

# Public Participation? No Public!

## An Example of Tangshan Bay Eco-city

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*Foggy beach in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, Photo by Author*

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Abstract:

The concept of Eco-city and the means of public participation in urban planning are receiving more and more attention in global urbanization and environmental discourse. However in China, comparing to the eco-city fever, public participation is ignored at a great extent. This thesis will explore public participation (and lack thereof) in eco-city planning in China by introducing the example of Tangshan Bay Eco-city and the experiences in Malmö Sweden. With a human ecology framework, this thesis employs an interdisciplinary methodological framework to address the question of social sustainability in a Chinese context, by answering the four questions of “phronetic plan research”.

**Key word:** eco-city, public participation, conflict, power

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# Table of contents

Introduction.....	5
Methodology .....	10
Participant observation.....	11
Intercultural approach .....	13
Interdisciplinary approach .....	16
Theoretical framework.....	19
Key concepts.....	21
Findings and discussions.....	31
No.1 Future Avenue .....	31
The silence of public .....	35
Who loses? Who wins? Power talks! .....	40
The creation of public .....	44
Conclusion and reflections.....	49
Bibliography .....	51

*The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.*

– David Harvey

## **Introduction**

To build a new city on an undeveloped saline land, Tangshan Bay Eco-city was facing a fundamental problem of no inhabitation when they started planning. During the Participatory Urban Planning Seminar and Panel Discussions held in Malmö University on 22nd November, 2011, Zhai Jingfeng, the deputy director of Beijing Vanion Construction & Investment Group asked me: “How can we engage public, when there is no public?” The same view over an absence of population and public was also shared by Wei Dehui, the director of Technology and Engineer Center of Tangshan Bay Eco-city Administrative Committee. As developers and governmental officials, they shared the same confusion of no public to engage in eco-city planning process.

Finnish professor Eero Paloheimo stated that “China could become the first and most important producer of eco-cities”, Paloheimo also argued that in European cities the planners have too many constraints in the planning process in order to build radical eco-cities. His argument regarding why China has the ability to do it is: “As far as I understand, Chinese decision-makers do not have the same constraints and are not as easily steered by the media. Major, radical decisions may be easier to take when you believe they are correct and need not suffer from irrelevant criticism. Making such a

radical decision as to build an eco-city is possible in China.”<sup>1</sup> This comment can be understood as a compliment on the efficiency in making decisions, but also can be interpreted as a tremendous public silence in China. There is no exception of this silence in eco-city related decision and policy making.

Greater public participation in contemporary environmental issues and urban planning discourse is becoming more and more emphasized by academia. However the absence of public in most eco-cities in China represents basically on two levels. Firstly there is literally no population as what happened to Tangshan Bay Eco-city, mainly because most of them are newly built on undeveloped land without or with only a few original residents. Secondly, there is generally no public engagement, just like what Paloheimo pointed out when stating: “Chinese decision-makers do not have the same constraints”, which is mainly due to the current “Chinese speed” in economic development and other cultural and institutional reasons. And the second issue is far more difficult to deal with.

China is currently in a process of rapid urbanization. Since 1978, its urban population rate has risen from 18 percent of the total population to 51.3 percent in 2011 (China Statistical Bureau 2012).<sup>2</sup> For the first time in China, more than half of the population is living in an urban area. It would be clearer if we look at the absolute urban population, which grew almost four fold, from 172.45 million to 690.79 million in 33 years.<sup>3</sup> According to the United Nations, the urban population rate in China will rise to 73.2 percent by 2050.<sup>4</sup> Although this percentage is still smaller than 85 percent in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eeropalohimo.fi/EcoCity.htm> (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/t20120222\\_402786440.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/t20120222_402786440.htm) (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2011/html/D0301e.htm> (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/wup2009/unup/>, Tuesday, March 27, 2012; 11:39:29 PM.

Sweden and 100 percent in Hong Kong in 2010,<sup>5</sup> due to the immense population base, this rapid increase has the potential to cause even worse environmental degradation.

Urban sprawl is almost always accompanied by ecological degradation and unsustainable resource exploitation. It is the reshaping of nature that has made civilized urban life possible (Gandy 2002, 72), but this reshaping and the process of reshaping have also caused profound negative impacts on nature, as it is noted: “The first and most obvious thing about cities is that they are like organisms, sucking in resources and emitting wastes” (Tickell 1997, vi).

Eco-cities are an important concept of green urbanism, they are introduced in order to expand and develop urban areas while sustainability is taken into account. It is becoming a global trend to build eco-cities on different scales, and the trend involves countries with different political, economic, and social situations. China is currently the biggest testing ground of eco-cities. According to a recent study by the Chinese Society for Urban Studies, up to November 2010, 276 out of 287 prefecture cities in mainland China target to build eco-city or low carbon city, 83 percent of more than 600 cities aim to become eco-cities as long-term goal, and only 27 percent of them are renewal urban,<sup>6</sup> which means most of the eco-cities are newly built where there was previously no development. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-rural Development issued Interim Measures for the Administration of Low carbon and eco-city (town) Declaration.<sup>7</sup> In these measures, it is regulated that only new cities (towns) or new quarters in existing cities can declare to build eco-cities (towns). According to this, there will be more and more new eco-cities growing in previous uninhabited places, in other words, places with no public. This situation to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2212.html> (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.chinajsb.cn/bz/content/2011-03/21/content\\_24050.htm](http://www.chinajsb.cn/bz/content/2011-03/21/content_24050.htm) (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.mohurd.gov.cn/zcfg/jsbwj\\_0/jsbwjcsgh/201107/t20110711\\_203738.html](http://www.mohurd.gov.cn/zcfg/jsbwj_0/jsbwjcsgh/201107/t20110711_203738.html) (accessed June 11, 2012)

some extent will reduce the inconvenience to and caused by local residents, increase the efficiency of decision-making, and at the same time fulfill the need to address urban sprawl. However, the lack of public input will lead to potential problems for eco-cities.

Building an eco-city involves knowledge in different fields. The current construction relies heavily on the application of “green” technologies like renewable and clean energies, waste recycle and reusing; architectural approaches and other natural science related fields are becoming increasingly common and valued as well. For example, green buildings, compact and dense layout, transportation orientated design are areas of increased popularity. Despite these new developments, there is no single way to fix all the problems. “While the physical reasons why land becomes degraded belong mainly in the realm of natural science, the reasons why adequate steps are not taken to counter the effects of degradation lie squarely within the realm of social science” (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, 2). To have good planning, Campbell (1996, 305) states, planners should strive to “promote creative technical, architectural and institutional solutions” to the problems of modern cities. In eco-cities, more and more attention is drawn to the process of organizing. Developer dialogue and public hearings are the main means to engage public into planning and building in some countries like Sweden. But in China, it still stops at the face of the forms. This thesis includes developers and other interested or impacted individuals and organizations in the public as stakeholders.

The central aim of this thesis is to highlight the possibilities to implement public participation within the particular discourse of eco-cities in China. The primary questions which guide the research are:

- Is Tangshan Bay Eco-city desirable?

- Where are we going with public participation in the contexts of Tangshan Bay Eco-city planning?
- Why is public participation neglected in the current eco-city planning process and by which mechanisms of power?
- Where are the public that should be engaged to build ecologically, economically and socially sustainable cities in China? How can China engage the public? What are the roles of governments in public participation?

