



Citizen participation in China's eco-city development. Will 'new-type urbanization' generate a breakthrough in realizing it?



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ABSTRACT

China's recently adopted 'new-type urbanization' policy puts a heavier emphasis on the social and environmental aspects of urban development than previous plan documents. This includes the aspect of citizen participation and a stronger bottom up orientation in decision-making processes, the aspect this paper homes in on. We will examine the realities of citizen participation in eco-city development in China at the local level and do this in one of the most prosperous and administratively forward looking cities in China, Suzhou. The analytical framework with which this analysis is conducted is a combination of Arnstein's participation ladder and the three dimensions in Fung's cube. The two cases we have studied are an eco-city project in a village community and one in the old city, to ensure we cover two different modes of participation, one rural and one urban. Three dimensions (participant selection, mode of communication and conversion of discussion output into action) and two policy making phases (decision-making and implementation) are applied to allow for a systematic comparison of the two cases. We find that citizen participation in the rural community is far more collectivist and reactive, while that in the urban setting is more individualist and proactive. Furthermore, in both cases, citizen input in the decision-making phase is quite limited, while during implementation local government appreciates the support and practical input locals can supply. To further enhance citizen participation along the lines proposed in 'new-type urbanization', legislative reform and professionalization of officials in dealing with bottom-up input would be essential.

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1. Introduction

China's urbanization and urban development have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (de Jong et al., 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017; Joss and Molella, 2013; Chang and Sheppard, 2013; Chang et al., 2016; Miao and Lang, 2015; Liu et al., 2009; Han et al., 2013; Caprotti, 2013; Wu, 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Taylor, 2015; Ahlers, 2015). The intense interest can be attributed to the importance of urban development as a process of urbanization. Urbanization is an important part of the China Dream (Taylor, 2015). China's urbanization has been proceeding along 'two tracks': one is the 'conventional urbanization' sponsored by the

government. The other is the 'spontaneous urbanization' driven by local economic development and market forces (Zhu, 1999:160). Under these two tracks, China's urban construction can be characterized as both rapid and unbalanced. Rapid urban construction (buildings, infrastructures and transports) is accompanied by serious ecological degradation. Moreover, the monotony of modern skyscrapers and business centers has replaced the unique historical and cultural look of cities. And finally, unlimited infiltration of state power coexists with limited citizen participation in policy-making and implementation. These above mentioned features have led to a decrease in social sustainability. Although the missions and regulations are issued by the central government, state agents at the lower levels of the government hierarchy and 'on the ground', which are required to implement and enforce related measures (Ahlers, 2015), often put economic growth before anything else (Wu, 2012; Joss and Molella, 2013; Chang and Sheppard, 2013; Han et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2015; de Jong et al., 2016).

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To respond to these social and environmental challenges, on 16 March 2014, China's State Council issued a plan announcing the strategy of 'new-type urbanization'. In chapter 18 of the 'National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)', it details a series of goals the government seeks to accomplish for modern urban development by 2020. The major goals are to promote green city, eco city and smart city development, enhance the historical and cultural heritage of cities, and to fully improve the inherent quality of urban life as a whole. It also claims that the idea of an ecological civilization needs to be fully integrated into the process of urbanization to promote green, circular, low-carbon development and environmental protection and ecological restoration, and to form a new mode of green low-carbon production and urban life. Compared with the 'old-type urbanization' that almost exclusively focused on economic development and land deployment, this new plan aims to refine the traditional mode and puts a heavy emphasis on people (taking people as the basis) and the environment (harmonious society) to realize sustainable development. More importantly, the distinct advantage of 'new-type urbanization' is that it focuses more on citizen participation. Chapter 19 of the "National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)" draws attention to encouraging and supporting citizen participation in the process of new-type urbanization.

Citizen participation has been announced in many central governmental documents (16th, 17th, 18th National Congress) and the awareness that citizen participation is indispensable to political and social reform has grown. However, the understanding of citizen participation might differ from the one that is usual in Western democracies. Like in most issues of public reform in China, policy making and implementation can often be read as a governmental monodrama. As Pieke argues: 'more than in Western liberal democracies, the hand of the state in China weighs very heavily indeed and is formally or informally present in (almost) all governmental activities' (Pieke, 2009: 12). Urbanization is no exception to this rule and eco-city development is obviously also locked into this primarily hierarchical approach. Institutional structures and mechanisms and cultural practices in China's urban development are still imbued with a distinctive top-down mode of decision-making.

