Pollution & profit; development and depletion

That the past thirty years of China’s financial and industrial boom have taken a great toll on the country’s natural resources and environment was clearly reflected in interviewees’ descriptions of how their hometowns have changed since their childhood. In fact, interviewees generally portrayed views of economic development and the preservation of nature to be two contradicting terms. “*Pollution*” and “*climate change*” were mentioned by *all* interviewees when asked what first comes to mind when they hear “*environment*” – only one additionally thought of the image of ‘unpolluted’ forests and lakes. The answer rendered

from all interviewees on the same question regarding "*development*" was either "*money*" or "*economy*". Although all interviewees clearly connected damaged nature and development, this relationship was generally viewed as – in lack of a better word – a natural one. To Shan, economic development brings about the death of "natural nature";

With the development of the city, people prefer to make some natural place...like Century Park [one of Shanghai's largest public parks]. But manufactured...*ren zao de*. By men. /.../ It is, this is...it is not about good or bad; it is because people – human race – need nature, but with the development of the economic, the nature has disappeared, so... You have to make it. (Shan)

The pollution and depletion of natural resources due to industrial activity is tolerated by citizens and the government alike because of the economic profits and job opportunities it generates. Despite being worried about climate changes and expressing occasional frustration with the government's weak enforcement of environmental policies, interviewees confirm the view that development – at whatever cost – is central to China right now;

"In general, many nations have become more aware of the environmental issues, especially in China, but change is difficult, it is adverse to our interests just at present." (Yanlin)

"Crimes against nature are paid for in money. The government has made laws, but they're not very effective. It's because all balance is about the money." (Shan)

Although Nuying believed that excessive pollution should be punishable with larger fines and forced community service similar to that in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and Xiaozhi suggested that industrial and urban expansion under the government should be compensated by donating money to the local society, no interviewees expressed that they blame the government for the state of things, nor that the state of the environment is a problem to which slowed and/or more sustainable urban and industrial development is the solution. Rather, pollution is merely regarded as a very regrettable but unavoidable side-effect to the economical wonder.

Urbanization

Today, more than forty percent of China's 1.3 billion citizens live in cities. In 1950 that number was around thirteen percent, and in 2030 it is expected to reach more than sixty (Brown, 2009). The rapid urbanization in China has led to the widespread expansion of already large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou as well as the birth of hundreds of new ones. The booming economy and the industrial development have inarguably had many positive effects such as improvements in standard of living for large parts of the population. But, as most of the work opportunities are now located in the urban areas, it has also brought about large-scale rural-to-urban domestic labour migration that the national infrastructure is unable to support.

"It's unavoidable. It's about the economic. We need to develop economic to make people living well... And, the people from the village, they have to find a job, go to the big city, to support his family." (Shan)

Interviewees all expressed concern over the rapid growth of China's cities and the large influx of migrant workers. Although urbanization was regarded as the necessary and unavoidable progress of the country's development, several interviewees wished that the government would do more to develop the whole country so rural inhabitants needn't move to the cities. City life was generally regarded by interviewees as a something that can offer great (financial) opportunities, but at the same time is closely linked to loneliness and alienation. It plays a two-faced part; although many of the fortune seekers find themselves without rights or protection, it's a place that offers whoever curious, brave or desperate enough to venture there a wide range of possibilities for the construction of their life project.

"For the sake of economic survival, individuals are now compelled to make themselves the center of their own life plans and conduct" (Beck, 1994, p.92).

However, unlike Beck's view of the individualized risk society citizen that has mainly the development of itself and its own success as driving force, interviewees highlight the *parallel* presence in today's China of individualization, brought about through the modern labour market climate and the booming economy, and traditional views on the importance of family.

In China the fruits of individual success and economic gain – although widely and enthusiastically pursued – largely befalls the individual's whole family, and not just the

individual him/herself. Unlike Beck's individualized individual that is somewhat regarded as a complete entity in itself, family ties as well as a sense of belonging to a specific geographical area are generally still of large importance in China. Not only the Confucian practice of filial piety (see for instance Fong (2002), Greenhalgh (1977) or Milwertz (1997) for more on this) but a lacking system for retirement income and expensive health, child and elderly care have contributed to a system of reciprocity; parents raise their children and invest greatly in their education and working life success, and then in turn expect their children to ensure that they are financially and physically cared for at the time of old age.