While there are hundreds of eco-cities currently in the planning and construction stages, I have selected Tangshan Bay Eco-city as an example to see what the obstacles and opportunities are. Furthermore, I will introduce the experiences of public participation in Malmö, Sweden into this discussion. My primary reason to choose these two cities is the “TangMa Training Project for Cities of Tomorrow” between Tangshan Bay eco-city China and Malmö Sweden, from which it is very obvious to see their different visions and methods in planning and building. Also, each city is seen as typical and standard eco-city in each country. Tangshan Bay Eco-city is a local government-led project like most of other eco-cities in China. Before 2005, it was an island without an electricity supply, with only salt farms and shrimp pools, and now they are building an eco-city of 150 square kilometers with a population of 800 thousand by 2020. Simply the idea that they are turning an empty saline island to a flourishing and ecological city in 10 years is tremendously exciting. According to Lin Peng, the director of Tangshan Bay Eco-city Administrative Committee, the project has received the best grade in an assessment among the four most valued eco-city projects in China in March, 2012. On the Swedish side, Malmö is considered the fourth greenest city in the world according to the American environmental magazine *Grist*.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, it represented Sweden to show “better city, better life” in 2010 Expo in Shanghai China.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.malmo.se/English/Sustainable-City-Development.html>

The lack of public in the city planning and building processes actually reflects an asymmetry of information and power, and will lead to more conflicts in the future. This makes the topic particularly relevant for human ecology, which looks at the intersection between power, culture and sustainability. There is no easy answer to the balance of power. To aid in our understanding, we should look at this problem with historical and cultural perspectives. To identify and engage the affected and interested public is improving the quality and legitimacy of decisions and policies making, as well as having the potential to address the “democratic deficit” and building social sustainability (Marian, Newman, Knops, and Sullivan 2003). Especially for eco-cities, it is not only about urban planning, but also an environmental movement to achieve the balance between human and ecology, between “good intentions and sentiments” to protect environment and “protection of their economic interests” (Brogden and Greenberg 2003, 297).

## Methodology

In this paper, I will introduce the methodology of “phronetic social science”. It is an approach employed in the specific study of policy and planning, which fits my topic of eco-city planning very well. The methodology is based on a contemporary interpretation of the classical Greek concept *phronesis*, variously translated as practical judgment, practical wisdom, common sense, or prudence. This approach calls for a focus on power in plan, an understanding of the practical political realities of any situation as part of an integrated judgment in terms of power (Flyvbjerg 2004, 284).

Phronetic planning research is problem-driven. Therefore such research does not, and cannot, subscribe a priori to a certain method (Flyvbjerg 2004, 291). In order to do the research, I have employed different approaches.

First, eco-city is a topic involving a wide range of different fields. It requires interdisciplinary knowledge including natural science and social science, as city is a concept of natural and built environment, and human interactions.

Secondly, this research was conducted both in Sweden and China, so the understanding of these two cultures and political backgrounds is also an important requirement. I was very lucky to have experiences studying and living in both countries. To look inside of China from outside as an insider was a very interesting and rewarding experience.

A central task is to provide concrete examples and detailed narratives of the ways in which power and values work in planning (Flyvbjerg 2004, 302). To do so, I conducted participant observation in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, and took it as an example to analyze the conflict and power of eco-city planning in China.

In order to gather an in depth understanding of the topic, I collected data with a variety of tools such as participant observation, an interdisciplinary approach, text discourse, comparison, and I went to the site to count lights in the evening to count the number of inhabitants who are living in the newly built neighborhood called Flower City.

Most of the data and statistics are collected from official sources, like governmental websites. Some important data and facts were also collected during interviews in fieldwork, or offered by informants.

## **Participant observation**

*If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough.*

– Robert Capa

“Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them” (Behar 1996, 5). I was lucky to get an opportunity to have a proper reason to observe and write.

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011, I got the invitation to be an interpreter for a Chinese delegation of “TangMa Training Project for Cities of Tomorrow”, where I began my participant observation. This training program took place between Malmö and Tangshan Bay Eco-city, with particular interests in Sustainable Urban Design (SUD) and Organic Waste as a Resource for Urban Renewable Energy (OWRE), and financed by ICLD (the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy). I attended three training sessions, two in Malmö in March and November in 2011, and one in Tangshan in April 2012. I got very open discussions and opinions from trainees from both sides of Malmö and Tangshan in private and public.

The distance to research objects is a very subtle issue in participant observation. As Clifford Geertz stated, the writing is “a strange cross between author-saturated and author-evacuated texts, neither romance nor lab report, but in between”. But before that, how to be able to get “close-in contact with far-out lives” while observing is already a problem (Geertz 1988, 6).

As an interpreter, my participant observation in this case is not only observing as an outsider without influence or impact. Except the interpreting work, sometimes, I joined in discussions or explained to the delegations with my own experience and knowledge.

I went to Tangshan to continue my participant observation for more than a month in January 2012, by sightseeing, joining the participants in all kinds of conferences, training, workshops, daily work and even daily life. People from different departments were working in a shared office, this facilitated data collection, since I

could be present to observe how they work and cooperate, and hardly missing anything that happened in different departments. Having lunch was another good way to observe. Because the only place for lunch is the canteen, I encountered and spoke to people from different positions and functions, from the head of the eco-city to the guards. The interviews were open ended and most were informal.

The two training sessions in Malmö allowed me, to build relationships with the participants. They knew my purpose and I was often asked “how is your research going?” They aimed to offer information that they thought would be helpful, including sensitive things. To build this trust, I believe the experience as interpreter was of great importance.

Participant observation and informal interviews can be a beneficial way of collecting data. However, I am aware of the constraints. For example, I could not feel comfortable to discuss too critical opinions when the relationship with informants became friendly.

## **Intercultural approach**

*I met a lot of people in Europe. I even encountered myself.*

– James Baldwin

The earth speaks several languages, thanks to that, I got the job. From the training sessions I not only got the chance to see how different groups envision the concept of eco-city, how different city planning systems work, but also I sensed obvious cultural differences, which is noticed by both sides. I aimed to explain to them, when there was possibility to eliminate the misunderstanding or confusion. In the process of explaining, I intended to bridge them, but actually I found the bridge for myself to connect two contexts.

The perspectives I got from the study in Sweden made me very critical to the Chinese ways to build a city they claimed ecological. With the doubt and critical attitude, I went back to China. But after talking to people and seeing them working, I became humble. Cultures are different, you can say you like it or not, but you cannot judge it right or wrong. The way they are building eco-city in Sweden might not be working in China, because of the different historical, economic, and cultural background, these two countries are at different urbanization stage. As I noted above, while the urbanization was still 51.3 percent in China in 2011, it was 85 percent already in Sweden in 2010.

Misunderstandings happened quiet frequently in terms of culture aspects on both sides. Sometimes, it can be confusing, but sometimes, it is beautiful and inspiring.



Figure 1: Street stand, photo by Qi Yunpeng

When Malmö delegation went to China, they found the street stands very dynamic, and were very interested in introducing it to Malmö. However it is actually a big headache for Chinese governments, because of the concern of health and image of the

city. The reason why the Chinese group chose to show the Swedish delegation street stands was because they found Swedish delegates to be amazed by the modernity, and it was necessary to show some negative sides for them to get a whole picture of cities in China.

Similar misunderstandings happened when the Chinese delegation was visiting the neighborhoods of Lugnet, Caroli in Malmö. Joakim Nordqvist, Climate Strategist in Environment Department of Malmö, also the coordinator of this training program was worried. He expressed the following: “I think they misunderstand us, we are showing these neighborhoods from 1950s, because we think they are ugly and we should learn this lesson from history.” His concern was confirmed when I heard the appreciation from most of the Chinese delegations. They thought these apartments were so well maintained for decades, which could be very seldom found in China. In China, it is common to say “no destruction, no construction” (不破不立, bu po bu li). This situation leads to another interesting discussion of “sustainability” between two cultures. When the Swedish delegation saw rows of buildings from 1970s being torn down in Tangshan, they asked the students from Hebei University: What is sustainability for you when people’s life is longer than buildings?”



Figure 2: Neighborhood of Lugnet, photo by author

A student answered: “I do not think we should judge a building sustainable or not depending on whether it still exists. If the buildings are not energy-saving or low carbon emission, they are not sustainable.”

