

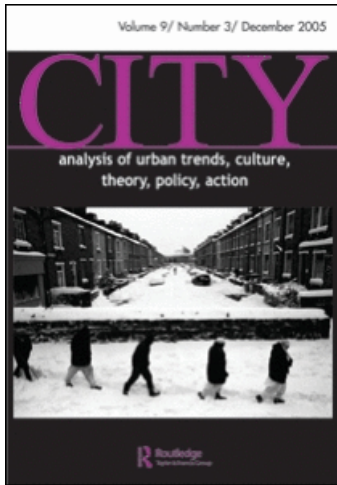
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Shannon May

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Ecological citizenship and a plan for sustainable development

Lessons from Huangbaiyu

Shannon May

In a small rural village in the mountains of Northeastern China, a transnational conglomerate is building an internationally lauded 'prototype' for rural urbanization in China. More than a master plan for sustainable development, Huangbaiyu is representative of the new power relations and claims of ecological citizenship that acceptance of the dynamics of global warming generates. Four hundred families are to be relocated and their lives radically altered to determine if rural populations can be allowed urban privileges, without putting the 'planet in peril'. Despite its promise of equity, the rationality that has made William McDonough's master plan for sustainable development in China internationally lauded is the same logic that ensures that existing resource distribution inequalities continue.

In early 2003, outsiders—Chinese and American alike—began periodically driving down a dusty road in rural Liaoning Province and going behind closed doors to discuss the shared vision between the Chinese government and US corporate leaders to 'leapfrog past limitations and accelerate sustainable development' by building China's first rural 'sustainable community'¹ in this valley (CUCSD, 2002). Led by William McDonough, the China-US Center for Sustainable Development's project in Huangbaiyu has been heralded by renowned environmental commentator Elizabeth Economy as 'perhaps the most ambitious multinational effort to help redirect China on to a new development path' (2006, p. 182). McDonough has himself lauded his project as the 'sustainable rural village that the government hopes will serve as a prototype for improving the lives

of 800 million rural Chinese' (*Harvard Business Review*, 2006, p. 7).

On 21 May 2005, McDonough and the other leaders of the China-US Center for Sustainable Development (CUCSD) held an opening ceremony in honor of the construction of the first house in their 'sustainable development demonstration village', and for the first time invited the residents of Huangbaiyu to witness the project that sought to remake the way they would live their lives.

'We see this project as a gift that you share with us, and we share with you', McDonough told the hundreds of residents of this valley who had come to see what this new-found outside attention would mean for their livelihoods.

'We see this project as a project for the children.... Why have we all come to

Huangbaiyu? To celebrate a new way of thinking: clean water, energy and air; economy, equity and ecology. And happiness. We hope whatever we do will make you happy.'

Hearing this interchange on that morning three years ago, attuned my ear to the uses of 'we' and 'you'—and the gaps in between that make all the difference—over the following 15 months that I lived in Huangbaiyu,² and researched the various persons, institutions, discourses and practices at work in building this 'prototype' that has been identified as the key to a 'future that is both bright and green', by many who have never been there (Steffen, 2006, p. 276). How is it that Thomas Friedman's documentary *Addicted to Oil* highlights Huangbaiyu as part of a solution to a global energy crisis while never talking to the residents of this valley? Who is the subject and who is the object of sustainable development (May, 2006)?

How is it that 'we' who do not live in Huangbaiyu have so often heralded it as 'truly sustainable habitation' (BBC, 2006), while the two local families who were moved into the Phase One of this proclaimed prototype wonder why they were not allowed to rebuild their own homes as they wanted to after an electrical fire that destroyed them?³ In October 2006—a month after Zhao Qinghao had moved with his wife into one of the 'master plan' houses that still lacked electricity, water, and gas for cooking and heating—I asked Zhao what he thought of sustainable development.

'Do you mean this development [project]?' he asked back. 'This development isn't any development, this development is unable to develop. We commoners don't approve. What is being developed here? *You* build these houses for what? What is this plaything for?'

When I tell him that international experts and news media have heralded this place as a model of development and a solution to the world's energy addictions and rapid urbanization he stares at me, dumbfounded. Zhao

considers my statement while rolling tobacco in his hands. 'The business of leaders and commoners is different.'

Ecological citizenship

Through the case of Huangbaiyu, this paper investigates how the 'new way of thinking' that McDonough and other advocates of sustainability champion is leading to the emergence of matrices of power, governance and citizenship—we(s) and you(s), leaders and commoners—as sustainability makes claims and takes action in the name of a shared, global future in a common fate. Acceptance of global warming and the ecological rationality to which it gives rise generates micro-strategies of power relations that constitute subjects in new ways (Foucault, 1991; Ong, 2003). In what follows I seek to make the politics of Huangbaiyu visible by asking: What type of self and society do the structures of this 'sustainable community' seek to shape? What logic of resource distribution is embodied in such models of sustainable development of the Chinese countryside?

