

DOCTORAL THESIS

China's Eco-city Initiative: Multilevel Governance, International Cooperation, and Climate Governance Experimentation

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Abstract

Climate governance has become an increasingly far-reaching discourse in China's social and political space. China has participated as a nation-state in various international governance initiatives through multilateralism. In addition, non-state actors such as cities are increasingly engaging in international cooperation for climate governance through transnational and bilateral mechanisms. Bilateral low-carbon/eco-city pilot projects with cities as the physical implementation bodies have become conspicuous governance arenas in which China's multilevel government agencies can demonstrate their governance actions. In such experimental governance measures, the original rigid hierarchical relationship between superiors and subordinates has become more cooperative on climate issues, and multilevel governance connotes more flexibility. The participation of non-governmental actors in climate governance points to more inclusivity in the search for solutions to public affairs, rather than merely the privatization of public services through market mechanisms. However, the institutional factors inherent in China's multilevel governmental structure are likely to make cooperative network governance unpredictable and to marginalize social groups such as indigenous communities. The eco-city project examined in this thesis, the Sino-German Ecopark in Qingdao, which has the theme of environmental protection and climate governance, has trialed some new technologies, such as Passive House, to improve energy efficiency. Based on this ecopark, we adopt qualitative studies (interviews mainly) to understand two sides of such a new governance initiative. One is on the structure and agency in terms of the newly active occurring of the project. Another is the structure and agency in terms of the passive adaptation to the new occurring. We find that the selective adoption of the transferred technology has made it difficult to promote socio-technological transition locally. The construction of projects using new technology has even induced social exclusion problems due to distortion of the functions of the technology by the local business coalition. This case demonstrates how accountability challenges can appear in eco-city pilot projects. From a more macro perspective, in our case, the purpose of the construction of the new eco-city project is to establish a new economic pole in China's urban growth, which will cause an imbalance in regional development. Rather than being integrated, the original urban areas near the newly built eco-city and surrounding underdeveloped areas had their development sacrificed.