Another noteworthy difference between two cities in city planning is the attitude and treatment to historical legacies. In Malmö, most historical architecture are maintained for their original use, or given new life by changing them for other purposes. For example, the old post office (Gamla posthuset) was established in 1906, and now it is



Figure 3: Gamla posthuset, photo by author

used by a company. Most old churches in Malmö are still used for worship, but The Caroli (Charles) Church built in 1880, originally part of the parish of St. Peters Church, was sold in 2009 and is now owned by a shopping center. In China, some historical buildings are torn down. Some are valued as monuments to be preserved and protected well. The only use of these buildings is for tourism, such as The Forbidden City, The Great Wall both in

Beijing and other places including Tangshan.

In sum, these two countries are thousands of miles apart, with totally different historical and cultural backgrounds, so it is very natural to have different opinions. But when they are facing a common fate, they choose the same solution, which is the development of eco-cities, even though they have very different visions and methods to do it. But they are building the bridge by learning and inspiring each other.

## **Interdisciplinary approach**

*The world has problems, but universities have departments.*

*- Brewer*

As early as 1935, the famous ecologist Aldo Leopold jotted down these thoughts on the back of a piece of hotel stationary:

*One of the anomalies of modern ecology is that it is the creation of two groups, each of which seems barely aware of the existence of the other. The one studies the human community almost as if it was a separate entity and calls its findings sociology, economics, and history. The other studies the plant and animal community and comfortably relegates the hodge-podge of politics to the "liberal arts." The inevitable fusion of these two lines of thought will, perhaps, constitute the outstanding advance of the present century."*

(Knight and Suzanne 2002, X)

In the March 2011 training session, the majority of the 16 Chinese delegates were from technical backgrounds. It was the first time for them to hear the concept of social sustainability in city planning when they were given a lecture about city planning approaches to solve social problems in Rosengård. This district was referred to as a suburb, while it is actually in the integral part of Malmö city, due to the complex immigration background and clashes between youth and police. The city's planning office introduced new bus lines to connect this district to the city center in order to keep it from being marginalized. Xiong, one of the delegates was very curious about this approach, and he asked me: how can we know whether it works or not? It is not like technic, we cannot have hard data to exam. I explained: there are approaches to examine the social consequences as well. In this case, you can do a comparison about the crime rate before and after the bus line introduced. He was happy with this answer.

Apart from different ways of conducting research, the city is also a concept with many different dimensions. It is the nature or built environment, and the society shaped by

people. To do this research, I lack the knowledge about the technical parts, especially architecture and energy. So I did make some effort to pick up this knowledge during the training session by listening to the lectures, joining in discussions and sightseeing. And also I consulted my friends in these fields. I got to know most of them from the training program.

In order to expand my research to include more technical aspects, I joined lectures and discussions within the training sessions that had a technical side. Furthermore, when I was in Tangshan to do my fieldwork, I attend most of the conferences and trainings, like green buildings, clean energy, greening and planting, city layout planning and so on. Two books that I received from Qi Yongxin proved to be very helpful, including *Designing with Plants*, which he translated into Chinese edition and was published in January 2012, and *Environmental Psychology*.

Posting threads on professional forums to seek advice for proposals was a helpful tool for collecting technical data as well. One example was when I wanted to find cases about public participation engagement in a new town. I posted a thread of “How to introduce public participation in the planning process of a totally new city” on Cyurbia Urban Planning Community<sup>9</sup>. This resulted in a lot of insightful recommendations from professional people from all over the world.

Of all the data I collected in my research, the portions not directly used in my thesis are mostly data about technologies, but it does not mean they were of no use, actually it helped me a lot to understand the context better.

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9

<http://www.cyurbia.org/forums/showthread.php?45923-How-to-introduce-public-participation-in-the-planning-process-of-a-totally-new-city&p=627397#post627397> (accessed June 11, 2012)

# Theoretical framework

Human ecology, as the relationship between humans and their natural, social and built environments, cannot be understood without a comprehensive understanding of their conflicts and powers. The example of Tangshan Bay Eco-city is situated at the intersection of socio-economic, environmental and political processes. Therefore, for this research I analyze public participation in eco-city planning in China based on the theories of conflict and power in the sphere of political ecology.

A core concept in early political ecology is the recognition of a plurality of positions, perceptions, interests, and rationalities in relation to the environment (Blaikie 1985, 16). “such that one person’s profit may be another’s toxic dump”(Paulson 2004, 2). The conflicts among different stakeholders and resources also caused the dilemma of “the tragedy of the commons”. One perspective is that multiple individuals, acting independently and rationally consulting their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource, even when it is clear that it is not in anyone's long-term interest for this to happen (Hardin 1968, 1244).

Conflicts, or “genuine clashes of interest” as Campbell (1996, 296) notes, go to the historic core of urban planning, and cannot be shaken off so easily. In his article “Green cities, growing cities, just cities? Urban planning and the contradictions of sustainable development”, he described a triangle of three conflicts. The first conflict is the property conflict between economic growth and equity that arises from competing claims on and uses of property, and this conflict defines the boundary between private interest and the public good. The second is the resource conflict, which defines the boundary between developed city and the undeveloped wildness. The third is the development conflict, lying between the poles of social equity and environmental preservation.

With different priorities of the conflicts, there will be three kinds of cities in planners' eyes, which are cities in competition with other cities for markets and for new industries, cities in competition with nature for scarce resources and land, and cities in competition within, among different social groups. So one role of planners is to manage and resolve conflict, to "grow" the economy, distribute this growth fairly, and in the process not degrade the ecosystem.

Eco-city planning is a concentrated expression of all the three conflicts, but my discussion about public participation in planning processes will specially focus on the conflict between official and public, which belongs to social and environmental justice.

The unequal power relationships among different actors are the key in understanding patterns of human-environment interaction and the associated environmental problems (Bryant and Bailey 2000, 38). Power in this sense has been conceptualized as social relations that have been established on the asymmetrical distribution of resources and risks (Hornborg 2001, 1).

Steven Lukes' *Power: A Radical View* was enormously influential. In the book, he presented his theory of three dimensions of power. The first dimension of power is overt dimension, which can be investigated by observing who participates, who profits, who loses, and who expresses himself in the decision-making process (Sadan 2004, 40). "Power is activated on the second, covert dimension, not only in order to triumph over the other participants in the decision-making process, but also to prevent decision-making to exclude certain subjects or participants from the process" (Sadan 2004, 41). "One of the important aspects of power, besides victory in a struggle, is to determine the agenda of the struggle in advance. That is to determine whether certain questions will even be negotiated. The two-dimensional approach related to open conflicts and to the ability to maneuver their extent and their contents, while one of

the most effective mechanisms of power is the ability to ensure quiescence in the decision-making arena- to prevent the outbreak of conflict” (Sadan 2004, 41) .The third is the latent dimension. “A conflict of interests between the activators of power and the true interests of those who are excluded from the arena creates a potential for conflict—a latent conflict” (Sadan 2004, 42).

“The harmonizing, conflict-avoiding and soothing vocabulary of sustainability is seriously shattered when confronted with real conflict situations and the exertion of power, resulting in processes of inclusion and exclusion, of empowerment and disempowerment” (Baeten 2000, 84). Eco-city planning involves different powers, which are maneuvered at different levels. Identifying the powers is the key to understanding the process of empowerment and disempowerment.

## **Key concepts**

### **Eco-city and sustainable city:**

Richard Register first systematically proposed the concept of "Eco-city" in 1987. Although it has been decades, there remains to be consensus on definition of eco-city. The main difference of the definitions focuses on the dimensions of eco-city. However a bigger difference lies between the theory and practice.

Richard Register explained “an Eco-city is an ecologically healthy city” (Register 1987, 3). And “most important, the concept must be firmly established and broadly understood and supported. Then, not only do we create the sustainable city that coexists peacefully with nature, but we will also discover a new creative adventure accessible to everyone, and ultimately, nothing less than a new mode of existence and creative fulfillment on this planet” (Register 1987, 5).