Beck's answer to how to create a sense of belonging in the risk society is through cultural democratization and political freedom (Beck, 2001). In China, due to mentioned political, historical, social and cultural reasons, this sense of belonging is instead often tied to being a member of a family, a socioeconomic class, a village or a group. In fact, the views on social divides and inequalities expressed by interviewees' show more concurrence with Beck's critic Gabe Mythen than with Beck himself. Similarly to Mythen, and contradictory to Beck's view of diversity, interviewees predict a strengthening and deepening of "traditional patterns of social inequalities" (Mythen, 2004, p.181) in the future.

For example, Mingyu and Nuying were maintaining that the categories of division between urban and rural areas are far from out of use. These categories are in fact sprung from a *governmental* policy of distinction and separation between rural and urban areas, established several decades ago. The following statements by Nuying & Mingyu regarding urbanization and rural immigrants clearly display the perceived lower status of migrant workers compared to registered urban citizens;

I think because their knowledge level is not very high and um... [Saying the word in Chinese] Um...un, uncivilized. Uncivilized. I think because their knowledge level not very high and maybe that include some crimes like stolen or maybe... I believe in China, in some places, you can see this; where they lived is more messy than the other places. The government maybe can give them more help, to help them to change their bad culture. And maybe go through some...training. (Mingyu)

"Because in China there are two different policies in the countryside and the city. And so...the farmers cannot get the same as the citizens." (Nuying)

Xiaozhi confirmed this common practice of 'labeling' when talking about the same topic...

“They’re called the second generation... the peasant, the second peasant generation. Also the media give a lot of focus on this group; this is very special group in China now”

...as well as reencountering some of her own experiences as a Jiangxi province native of being viewed as an outsider;

Yeah, it depends on where you’re from. Just like with the different students in Shanghai too, it’s different. Us students can’t say the difference, but maybe after school and you are interviewed by a job maybe the company say ‘I would like to hire a Shanghai born people’, just like that. (Xiaozhi)

6.3. Agents of change; governments, NGOs and individuals

“We need [...] individuals who will create a sense of cohesion and fellow-feeling through public conflict and commitment” (Beck, 2001, p.8).

As all interviewees agreed that the environment at large is at risk and non-renewable natural resources are commonly sacrificed in the names of development and industrial profit around the world, their suggestions for personal and large-scale change offer an interesting look at their views of patterns of action.

Small, everyday actions like water preservation, minimizing the use of paper, recycling household waste, and informing others were mentioned by interviewees as easy ways for individuals to make a difference. Also, the personal involvement of interviewees Zhenzhen, Chifen and Shan (in international NGO Roots & Shoots and as volunteer director of a short-film project aimed at informing about environmental problems, respectively) provide support for Beck’s claim that mainly “*younger and more educated sections of the population*” (Beck, 2001, p.14) are involved in social movements. At the same time, several interviewees confessed that they themselves could get more active and do more to protect the environment.

Maybe environment too...abstract, maybe that's it. This works quite like, most people know that smoking would badly damage their lung, but they still addict to it. And also maybe environmental degradation is not so easily seen by most people and it's ‘faraway’. What we've done take a long time to react on the nature, so the damages are not instant results. (Chifen)

Qingzhao agreed that environmental problems and similar issues get moved to the back of the mind in order to give room for the everyday problems and challenges that appear more close to home;

Though I believe climate is changing, and the environment is getting worse, and I sometimes do worried about that, and make resolutions - like doing things as you are dying... [laugh] but I can tell in my heart that I am not so deeply concern about these stuff as my personal future, health or English test... (Qingzhao)

This said, interviewees all believed that attention from media and the government has at least improved the situation compared to twenty years ago, and that today's young have much more environmental awareness than previous generations did.

