



A NEW APPROACH TO URBANISATION – LESSONS FROM CHINA



Impact Objectives

- Deepen our understanding of the dynamic interactive processes between urban development, resource consumption and environmental impacts.
- Identify innovative practices and effective strategies to manage and plan for sustainable urbanisation in China.
- Develop a new urban agenda to generate ideas in the broader international context that can be applied in places undergoing rapid urbanisation.

Possibilities for sustainable development in urban China

The rapid pace of urbanisation and industrialisation in China presents specific environmental and socio-economic problems. Cecilia Wong introduces a project that promises to help find ways to make this development more sustainable and to mitigate the environmental and ecological impacts



What is the 'National New-type Urbanisation Plan', and what does Chinese government hope to achieve with it?

The "National New-type Urbanisation Plan" was published in 2014 to mark a shift of the Chinese government's approach towards a new form of urbanisation. Acknowledging that urbanisation has created the so-called urban diseases, for example, pollution, traffic jams, and so on; the Chinese government aims to seek a new approach to urbanisation by promoting a more human-centred and environmentally sustainable pathway of urban development. This very much echoes the United Nations (UN) Habitat III's New Urban Agenda.

The goals set in the New Urbanisation Plan are very comprehensive and ambitious, including integrating urban and rural development, making basic public services available to rural migrants in cities, optimising spatial layouts of city system, and achieving ecological and environmental sustainability.

What are some of the unique challenges presented by the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei

Metropolitan Region (BTHMR), the area your study focuses on?

From a spatial planning perspective, there are multiple challenges for promoting eco-urbanisation - a new approach to urbanisation, with built-in considerations of its ecological and environmental consequences - in BTHMR. Firstly, BTHMR is facing tremendous urbanisation pressure as urban population and land-use have been expanding rapidly and there are no signs of slowing down. Public services such as housing, education, and transport are under great pressure to meet the needs and demands of new urban residents. Secondly, environmental problems and resource shortage are acute in BTHMR. Beijing, Tianjin and major cities in Hebei are all among the most polluted cities in terms of air quality and smog. Tianjin and Hebei's economies are highly dependent upon heavy industries such as steel and chemical plants. It is not an easy job to balance the economic benefits and environmental costs. Thirdly, BTHMR poses as an interesting case for regional governance. The state government has published policy guidance for integrated development of BTHMR. The key goal is to channel urbanisation pressure from Beijing and Tianjin to the less developed Hebei by relocating firms and public institutions there. However, this process is challenged by economic viability and political conflicts between local governments.

How have urbanisation patterns in China shaped your research?

China's urbanisation trajectory is very different from the pathway of western countries. The nature and patterns of urbanisation also vary widely in different parts of China. Its communist era left it with a unique institutional legacy, such as the hukou (household registration) system and collective land ownership in rural areas. Its practice of central planning also allows it to accelerate economic and urban development in an unprecedented pace over the last three decades. Having a good grip on its socio-cultural context is critical in gaining a deeper understanding of the intricate and complex socio-spatial relations and challenges in its urbanisation process.

Do you see this project as serving as a model for other Chinese cities, and perhaps on an international scale as well?

This project is a useful lens through which to examine the different dynamics of urbanisation over different types of communities. What we learn from the BTHMR will provide valuable insights for tackling similar problems in other cities and metropolitan regions. This is especially true in developing countries where there is rapid urbanisation and common challenges such as housing, transport, migration,





A new approach to urbanisation – lessons from China

*In 2014, the Chinese government announced a new strategy to manage rapid urbanisation. A new project, **Eco-Urbanisation: promoting sustainable development in metropolitan regions of China**, examines this strategy and its efficacy, and the effect on the local community*

The problems caused by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in China and other countries are often reported on, particularly from an environmental point of view. Smog, in particular, is one phenomenon that looms large in the public imagination whenever cities, towns and industries grow faster than their infrastructure can deal with. Scholarship in the area demonstrates that the reality is more complex, and defies simplistic presentation and media snapshots. 'To understand the process and outcome brought by the interaction between local communities and their natural and built environment under the rapid urban development process in China is a very challenging task. We have to grasp the complex reality as well as think outside the box to develop practical and innovative methods to research the issues', explains Professor Cecilia Wong from the University of Manchester, the project's Principal Investigator.