The Worldbank defines ecological cities as places that enhance the wellbeing of citizens and society through integrated urban planning and management that fully

harnesses the benefits of ecological systems, and protects and nurtures these assets for future generations. They also mentioned a new concept of Eco2City, which represents a second generation of eco-city. “Instead of focusing on ecological performance alone and good practices in different sectors, it encourages cities to adopt a holistic framework for analysis. Eco2City also embraces a highly participatory process for managing change at all levels of decision making bodies and across all sectors.”<sup>10</sup> According to the Worldbank, it can be concluded that eco-city focus on ecological performance alone, without consideration of participatory process in decision making.

Roseland, director of the Centre for Sustainable Community Development at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia pictured an eco-city with

*Streets for people, not cars. Destinations easily accessible by foot, bike, and public transit. Health as wellness rather than as absence of disease. Restoration of damaged wetland and other habitats. Affordable housing for all. Food produced and consumed locally. Renewable sources of energy. Less pollution and more recycling. A vibrant local economy that does not harm the environment. Public awareness and involvement in decision-making. Social justice for women, people of color and the disable. Consideration of future generations. (1997)*

This description is very romantic with a collection of apparently disconnected ideas about urban planning, transportation, health, housing, energy, economic development, natural habitats, public participation, and social justice, involving environmental, economic and social concerns. So the question remains, what exactly is an eco-city?

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10

[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTURBANDEVELOPMENT/Resources/336387-1270074782769/Eco2\\_Cities\\_Guide-web.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTURBANDEVELOPMENT/Resources/336387-1270074782769/Eco2_Cities_Guide-web.pdf) (accessed June 11, 2012)

The open sources site Wikipedia suggests that “a sustainable city or eco-city is a city designed with consideration of environmental impact, inhabited by people dedicated to minimization of required inputs of energy, water and food, and waste output of heat, air pollution - CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, and water pollution.”<sup>11</sup> In Wikipedia, This definition of eco-city shares the same entry with sustainable city.

But in literatures and practice, sustainable cities is broadly defined based on the concept of “sustainable development”, which is universally accepted as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” presented by Brundtland Commission in 1987. Furthermore, a sustainable city has been seen with three pillars, as in Global Report on Human Settlements 2009: Planning Sustainable Cities <sup>12</sup> by UN-HABITAT, the goal for a sustainable city is environmentally safe, economically productive and socially inclusive.

The loose definitions of eco-cities will lead to fundamentally different visions they are planning and building. An eco-city in Africa or in Asia, or in Europe, has different faces and focus. In South Africa, it is described eco-cities as such: “Eco-City has successfully solved environmental problems including poverty, poor environmental management and wasteful production and consumption methods. It tackles poverty by promoting green ways of making and saving money (through growing organic food, recycling, repairing bicycles, selling green energy aids and appliances, building ecological homes and starting Eco tourism enterprises).”<sup>13</sup> In Malmö, Sweden has a description for Ekostaden Augustenborg “the collective name for a program to make Augustenborg into a more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable neighbourhood.” “Ekostaden is working within the residential area of Augustenborg

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<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable\\_city](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_city) (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/GRHS\\_2009Brief.pdf](http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/GRHS_2009Brief.pdf) (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.unhabitat.org/bp/bp.list.details.aspx?bp\\_id=2552](http://www.unhabitat.org/bp/bp.list.details.aspx?bp_id=2552) (accessed June 11, 2012)

in Malmö, Sweden, as well as with the school, industrial area and other local businesses. One of the key aims of the project is to enable residents to take a leading role in the ideas, design and implementation of the project.”<sup>14</sup> On the website of Tangshan Bay Eco-city, it targets “a future city enjoying high degree of openness, prosperity and civilization, an innovative city blessed with innovation in culture, institutions and environment, an eco-city featuring harmony in industry, resource and social life and a happy city with development in economy, technology and service”.(一座高度开放、高度繁荣、高度文明的未来之城，一座文化创新、体制创新、环境创新的创新之城，一座产业协调、资源协调、生活协调的生态之城，一座经济发达、科技发达、服务发达的幸福之城！)<sup>15</sup>.

The difference between eco-cities and sustainable cities is not only that eco-cities still have very disputed dimensions comparing sustainable cities, which leads to different visions. But more importantly, visions decide approaches. In the article of “*Eco-Cities*” and “*Sustainable Cities*” - *Whither?* (Koh, Asanga & Lovleen 2010, 90). The authors pointed that “In practice, the term ‘eco-cities’ is often used to describe new cities rather than modification of existing cities (as in the case of ‘sustainable cities’). Such a concept provides rapidly urbanizing developing countries with the opportunity for technological leapfrogging, as they are still in the early stages of development.”<sup>16</sup> So compared to sustainable cities, eco-cities are newer, and more dependent on technologies. It is also mentioned that eco-cities are built on previously contaminated

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.malmo.se/English/Sustainable-City-Development/Augustenberg-Eco-City.html>

(accessed June 11, 2012)

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[http://www.tswstc.gov.cn/comcontent\\_detail/&FrontComContent\\_list01-1289889106619CurrentIds=c6235814-be6d-4724-8af2-6e7c34e18db5\\_2af97109-f833-4b82-87bd-96e607bdc062&comContentId=2af97109-f833-4b82-87bd-96e607bdc062&comp\\_stats=comp-FrontComContent\\_list01-1289889106619.html](http://www.tswstc.gov.cn/comcontent_detail/&FrontComContent_list01-1289889106619CurrentIds=c6235814-be6d-4724-8af2-6e7c34e18db5_2af97109-f833-4b82-87bd-96e607bdc062&comContentId=2af97109-f833-4b82-87bd-96e607bdc062&comp_stats=comp-FrontComContent_list01-1289889106619.html) (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>16</sup>

<http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/downloads/SocialSpace2010-KohKhengLian&AsangaGunawansa&LovleenBhullar.pdf> (accessed June 11, 2012)

land, irrigable land or ecologically fragile/protected area, which is true in many cases in China, not all of them though. Besides the failed project of Dongtan Eco-city on wetland in Shanghai, another eco-city called Nanhu in the city of Tangshan is built on an area of ground subsidence caused by coal mining with a history of more than 100 years, and now they are building 3,000 residential units set within an eco-friendly environment. Tangshan Bay Eco-city is also built on saline land. Some lands are even made by blowing sands. This condition is not the best for eco-cities, and very questionable.

### **Social sustainability in an eco-city context:**

Although there is no universally accepted definition about eco-city or its dimensions, a discourse analysis of six different eco-city projects from different parts of the world proved that, “environmental sustainability clearly dominated over economic and social”. (Rapoport, Vernay, 2011) My discussion with Wei Dehui confirmed this conclusion. I asked him what eco-city is in his understanding. He answered: I do not understand why you are always talking about social sustainability. Can you explain what ‘eco’ is? Why is it labeled eco-city instead of other names? I am not saying social sustainability is not important, but is not it important to all cities?

In some literature, social sustainability is defined in relation to the concept of sustainable development, as the idea that future generations should have the same or greater access to social resources as the current generation (“inter-generational equity”), while there should also be equal access to social resources within the current generation (“intra-generational equity”). Social resources include ideas as broad as other cultures and basic human rights.

In an urban context, social sustainability always includes two main dimensions, social equity and sustainability of communities (Bramley and Power 2009). It is defined that equity as providing equitable opportunities and outcomes for all its members,

particularly the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community. While the sustainability of communities includes various sub-dimensions such as attachment to the neighborhood, social interaction and safety within the neighborhood, perceived quality of the local environment, satisfaction with the home, stability, and participation in collective civic activities (Bramley and Power 2009). A widespread participation of citizens is not only in electoral procedures but also in other areas of political activity, particularly at a local level.

Social sustainability is the most neglected of the three pillars of sustainable development. This is partly because it is another ambiguous concept without clear definition, also because there is no hard data to measure its impact and importance. For city planners and governments, data matters. However, there is an increasing awareness of social dimension in city planning and how to organize the planning.