Young people, I think, in China do better in this field than their parents because they have stronger sense and less burden. For my friends are mostly college students, less burden means they have more time to do 'other' things, to volunteer, and not so worried about the financial situation. (Chifen).

In order to continue this positive development interviewees emphasized the importance of educating especially the young on environmental issues; through their unique status as single children they can influence their whole family to be more climate friendly.

Both Beck and Mythen stress the important role NGOs play as channels of both civil action and political influence in the world today. As meeting points of private, local, national and global issues they are central tools for raising awareness and creating public opinion. Interviewees also mentioned NGOs as important agents for environmental change, but that the relatively small number of NGOs in China, and the main concentration of these to the large cities and coastal areas, means that joining an NGO to help your cause is not an option for the majority of the population. Instead media coverage (along with internet and social media like Youku, Facebook and QQ), schools, families, and above all, governmental policies and legislation were considered the most effective ways to spread information and change.

The younger generations could account better than the older generations, 'cause when they grow up they play a core role in the family. And this core role will improve the core role of that generation, of that whole society. /.../ But like places in my hometown there are not so much NGO: s to play a role, to promote these kinds of

ideas, so the heavy burden lies to the family...media, books, and education.
(Zhenzhen)

Overall, interviewees largely portrayed a view of the individual as someone that might possess a desire for information and change, but is unable, due to lacking opportunity, education, expertise or power, to act with any impact.

“I think all the people in the world should do something...to prevent these things from happening. But it’s like...common people just...cannot do some important policy, they cannot...just do something by ourselves.” (Meilin)

Unlike Beck’s risk society individuals that take action through a combination of channels, the government – not groups or individuals that join forces – was still considered by a majority of interviewees to be the initiator and controller of change and development. Similarly, where the diversity of NGOs is not available, the main initiative and responsibility goes back to the collective groups of family life and public educational institutions.

As a final remark one might also mention that Beck’s call for civil action is not as easy to heed everywhere around the globe as it might be in his native Germany. In China (as in several other countries), protests and critique towards the national government are commonly desponded and quieted down, and dissidents and activists may even face severe punishments such as prison sentences or labour camp.

Future Hopes and Fears

“Our world, our Earth, is getting worse and worse, year by year.” (Xiaozhi)

Just like in Beck’s risk society, it was largely man-made disasters that made up the fears of interviewees. The most common fears mentioned were of the city drowning, either by being swallowed up by rising sea levels or sinking as a result of overpopulation, and the weight of skyscrapers causing the ground to collapse on top of the metro system. Extensive air and water pollution as well as climate change were considered to be already realized fears that with help of technological development and actions from the government hopefully will get better in the future.

Another point of interest is that although many interviewees found supra-national cooperation to be the right way to tackle present and future threats to the environment;

“Environmental big as not for individual country or individual people to address. In other word, we have reached the stage that environmental problems be solved for international view.” (Yanlin)

...they put little trust and faith in the current systems available. Globally established environmental rules and standards, such as the United Nations’ climate goals and emission quotas, are portrayed by interviewees as inefficient and unfair, and prominent attendees at climate conferences are regarded as lacking in sincerity. They see a great divide between the privileges of and the demands on developed and developing countries, and all interviewees emphasize that the developed countries should ‘help’ the developing, and overall ‘do more’.

I think global is like a big family, so countries and countries...for the future I think they should...excel in cooperation. ‘If we can use this, you can use that’. If one country do some very bad things it’s not gonna just affect maybe itself. So I think all the countries should work together to solve those big problems. Protect the whole globe. (Qingzhao)

Paradoxically, interviewees also expressed clear views of environmental problems and responsibilities as issues that should be dealt with on a national level, seeing as each country has different conditions and means at its disposal, and can be expected to do what is in the interest of its citizens.