One clear answer to the environmental and human challenges of rapid development is so-called "eco-urbanisation", which project partner Prof. Xiangzheng Deng from the Chinese Academy of Sciences describes the concept as follows: 'Eco-urbanisation is a process that involves ecological flows, stocks, risks, utilization, conservation, functional changes, and economic cost–benefits for sustainable development across different scales and hierarchies through networks, nexus,

and interdependence of both natural and social evolutionary processes'. In 2014, signalling a new chapter in its approach to the potential problems of urbanisation, the Chinese government launched the 'National New-type Urbanisation Plan', aimed at guiding development down a more sustainable route in terms of environment and population. Deng explains that this policy, part of the 2014-2020 Chinese national plan, is 'based on seven principles: human-centred development and equity; coordinated urban-rural development; optimal resource allocation; environmental-friendly ecological-civilisation; cultural heritage; market allocation under government direction; and integrated planning and orderly implementation of urbanisation'.

LOCAL STUDIES, GLOBAL APPLICATIONS

One of the first testing grounds for this new policy is the urban area encompassing some of China's largest and most heavily-polluted cities, the so-called Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Metropolitan Region (BTHMR). Given the reliance of much of this region on heavy industry, and the endemic problem of smog, this is an area where an innovative approach is most sorely needed. This area is one of the project's main focus points in geographical terms.

The diverse team, including leading researchers from the UK and China led by Professor Wong and Professor Deng,

determined that their research will have overall applications, regardless of the area – rapid urbanisation and industrialisation are perennial issues not limited to China or East Asia. By contextualising the BHTMR case study, the team hope to give their study broad application. Unlike many projects in the region, the team's focus has gone a long way beyond data collection, to theoretical contextualisation and the use of different perspectives to interpret data. In this way, the project is able to lay the groundwork for a new urban agenda.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DATA

In contrast to western countries, public participation in issues such as the environment and urban planning in general is low in China, for a range of structural reasons. At the same time, given the lack of information available in the public domain, engaging with the views and experiences of people at a local level is more crucial than ever. There is a generally insufficient awareness of environmental issues and initiatives. As Wong points out, 'although the Chinese government has been promoting the ideology of sustainable development for many years, local community's involvement in such initiatives remains tangential'. The Chinese government is generally willing to investigate and trial new developments such as electric cars, but their impacts are



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at best piecemeal and could not generate widespread changes at the grass-root level. It was thus crucial for the researchers involved in this project to take their data collection and analysis to the local level and connect the analysis to policymaking.

The collection of data poses a particular challenge for researchers in China, where information that is typically publicly available, such as census data, is not fully published. The team overcome this difficulty by 'painstakingly integrating different datasets to innovatively devise a multi-level spatial sampling frame to pick out 22 survey communities to represent different socio-economic context and urbanisation pressure in BTHMR', as Wong recalls. This innovative approach to data, which looks closely at the spatial level at which the information has been gathered, allows researchers to build up a picture of the dynamics of urbanisation. This level of contextualised understanding has direct relevance to the United Nation's (UN) New Urban Agenda, and thus strong global impact.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS PROCESS

Following work on conceptualisation, the project has recently concluded its fieldwork stage, which is a large-scale survey of urban residents, involving questionnaires and other assessments at the local community level. The next step is to analyse and integrate this data with other information and secondary data gleaned from GIS mapping. Then, the team will begin writing reports and organising seminars in order to disseminate their findings, which are likely to be crucial information for anyone involved in urban development, in China and further afield.

Wong is keen to emphasise that data collected is only a picture of a particular place at a particular time. 'Sustainable development is best viewed as a process rather than an end-result; it is really difficult to point out a few 'successful' stories by taking a snapshot in isolation from the spatial and temporal context', she notes.



Dinggezhuang village, one of the 22 surveyed communities



Project kick-off meeting in Beijing, April 2016



Site visit in Beijing, April 2016

Given different trajectories in different countries at different times, and the varying paths which the future might take with regard to sustainable development, this highlights the benefit of conceptual frameworks which produce results with global application.

For China in particular, the challenge of sustainable development, situated within a political context that often throws up surprises, continues apace. The announcement of a new Xiong'an New District was just such a curve ball. A planned development of 2000 square km, it is envisaged that it will eventually take over all non-governmental functions of Beijing. A side-effect of a planned economy is that these bold urban experiments can be put effectively into practice, providing vital real-life experiences of urban development to those researching in the area.

Project Insights

FUNDING

Economic and Social Research Council Newton Fund

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Professor Cecilia Wong is a fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences and a chartered town planner with over 25 years' research expertise on policy monitoring and spatial analysis, strategic planning, and urban and regional development policies. She has conducted major research projects for UK central government departments, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Economic & Social Research Council, Royal Town Planning Institute, Homes and Community Agency, and regional and local bodies. She was a commissioner of the Lyons' Independent Review of Housing for the UK Labour Party. She was a member of the Department for Communities and Local Government's expert panel on housing and planning and an expert panel member of the European Commission's Urban Audit II.