The discussion with Wei Dehui sparked deeper investigation and led to the following questions. What is the significance of social sustainability for eco-city particularly? Is it called eco-city if it is equipped with all kinds of green and clean technologies but in the danger of security of conflicts and even wars? What if it is a city with great balance between citizens and environment without much carbon emission, but with terrible unemployment and poverty? What if it is a garden city with huge inequality of income and social respects? What if it is an economically and environmentally flourishing city without democratically participial system?

Whether environmental and social sustainability are necessarily connected? To presume that the environment can only be sound with equitable society is not always right. And there is also no necessity that social sustainability can only occur in high environmental quality. Nevertheless, it does not mean the environmental and social sustainability is disconnected. While there is no consensus, it is widely assumed that social dynamic is more likely to occur in high quality physical environments in theory,

policy and practice (Dempsey 2007, 291). Vice versa, a better environment is more likely created and governed in social harmony.

For an eco-city, what are the special requirements to social sustainability? There are some features noted, in addition to the mentioned above. It is a positive condition created by particular social and environmental institutions and policies, includes a use of natural resources that is not greater than their natural supply; a locally-based sense of community responsibility for the use and management of resources within the community area; and a system for transmitting socio-environmental awareness from one generation to the next, as well as a sense of community responsibility for maintaining that system.<sup>17</sup>

After the discussion and questions, in this paper, I will accept the definition of eco-city in a narrow sense of environmental dimension, but with high demands of social and economics sustainability comparing traditional cities. Ecological requirements combined with socio-economic conditions are what create an eco-city (Rüdiger 2008, 29-32). And eco-city also will be considered as a dynamic and continuing approach changing over time, instead of a green destination.

#### **Public participation with Chinese characters:**

As an important indicator of social sustainability defined by Bramley, “participation in collective civic activities” has gained more and more attention in urban planning and environmental decision-making discourses, particularly at a local level. According to Rüdiger, only cities that have established a common vision for local sustainable development with input from a wide variety of members and sectors (stakeholders) of the local community can be considered sustainable (Rüdiger 2008, 29-32).

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<sup>17</sup> <http://w3.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/research/ecosocial/eco-position.asp> (accessed June 11, 2012)

In June 1998, the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Aarhus, Denmark, also called the Aarhus Convention, was signed and ratified by the European Union and countries in central Asia. The Aarhus Convention promotes environmental democracy where every person has the right to be informed, to be involved in decision-making and to have access to justice in environmental matters. In the convention, “The public” is defined as one or more natural or legal persons, and, in accordance with national legislation or practice, their associations, organizations or groups.<sup>18</sup>

In many situations, the term public participation may be used interchangeably with the concept or practice of stakeholder engagement.<sup>19</sup> They are named differently, but there is sometimes an overlap between different people's interpretation of what they mean. Freeman and Reed suggest one broad interpretation of the term stakeholder, which embraces “any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives or who is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives” (Freeman and Reed 1983, 91). All the actors identified share the same name of stakeholder, despite the fact that they have different influence or be influenced differently. In the sense of public participation, all the stakeholders are separated into two groups, *the official* and *the public*, according to different powers, such as politic, knowledge, information and finance. In this paper, *the official* will mainly refer to governments at different levels and experts from different fields. Developers, producers and citizens will be included in the sphere of the public.

Potentially, participation in planning can empower communities and build social capital, can lead to better design of urban projects and can allow for participants’

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/pp/documents/cep43e.pdf> (accessed June 11, 2012)

<sup>19</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_participation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_participation) (accessed June 11, 2012)

concerns to be incorporated within strategies. Paulson, Gezon, and Watts (2003, 212) has posited that:

*There is the need to concentrate on environmental decision making and conflict resolution; attention to the mutual collaboration with various kinds of social groups and social movement interested in the distribution of benefits, costs, and risk on various scale; and concern with development models and discourses, together with their environmental and social consequences. Practical engagement with different stakeholders needs to be part of the methodological commitment to understanding how environmental uses and conditions are affected by economic and political systems, as well as the discursive and cultural construction of the environment.*

Arnstein developed a hierarchy of different types of public participation called “ladder of participation”, including eight rungs: 1. Manipulation, 2. Therapy, 3. Informing, 4. Consultation, 5. Placation, 6. Partnership, 7. Delegated power, and lastly citizen control. While citizens are informed and heard in consultation types of participation, these methods do not provide the power to ensure that decision makers will seriously consider the citizens’ input. These gradations make it possible to understand the increasing demands for higher levels of public participation for all citizens (Arnstein 1969, 217).

In China, the concept of public participation was introduced in the 1990s<sup>20</sup> with its own characters. Firstly, contemporary urban and environmental management in China is basically dependent on the legislative and bureaucratic systems, heavily influenced by the power relations that are typically associated with authoritarian regime. Even most NGOs (non-governmental organization) actually are governmental organized.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://ccpg.org.cn/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=1179> (accessed June 11, 2012)

Although the State Environmental Protection Administration issued Tentative Measures for Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessments, which were effective from March 18<sup>th</sup> 2006. Next, public participation was written in Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People's Republic of China effective from 2008. Despite efforts, there remain limits to the openness of debates, especially in cases linking with questions of human rights, ethnic tension or strategic economic decision-making the debates (Li 2005), so public participation to a great extent is a mere formality. Besides, the management of environment and urban in China is top-down, but public participation is always from down to top. Most cases are after public's immediate or vital interests harmed. Thirdly, a most effective approach for public to participate is using media to draw attention from more public and governments. Even though media in contemporary China is still censored to some extent by governments, internet and other social media are playing more and more important roles.

Public participation is an incarnation of conflicts and powers. It is a way to coordinate conflicts among different stakeholders, and also a way to balance powers. Mette J. Brogden and James B. Greenberg (2003, 296) stated the following in *The Fight for the West: A Political Ecology of Land Use Conflicts in Arizona*:

*Where power is too concentrated, and bureaucratic structures too deaf and blind, pluralist activism is critical to the achievement of change. Activism enables conflicts to reach a critical state that forces powerful parties both to respond to changing public values and to see and address problems they would otherwise be inclined to externalize.....*

*Collaborative approaches enable effective dialogue among stakeholders when power is diffuse and help them understand the truth about emergent patterns, so they can together construct a more sustainable path to the future. Pluralism backstops collaboration. It keeps collaboration honest*

*because if key interests are not adequately addressed, proposals will become the subject of oppositional activism.*

## **Findings and discussions**

According to Bent Flyvbjerg's phronesis planning research, I took Tangshan Bay Eco-city as an example to answer the four questions at the core of phronesis. (1) Where are we going with planning? (2) Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? (3) Is this development desirable? (4) What, if anything, should we do about it? (Flyvbjerg 2004, 283)

To build an eco-city, although people have different perspectives about this concept, the role of public input is always highly valued. The consumption of environmental resources is a collective activity, concerning every individual and organization's interest, and it is also a supplementation of environmental governance. My intention of this paper is to use Tangshan Bay Eco-city as an example to explore approaches, find where the public is, and how to engage stakeholders into eco-city planning process and governance, even when there is no existing inhabitant yet.

### **No.1 Future Avenue**

During a meeting about the challenges of urban afforesting and greening that Tangshan Bay Eco-city faces ahead, Guo Xuecheng, an engineer from the planning and construction bureau was listening to the experts and writing and drawing in his note book. He was not taking notes, but puzzled his brain to name those newly completed streets. Since December 2008 the master plan of eco-city was officially approved by Hebei Province, in March 2009, more and more projects are put into operation. From land reclamation by sand blowing, the first bridge built, the first road paved, the first residential building established, in more than three years, 75 projects

are already under construction, including infrastructural and public facilities. The construction is in full swing, and infrastructure such as water, electricity, roads and telecommunications are maturing. In this city of tomorrow, with an expectation of 800,000 habitants by 2020, many streets will be named by Guo Xuecheng, and they are listed in his note book right there.