“The government’s actions are important and will give us driving force. The Chinese government gave top priority to building a low-carbon society but make a slow progress... Anyway it’s better than nothing.” (Yanlin)

There is again clearly great ambivalence regarding present day problems and future hopes and fears in the attitudes expressed among the interviewees. Although Meilin expressed great worry for the future; “I worry about what I am afraid of. A lot of people maybe because of pollution maybe will died of cancer or some diseases...” the future still holds a promising glow; “I hope. I hope, yeah. Maybe people will live more comfortable...Maybe the environment will become...better. Because the government pay more attention.” (Meilin)

It is as if fears are mainly considered on an individual level, and in the bigger picture the future of the majority will be full of promising improvements. Although some interviewees believe that social and economic divides will grow (as has been illustrated in previous sections), none of them expect this to lead to a battle of resources, and no one considers armed conflicts or war to be a future threat. Cooperation, material and ecological improvement (thanks to science/technological development and governmental action) and understanding dominate the visions of future society. The view of the world is that of a globally interconnected society similar to Beck's, but it seems to be lacking the same feelings of exposure and insecurity – probably much due to the belief that the national government will remain strong for a good part of the foreseeable future.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Analysis summary

The aim of this thesis has been to examine the opinions and attitudes of a group of university students regarding ecology, urban development and risk with the help of the following research questions:

- What are the attitudes concerning the relationship between human urban development and its relation to the environment among highly educated young adults from a large urban area in China?
- Is Beck's view of today's global society as a risk society and the view that this society is culturally rooted in individualism, diversity and scepticism applicable to this group?

There is no doubt that Beck through his theory of risk society successfully addresses and pin-points many of the challenges, threats and benefits that comes with life in the 21st century.

But, in contrast to Beck the interviewees of this study regard their risk-filled surroundings not as something symptomatic of a new world order, bound to carry on for a vast period of time, but as a something finite that with the right tools and knowledge will be dealt with and lightened within a relatively short time span. Also, in general they do not consider risks as issues to be primarily dealt with globally; in fact instead of reaching towards social and political civil movements and they turn to the national government for guidance, encouragement and plans of action. The interviewees' attitudes reflect a view of society and self in which the strong national government is a constant presence. Viewed against this background Beck's claim that "We have been witnessing a global erosion of the authority of nation states and a general loss of confidence in hierarchical institutions" (Beck, 2001, p.14) seems to be if not presumptuous at least somewhat premature.

Also, unlike Beck – who puts the individual at the centre of society – the interviewees' views repeatedly refer to the individual as part of one or many groups. The collective has not been shattered or made superfluous by the diversity of modern times, but rather is strengthened and maintained on both individual and collective levels.

In conclusion; Beck's impressive theory of world risk society is rooted too deeply in Western (the very stern might even say German) society to adequately be applied on such a grand scale as is its aim. The individualization, diversity and scepticism Beck regards as 'innate' to (risk) society, in reality weighs heavy with cultural connotations, and its close ties to a form of welfare system existing only in a few, predominantly Western, countries in the world estranges it from many of those countries and cultures it wishes to embody. As Mythen puts it; "Beck's totalizing approach to risk is tainted by a distinctly Eurocentric bias" (Mythen, 2004, p.182). The works of Nisbett et al. (2001) on culturally rooted systems of cognition was found to be an insightful and helpful tool in the attempt to shed light on that which is too often merely referred to as 'cultural differences'.

Final remarks

As all interviewees save one participating in this study were females, there is the natural possibility that the views expressed in this study are more commonly present in females than males. To satisfyingly analyse the correlations between gender and attitudes on areas similar to those focused upon in this study, a comparative study including both males and females would be preferred.

A potentially interesting area for future research is what effect the continued economic development and the planned expansion of mainland China's welfare and health systems will have on the informal economical reciprocal systems that today play such a central part in the lives of many Chinese families. Will the attitudes of China's young toward family ties and personal economic wealth become more like those described by Beck when and if there is a welfare state up to par?

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(Page shows in original Mandarin. To read in English, please use Google Translate bar, or similar software. The text was originally found under “News” in the website’s main menu, but as the ‘newsroom’ displays only current events and documents it is (to my knowledge) now only accessible via the direct address link shown above).