From a Chinese perspective, governance and citizen participation 'resemble less the spread of a hegemonic western blanket than a process of selective borrowing and mixing' (Pieke, 2009: 9; also see Shambaugh, 2008; de Jong, 2013). In this contribution, we will examine how in response to the growing unease, the Chinese government developed specific participatory mechanisms and techniques to flesh out ambitions implied by its recent 'new type urbanization'. The paper focuses on community involvement and citizen engagement at the local level to examine what public participation in eco-city development looks like in practice. Empirically, we explore two cases of citizen participation, one urban and one rural, and look at both their formal arrangements and informal practices. In this paper, we distinguish rural from urban by geographic location and *hukou* status of residents. Case 1 takes place in the eco-town located in a rural village where almost all residents are farmers, whereas case 2 takes place in the old city located in the center of Suzhou city. Most residents there are urbanites and citizens.

Research methods include desk research made possible after the development of a bank of documents and minutes of meetings made available to the researchers. In addition, interviews with key participants were used to investigate the perspectives of local officers, villagers and citizens on participation practices in the period April 2015 to August 2016. Interviewees included four local officers (directors and vice directors of a village and an urban community) and eleven randomly selected residents from villages and urban

communities. All of them participated in the projects.

The remainder of this article deals with the following issues:

- We establish a participation model that combines Arnstein's participation ladder with Fung's cube and use this as our analytical framework (section 2).
- Taking its social and cultural background into account, we describe the main characteristics of citizen participation in China's eco-city development at the local level (section 3).
- The context of the two case studies is given, including the mechanisms by which citizen participation in Suzhou is organized. This appears to take on very different shapes for villagers as members of community cooperatives than for old city residents who join projects as volunteers (section 4).
- The analytical framework for citizen participation referred to above is used to analyze the two cases along three dimensions and two decision phases, after which the views of the participants are presented (section 5).
- We end with an assessment how citizen participation in China's eco city development can be qualified and examine the theoretical framework for understanding bottom up urban development in China and practical implications of our findings for new-type urbanization in the coming years (section 6).

2. Theorizing citizen participation in China

In most western societies, citizen participation is an established part of democratic government, a key ingredient to equip citizens with the professional and governance skills to contribute to decision-making and empowering them in their political and social life. Considered an alternative to the conventional top-down approach that has grown increasingly ineffective, bottom-up participation has emerged as a potentially valuable way of breaking through this deadlock (Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Carpini et al., 2004). Citizen participation is seen as citizen power, as Arnstein (1969) put, it is the redistribution of power that enables the underprivileged citizens, excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately involved. It is the strategy by which have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. Citizen participation is also seen as a vital aspect of good governance. For a healthy democracy at the local level, aspects of democratic citizenship are more important than having a direct say in decision-making (Lawton and Macaulay, 2013). It is a shift from a hierarchically organized, managerial or top-down approach towards a more horizontally organized one with a revitalized emphasis on building institutional bridges between governmental leaders and citizenry, often termed community engagement (Head, 2007; Sorensen, 2002). Community engagement is seen as a way of bringing about democratic renewal by opening up new structures for more localized decision-making and engendering public interest in governance (Purdam and Crisp, 2009).

Fung (2015) points out several important contributions that citizens can make to solve wicked problems. The enhancement of participatory possibilities for citizens need to be accompanied by a shift in the role and actions of political and governmental elements, such as political attitude, bureaucratic involvement and position of officials. Bovaird et al. (2015) distinguishes the concept of 'I believe people can make a difference' (political self-efficacy) from 'I believe I can make a difference' (personal self-efficacy), and appeals to improving consultation and information processes to ensure that they (citizens) are genuinely effective, rather than just let them carry out tasks for symbolic or cosmetic purposes. Tholen (2015)

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