Tangshan Bay Eco-city, also called Caofeidian International Eco-city, is one of the many eco-cities rising in China. It is 150 square kilometers, located in the south of Caofeidian New District, 5 kilometers away from Caofeidian Industrial Zone, 80 kilometers away from Tangshan, 120 kilometers away from Tianjin, and 220 kilometers away from Beijing. Tangshan Bay Eco-city is a local government-led project by Tangshan municipality. The city of Tangshan has become known for the earthquake measured 7.8 on the Richter scale and at least 255,000 residents were killed in 1976. But now it has developed into an important heavy industrial city, with a GDP ranked No. 18 in China in 2011. <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> <http://baike.baidu.com/view/4673.htm>



Figure 4: Location of Tangshan Bay Eco-city, adapted by author

The pink part in the above graph is Caofeidian New District, located in the central part of Tangshan Bay. On the base of Caofeidian Industrial Zone, it was built and formally unveiled the plaque to open on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2009, has jurisdiction over Tanghai County, Caofeidian Industrial Zone, Nanpu Economic & Technical Development Zone, and Tangshan Bay Eco-city.

With the concern about air pollution effects to Olympic Games in 2008, the Beijing municipal government had been moving factories out of the town. The Capital Steel Plant, which is the biggest iron and steel factory in China, was decided to be moved to Caofeidian industrial zone in 2005. Since then, this area received electricity for the first time. Almost at the same time, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2007, there was an announcement that a big oil field was found in Caofeidian with 400 million tons proved reserves, where the Nanpu Economic & Technical Development Zone is now.

These two big projects increased job opportunities and population in Caofeidian New Zone. About 2.6 million workers are working there, some of them are living in Tanghai, and some are still living in Beijing. It became an urgent need to build an accommodation and public facilities area for them. That is how Caofeidian Eco-city started. The planning permission was granted in 2008 and by 2010, 21 out of 100 projects within the overall development had been completed, including infrastructure planning for transport, water supply, drainage, and district energy.

In September 2011, Flower City, the first residential area in Tangshan Bay Eco-city was completed with 728 apartment units. They were sold out right away, and most of the residents were technicians from Caofeidian new area and the eco-city.

It was planned to be a residential area, but in 2011, because of the housing control policy from central government, housing prices went through the roof. The eco-city administration committee decided to introduce industries, including low-carbon and environmental protection industry, tourist and vacation industry, logistics and trade industry, living and cultural industry, and living and culture industry.

The first day when I arrived in Caofeidian, I saw more than 50 people, most were young, working in a common office from different departments, two tables standing in the middle for meeting. Three were small separated offices with glass wall on the left hand for directors. Wei Dehui was eating his dinner taken from cafeteria on the meeting table fast. It was night already, but they were still working.



Figure 5: Model of Tangshan Bay Eco-city, photo by Amy Chin

With the projection of 45 percent renewable energy, 80 percent residences within 300 meters to bus stops and 100 percent within 800 meter, 30 percent affordable housing, if you ask me whether a vision of this city desirable? Yes, just like the address of the Tangshan Bay Eco-city Administration Committee office, No. 1 Future Avenue. But, if you ask me whether it will be a city ecologically, economically and socially sustainable? I will reserve my view, and say that it is too early to judge, the city is just three years old. And if you ask me whether it will be a utopian that everyone enjoys his or her rights to the city? I will say it is a long journey.

## **The silence of public**

“Citizen is the owner of a place. They have the right to air views over the planning of their homes. But public in China hardly knows about the planning of their cities. They always figure things out until there is a big character of ‘拆’(chai, to be dismantled) on the walls of their houses.” This is what professor Cai Dingjian from China

University of Political Science and Law stated in a workshop of Theory and Practice of Public Participation in City Planning.

The first day in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, Hailong, who is working in the Technology and Engineering Center, drove me to visit different sites. The situation of the finished road was very good. Some parts were still blocked or under construction. Lamps were both wind and solar supported. It was quiet and empty. All of the projects stopped, partly because it was not a good time for construction in winter, partly because it was the end of the year, and workers were going home for spring festival. I went to the Flower City to count lights in the evening, although all the apartments were sold,



Figure 6: A corner of Flower City, photo by author

there were few lights shining. Qi Yongxin, an architect from Vanion, the developer of the Flower City, told me that most of the buyers were for investment purpose, instead of living. There were not many residents living in an almost empty place without

well-grounded infrastructure. It is not surprising that before the apartments established, there was no public at all.

Flower City is the first residential area in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, with 728 unites, covering 80 thousand square meters. It started construction on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2009, even before the architectural design was totally finished and approved. It was supposed to be completed by the end of 2009, but normally the process of formality and construction design and drawing would take nine months. Therefore, they were

constructing basically as they were designing. After one year and three months, the construction was finally finished, but it was still behind schedule. I asked the developer whether they talked to the government responsible person about the situation. They gave me a positive answer, but the result they got was not. Their opinions did not have weight.

There was not enough time for architects to do more research and design work, which is very common for most of the ongoing projects currently in China. And the local environment was ecologically fragile in Tangshan Bay Eco-city. For example, blowing sand reclaimed the land where the apartments were built. So now, after more than one year, when I was there in December in 2011, I found there were already some cracks on the walls. Because of the unqualified design under pressure, a good deal of time, money and resources is wasted. Since September 2010 they finished the project, all kinds of rectification and reform hasn't been stopped till now. What they are currently focusing on is the landscape restructuring.

But even worse, an official from the administration committee told me that because some politician did not like the predominant color of the buildings or the flat roof design, the developer was asked to change it into sloping roof, otherwise they have to pull them down and rebuild the whole residential area. The architect told me, it was nothing wrong with the design of the roof. To choose flat roof was for the sake of solar panel installing. It is very important to install the panel based on the local solar altitude angle to use resource more effectively. Comparing with sloping roof, the flat roof can be easier to adjust the angle of the panel and better use the solar resource. They changed the roofs eventually, and 6.6 million RMB (almost one million USD according to the current exchange rate) was spent on the project. If there were enough



Figure 7: Solar panel on sloping roof, photo by author

dialogues between responsible departments and developer, a lot of problems could be solved from the beginning, even if the cost would be more time and lower speed.

I had a conversation with Liu Zhidong, who is the head of Economic and

Development Bureau of Tangshan Bay Eco-city. We talked about the current public participation in Tangshan Bay Eco-city and generally in China. He told me, it is still a new concept for the country. Although it is regulated to introduce public participation both in environmental and urban planning laws. The implementation was not so satisfying. The most common way to engage public is promulgating plans for a period to keep public informed and the public can also comment or offer suggestions. How long will it be promulgated will depend on the local governments. The truth is that most people are not interested. And the published information is not always sufficient,

most consisting of several drawings and very simple text introductions without detail explanation of the technic indicators. “Not mention the citizens, sometimes, even I cannot understand what it says” Liu Zhidong said, “ although in some places, publicity, exhibition, survey and other forms are used to engage public, but they are mostly symbolical. Public need time to cultivate the awareness and knowledge as well.” The second day, the Swedish delegation asked regarding what the comments from public to Tangshan Bay Eco-city. Wei Dehui replied that most people were positive about this project, and he mentioned there was a notebook with comments from public at the very beginning, but both Liu Zhidong and Wei Dehui did not read it yet, because they were not working here at that time.

On the official website of Tangshan Bay Eco-city, there is a menu called “government”<sup>22</sup> with updated information about what is happening in the eco-city and also some publicity about the ongoing projects and environmental assessments, and there is another menu of “interaction”<sup>23</sup>, public can use it as a way to comment, question or consult about the process of eco-city. But since December 2010, there are only five comments in total. One is about a website material downloading problem; one is enquiring of a job possibility; one is asking about when the bus will be available; one is consulting the house price in eco-city, and the last one is about the update speed of the website. Although none of the questions is about city planning, except the one who is asking about the bus, all the questions are answered very professionally and with great detail and patience.