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Appendix I – Interviewees

In this study a total of nine informants, eight females and one male, shared their thoughts and attitudes in personal interviews. When the study was conducted all informants were students at one of the following three universities; China Eastern Normal University, China International Language School, Shanghai University. Although originally from different provinces all were living in Shanghai, China and aging between 21-32 years old. Where the interviewee's city of origin is named in addition to province this is merely because that interviewee in question provided this detail regarding his/her origin.

Yanlin (female): 27 years old, history major. From Anhui province.

Mingyu (female): 26 years old, journalism student. From Hebei province.

Chifen (female): 21 years old, Chinese language major. Born in Shanghai.

Xiaozhi (female): 23 years old, journalism and international communications student. From Jiangxi province.

Shan (male): 21 years old, motion graphics/motion design student. Born in Shanghai.

Meilin (female): 32 years old, journalism student. From Anhui province.

Nuying (female): 26 years old, journalism student. From Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.

Qingzhao (female): 24 years old, journalism student. From Liaoning province.

Zhenzhen (female): 24 years old, international journalism student. From Xi'an city, Shaanxi province.

Appendix II – Selection criteria for interviewees

The criteria present in selecting interviewees for this study were:

Chinese

As the research topic for this thesis centres on views of ecology, risk and urban development in China from the viewpoint of Chinese citizens it was a main requirement that the participating interviewees were both born in China as well as currently living there.

English speaking

The interviewees had to be currently living in Shanghai. The interviewees had to be sufficient enough in spoken English to feel comfortable and being able to express their opinions in a degree satisfying to themselves.

Students

Chinese and current student at one of Shanghai's universities. Exchange students of Chinese origin at university for studies of Chinese as a foreign language was not considered as a certain knowledge of and familiarity with the country's environment and development were central.

Geographical origin & academic major

Geographical origin (beyond nationality) and academic major was not specified as important or unimportant criteria, but a heterogenic selection was considered favourable as this might provide several points of view.

Gender and Age

Gender and age were not specified in the selection criteria.

Appendix III - Interview guide

Background information: gender, school, origin, major, age.

1. When you hear or read something about “[the] environment”, what do you think about? What does environment mean to you?
 2. What role does environment play in your life?
 3. When you hear “development”, what do you think about? What does development mean to you?
 4. How has environment and environmental issues been given in your education? In school when you were little/ in your current program?
 5. How often do you leave the city/ Go home? If you could choose a place to go for vacation/travel, where would you go? Why?
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6. To you, what does it mean to be environmental aware? How do you regard yourself in this matter? How do you regard people in general? (Around the world/ In China?)
7. What does “sustainable development” mean to you?
8. What do you think would be a good way to increase environmental awareness? In the world’s population in general? In China?

9. When you hear about environmental or climate changes, what are your thoughts/feelings?

Do you believe what you hear? Why/why not? What role do you think media plays in our perception of development and environment?

10. In your opinion, what role do young people today play for the future environment?

11. What means/ways/options of action do you see available to you and other young people to have an impact/make their voice heard environmentally?

What do you think about using civilian disobedience and/or violence as a means to protect the environment?

12. As a consumer, when you buy an item, what relevance does the way it was made, or where it comes from have to you?

13. In your future career, what effect do you think an employer's/ a company's environmental attitudes/ policies will have on your feelings about a job?

14. What is your general view on global urbanization, i.e. that more and more people move from the countryside to the cities? What do you think about this in Chinese society?

15. The two main slogans of the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai is “Better City, Better Life” and “World Urbanization in Focus, We all Gather at the Expo”. What do these slogans mean to you? In your opinion, what effects has the Expo had on Shanghai?

16. What is your general view on globally established environmental rules and goals, for example the United Nations' climate goals and emission quotas?

17. To you, what connections are there between industrial and economic development and the state of the environment? What role do you think technology plays?

18. Thinking of environment and development, how do you picture Shanghai in the future? How about the world?

19. What would your ideal vision of Shanghai/ the world in 10, 50, 100 years be? What future possibilities and challenges do you imagine?