It is not difficult to find that in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, the silence of the public is a consequence of many facts. As a newly developed city from nothing, there was no

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22

[http://www.tswstc.gov.cn/news\\_list/&newsCategoryId=8eadc068-1287-4ee8-ac96-f84eb7cf0d19&comp\\_stats=comp-FrontNewsCategory\\_tree01-1289889270771.html](http://www.tswstc.gov.cn/news_list/&newsCategoryId=8eadc068-1287-4ee8-ac96-f84eb7cf0d19&comp_stats=comp-FrontNewsCategory_tree01-1289889270771.html) (accessed June 11, 2012)

23 [http://www.tswstc.gov.cn/messages\\_list.html](http://www.tswstc.gov.cn/messages_list.html) (accessed June 11, 2012)

public to engage at the beginning. Since the new China was found in 1949, it has been adopting the urban planning system of Soviet. From planning to approving and initiating a project, from implementation to supervising, all the decisions are made by urban planning departments without public participation. So it does not only cause the absence of public from a government perspective, but also from the public themselves. This is the answer to the question of where we are going with planning.

## **Who loses? Who wins? Power talks!**

In March 2011, Chinese delegation visited Hyllie, a new project in Malmö to observe the developers dialoguing and collaborating. After hours' listening, many of them were surprised by the fact that this dialogue has been lasting for three years already, and they are still discussing without a final decision. One of the delegations said: "This is too inefficient, if it was in China, nothing could be finished before deadline." Everyone laughed.

Power is the key concept to understand the process of empowerment and disempowerment. Comparing the planning process in the two cities, it is very obvious to see their different attitudes and focus. In Sweden, since 1960s, with the highly developed economic and maturing social functions, Swedish governments turned their objectives to pursuing citizen's quality of life. And to distribute social resources justly and equitably is the key way in regional and urban planning, even though they have to plan slowly to minimize the risk in decision-making. China is still in the transforming period. With the economic development and the rapidly increasing living standards, citizens are starting to seek a better living environment. But it will take some time for the dramatic increase in development to slow down. Two countries are at different stages of economic and urban development. As a Chinese delegation once joked when he was listening to the environmental history of Malmö, "Tangshan Bay Eco-city is just like Malmö in 1728 when there were only 1500 people back then, and the muddy

road bemired the wagon.” The power of economic decides that in current China, speed is still most valued and concerned, and this speed does not allow for much public participation.

More importantly, according to the three dimensions of power, the covert dimension, power is the not only for taking control of the decision-making process by winning but also by excluding certain subjects or participants and by determining the agenda. In Tangshan Bay Eco-city, the absence of public is a choice made by the governments, and also they will decide what issues will engage public and what issues will not. As John Gaventa (1982, 3) argues that a situation of apparent lack of conflicts is both a sign and a consequence of deliberate use of power mechanisms. The purpose of power is to prevent groups from participating in the decision-making processes and also to obtain the passive agreement of these groups to this situation. And in the third dimension, the conflict of interests between the activators of power and the true interests of those who are excluded from the arena creates a potential for conflict—a latent conflict. There will be 800 thousand people in Tangshan Bay Eco-city by 2020, if everything goes well. And every decision made now will impact on future public.

To understand who loses and who wins, the key is to identify the stakeholders.

Local governments - In the article of “‘Eco-Cities’ and ‘Sustainable Cities’ Whither?” (Koh, Asanga & Lovleen 2010, 86), it is explained with several reasons for the emergence of ‘eco-cities’. “Such initiatives can distinguish areas and add to a region’s attractiveness for foreign investment inflow. They can also place the local governments in a good position to receive preferential financial treatments (such as tax breaks etc.) from the national government. Eco-cities may also serve as pilot projects or technological niches where new ideas to tackle urgent environmental issues are developed and tested. Their success may create a demonstration effect and these technologies can be replicated on a larger scale”.

Because of these reasons, conflicts are created between different eco-cities and inside the eco-cities. For example, to get the support from central government, there was a competition between Tangshan Bay Eco-city and Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city. Tianjin won the competition. That is one reason why Flower City got the pressure to finish the buildings in short time.

Experts: Experts, as the special group with the power of knowledge, always have a say in the process of eco-city planning. As I heard about the situation in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, they valued the opinions from both native and foreign experts, and also paid a lot of money in consulting. In Malmö city planning, experts are also very influential in decision-making.



Figure 8: Purac Wastewater Treatment Plant, photo by author

Foreign companies: Many countries, especially European countries have developed ecological industries by exporting ecological resources to developing countries. Companies like Sweco, Arup, DHV and more, have earned both reputation and money by doing so. According to the website in Sweco, “Sweco’s expertise in sustainable urban planning continues

to be highly sought after in China. In a short span of time the company has been chosen for planning assignments in connection with development of three new eco-cities. The contracts have a total value of nearly EUR 1.7 million.”<sup>24</sup> And there are more contracts in Russia, India and other countries. Arup was the designer of

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24

<http://www.cisionwire.com/sweco/r/sweco-awarded-new-urban-planning-contracts-in-china,c556722>

Dongtan, a high profiled eco-city in Shanghai. There were more than 60 master plans received from America, UK, France, Japan and other countries during 2000 to 2005. Although the project failed at last, Arup still earned ten millions RMB from the contract.<sup>25</sup>

Developers: Although developers are also important for governments to plan and build the eco-city. But in 2009, real estate was the most flourishing, competing industry and every project is raking in exorbitant profits. So when the land was owned by governments, the governments have the right to speak. But to citizens, developers hold more powers, because houses are still a rare resource.

Producers: An official from the delegation told me, every day, he would get countless phone calls and visitors from different companies bidding for contracts. Outside his office, on a one square meter place, there were standing three street lamps supported by wind power and solar power with different shapes and functions, belonging to different companies. It is just an experiment to find the best one. So, producers are not so powerful when compared with interests.

Citizens: There was no citizen body before. There are only a few citizens now, and perhaps there will be a lot of citizens in the future. For Tangshan Bay Eco-city, a big problem ahead is population. They want to attract people to come and live there. So as a collective concept, citizens are desired and powerful, but not on an individual level.

These are the main stakeholders in eco-city planning process, of course there are still a lot not included. The answer to the question of “who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?” is obvious for now, but very uncertain in the future.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/b93807d9ce2f0066f533223e.html> (accessed June 11, 2012)

## **The creation of public**

A totally new city at the scale of 150 square kilometers will inevitably face the lack of public in planning process. How to implement public participation when there is “no public”? It is possible.

### **Who to engage on the empty saline?**

There is a “future public” that can potentially be mobilized in the decision making processes. By now, in China, eco-cities are commonly recognized as cities which are “green and have solar panels”. Public participation therefore is not only a way to realize “sustainability”, but also an effective way of advertising to draw attention from the potential residents which will help to better understand the concept of eco-city. To the specific case of Tangshan Bay Eco-city, I have the following proposals:

First of all, the people working in Caofeidian Industrial Zone are the main target group. The current number of workers in industrial zone is 260 thousand, according to a market research conducted by Vanion, they have the ability and wish to buy houses in Tangshan Bay Eco-city. They are very likely to be the future public. Their opinions and contributions are very important to be taken into consideration. So it is important to use different ways, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, to understand what kind of city they want, and what they expect about their homes.

Secondly, solicit comments from neighboring cities and towns, such as Tangshan and Tanghai. Tangshan Bay Eco-city is a big project, it relies on and interacts with surrounding areas and population in those areas might be impacted. They also have similar local environments. So their demands are of great referential value.

Thirdly, find the potential workers in future industries. Since Tangshan Bay Eco-city is planning a low-carbon and environmental protection industry, tourist and vacation

industry, logistics and trade industry, living and cultural industry, and living and culture industry, it will create a lot of job opportunities, and attract people to come to work, so go to find people who are working in a similar situation to understand their opinions of this group of people, such as teachers, students, civil servants, small business owners, manufacturers of the “eco” elements that may be incorporated into the development.

Fourthly, talk to the residents in Sino-Singapore Eco-city, which is only 120 kilometers away. The two eco-cities have a lot in common. Furthermore in Sino-Singapore Eco-city, the first residents officially moved in last year. Their concerns are probably also the future public’s concerns in Tangshan Bay Eco-city.

Fifthly, there were residents already in Tangshan Bay Eco-city, albeit few. Although most of them are not living there because of the undeveloped infrastructures, they still have interest in the project. So they are actually already a small population to collaborate with. Besides, people who are working in eco-city, like government and other related companies are also considered public.

### **Experience from Sweden**

Jonna Sandin and Roger Westin are both from the city planning office in Malmö, and they went to Tangshan Bay Eco-city in April 2012. Although the information about public participation in Tangshan Bay Eco-city was very limited, Sandin was still impressed by the interaction on website. In Malmö, she said, it was regulated in the law that everything on website should be official statements, so it was not so easy for them to do the same. But she thought it was a good way to make people feel it possible to have dialogues with planners, and it was necessary to create more platforms for citizens to communicate with civil servants and politicians. Westin shared his experience from Växjö. In Växjö, publishing on website is part of the

process. It is good to promote ideas and inform people, but sometimes, people will flood the screen.

There is a recurring debate in Malmö about social problems. Some people do not feel the sense of belonging to the place, and some people are not satisfied with their lives. So Sandin believes it is very important to engage people. In addition, the master plan in Malmö is not legal binding, so it is very necessary to engage public to participate. Only when they are broadly informed, respected, they can be supportive and corporative. This year, there will be another comprehensive planning in Malmö, and they have an ambition to involve everyone to communicate about the comprehensive plan and make them feel that they are relevant to the planning. Jonna told me there were 40,000 participators engaged already.

As the most popular neighborhood, West Harbor is a successful example of stakeholders' dialogue and public participation. It is 100 percent powered by renewable energy, with plenty of green places and almost no cars. Actually, this was an old, polluted shipyard that closed a few decades ago leaving 6,000 people without jobs. Malmö city saw it not as a problem area, but as a solution to the need of a beautiful new part of the city which would inspire a new environmental, economic and social miracle. And stakeholders engaged in a new planning process: the Creative Dialogue (ByggaBoDialogen) facilitated discussion amongst representatives of Malmö, together with property developers and architects concerning sustainability themes and expectations. Various firms (traditionally competitors) learned to cooperate in order to build a more attractive and sustainable neighborhood district. While there were challenges, most participants agreed it was a worthwhile process to engage in.”<sup>26</sup> Another creative approach was that when there were no existing residents, they involved public by advertising in newspaper. This project triggered

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.malmo.se/English/Sustainable-City-Development/Sustainable-Urban-Planning.html> (accessed June 11, 2012)

some people's curiosity, some people responded and some of them even became citizens there.

Although there is no single way for every city, experiences from other cities can also be good references. And, I am sure Tangshan Bay Eco-city will find their "creative dialogue" with public.

### **How to engage?**

Power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on. Government is the most powerful actor to promote public participation. To put public into regulation is one thing, to make sure the implementation is a more important issue. The roles of governments are not very specific in public participation, as Sandin noted. As local governments, they are the organizers and coordinators of public participation, also the quality controllers. Listing all the roles is beyond the scope of this thesis, so I only describe some common challenges both in Tangshan Bay Eco-city and Malmö

One common challenge is that the participation is always passive or belated. "... Meaningful, authentic participation is rarely found, as many public officials are reluctant to include citizens in decision making, or if they do, they typically involve citizens after the issues have been framed and decisions have been made" (Yang & Callahan 2007, 249). But on the other hand, Liu Zhidong and Sandin both mentioned this problem "the public always complain about everything after decision made, but they do not participate at the beginning before they are impacted". To connect this disconnection, more active ways should be employed, like knocking on doors. Westin told me that once he knocked on someone's door, and asked "Hello, I am an urban planner, can I come in to have a coffee and talk about the planning?" The answer was "No! But I can come out to talk with you."

Education of urban planning knowledge is another problem. Just as Liu Zhidong said, he himself cannot understand everything posted on information board, public without professional knowledge will have more difficulties to participate without a good understanding of the information. So it is very important to educate the public, at the same time, make the plans easier to be understood with less technical indicators, but more relevant text descriptions and details. Honest dialogues are only possible when the public knows what they can contribute.

To coordinate the dispute interests is the task of governments in public participation. As net friend “wahday” replied to my thread, “It is helpful to be prepared for the public process being messy and inexact. People may be suspicious of your motives or be reluctant to participate. They may provide such a wide range of opinions that you cannot identify any trends or common ground. Some opinions or ideas may be unreasonable. Ultimately, you will have to struggle with identifying input that is productive and useful and be prepared that not all ideas will be implemented.” One role of government is to value different opinions for common good, and explain this decision to public.

One important character of Chinese public participation is the influence of media. In most cases, participation was always started by one citizen, with the support from lawyers and experts, and the intervention media, finally governments would pay attention on them. A study by Gibson (2004, 283) demonstrates that local reporters cover urban development debates from a perspective that advances the position of those in power, and Chomsky (2000, 415) shows that the government’s influence is strongest when officials and media owners share interests and values. The media can play an important role in advancing or discouraging citizen involvement efforts by government (Yang & Callahan 2007, 254).

What, if anything, should we do about it? The “ladder of participation”, as mentioned, includes eight rungs (Arnstein 1969, 217). Meaningful participation should be more than just information and consultation. How much and how deep the public participation will be is mostly controlled by the official.

## **Conclusion and reflections**

Given the cultural and political backgrounds, as well as the fact of no actual public, public participation in Tangshan Bay Eco-city is beset with difficulties. It is just an example among hundreds of other eco-cities in current China. This city serves to illustrate a wider picture of what is happening in China, because what is happening to Tangshan Bay Eco-city is also happening to the others.

Public participation is a process that brings social dimensions of a city into consideration, but at the same time it serves as an important approach to solve environmental problems by involving all to decide for common good. Public participation allows for the public’s intervention from the first stage of urban planning, contributing to the definition and determination, which is more significant for the new urban form of “eco-city”.

For the simple fact of no population to engage, “future public”, “imaginary public”, “similar public” and other approaches can be employed. Although there is no single way for every city, experience from other cities can also be good references. Sweden and China are at very different stages of urbanization, and also have different traditions of social democracy, just like Westin said, “In Sweden, it can be connected to the election process. People can vote for the party who represent the city they want”. In this sense, even though public participation may not be implemented fully, the public have participated already by enjoying the power to decide who they want to be the decision-makers.

“The missing public” is easy to be found on the literal level, but on the institutional and cultural level, it calls for more effort. Governments and media have more responsibilities for this change. Public participation is not only important at the planning stage, but also for the governance of the eco-city in the future. So it should be institutionalized. *Environmentality as green governmentality*, in Agrawal’s opinion, attends carefully to “the behaviors that regulations seek to change, which go hand in hand with the process of self-formation and struggles between expert-or authority-based regulation and situated practices” (Agrawal 2005, 324).

With regards to eco-cities, there are dispute discussions whether it is a savior or disaster. It is a conversation between human and nature. When humans sprawl were taking resources from nature in an unsustainable way, nature talked back with degradation. Now, when humans continue this conversation with eco-city, using the language of technology, we shall see whether it is the way nature likes. Eco-city is just a path approaching sustainable development, if this path leads to a wrong place, we can adjust our direction, instead of the destination. On the way to the destination, collective wisdom is an insurance to make everything on track.

There is a proverb in China, saying that the water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up (水能载舟亦能覆舟). It is the same as power. The power that creates conflict is the same that eliminates it. It will not be easy though, as another saying goes: “I see no ending, yet high and low I’ll search with my will unbending” (路漫漫其修远兮，吾将上下而求索).

And, then you will see, as a final saying goes: “After endless mountains and rivers that leave doubt whether there is a path out, suddenly one encounters the shade of a willow, bright flowers and a lovely village”(山重水复疑无路，柳暗花明又一村).

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