The construction of a 'design for living' (McDonough, 2004) is itself more than a built environment; it is a physical manifestation of a system of values and a record of power. In the name of a shared planetary, community of fate, new assemblages of authority and practices of governance are emerging into what I call ecological citizenship. As scientific models ground political discourse, the name through which authority to act upon a population is invoked is no longer only the state, but also the planet, in which *every* person has a vested interest. Under these terms, everyday practices of living become subject to judgment, transformation and discipline by persons never met, with whom there is no formal system of shared governance, in the name of protecting the planet.

The design and building of the Huangbaiyu project brings to light these tensions of ecological citizenship through the particular chiaroscuro of the doubled development

divide between the USA and China, and between urban and rural populations within China. What is at stake in Huangbaiyu is not only of consequence to the persons who have inhabited its spaces, but to all those who are encountering the ethical claims operationalized by ecological citizenship, or are thinking of making such claims on others.

In order to understand the context of the explicit and implicit practices of resource distribution in the Huangbaiyu 'master plan', it is necessary to gloss the dominant modality and temporality of responses to global climate change, and then introduce the China-US Center for Sustainable Development as an institution acting out ecological governance.

Implosion and stasis in ecological logic

There is a rising social consciousness in the 21st century that is fraught with the developmental paradox of energy consumption: will humanity's desiring appetite for living compromise the material basis of life itself? With the earth now popularly conceived as a 'planet in peril', the lifestyles of all populations are now widely discussed in terms of how they contribute to or mitigate global warming (UNEP, 2006; CNN, 2007; *Daily Show*, 2008).

Global warming is more than a natural, if human-influenced, process through which changing carbon cycles raise the average temperature of the earth's surface. It is also a social and political process. Following Bruno Latour, I consider it a hybrid—a complex intersection of social practices and natural processes captured by a single signifier (1993). The danger of such hybrids is that their material basis elides the extent to which the complex signified is itself contingent, and socially constructed. The carbon cycle has definite pathways, but these themselves are modeled through human-generated abstractions, and the paths of human engagement and reaction are infinite, until politics paves them.

The measurement and equation of carbon emissions is just such a paving stone marking

the path currently taken in addressing global climate change, and is representative of ecological logic. Operating through a modality of implosion (Haraway, 1997; Bowker, 2005), carbon emissions measurement and pricing renders the smoke wafting toward the sky from indoor subsistence stoves in Huangbaiyu and the exhaust sputtering from a car commuting on Interstate-5 in Los Angeles into market commodities. In this logic, it is only by accounting for the value of the shared atmosphere of the earth, that it can be preserved. Suddenly, previously incommensurate things are made comparable, imploding the complexity of singular histories into a remainder that can be measured, counted and exchanged: 1 metric ton of carbon dioxide.

In order for the threat to the ecosystem to be quantified and valued through market calculations and then managed, currently unruly, non-systematized carbon emissions must be brought into the market. In terms of basic daily life practices, this means extending public systems of gas, electricity and water to all persons so that audits can be performed and energy use centrally managed. It is because public services are extended to a population—as is the plan for sustainable development in Huangbaiyu—not in order to facilitate state economic growth, but to manage ecological harm that analyzing these emergent relationships through the terms of ecological citizenship is particularly apt. Moreover, the motivation for such revolutions in 'community' structure often arise from the visions formed between various actors—or transnational conglomerates—who do not have legal ties to the population, but act in the name of protecting their shared ecosystem, the earth.

The political and ethical effects of this modality of implosion are exacerbated by the homeostatic temporality of much of the dominant discourse responding to global climate change. The defining of an ecosystem—a closed environment the internal dynamics of which generates life—takes conditions observed in the present as eternal norms that must be preserved. Present hierarchies are naturalized as internally necessary dynamics

of the ecosystem itself. This homeostatic logic is evidenced by the rhetorical method of putting the blame for pushing the earth beyond its means of sustainability not on the lifestyles of populations that are presently privileged at the top of the food chain, so to speak, and emit the most carbon, but on those populations who are at the bottom, and desire to upset the current balance of power, and desire greater equity.

China's rapid development is often depicted as the source of current ecological instability and potential future collapse. If each person in China were to consume the same amounts of energy as the average consumption of persons in America, it is said, China would metabolize more than 80 million barrels of oil per day—or the entire world's current daily supply (Jiang, 2007). Even self-styled progressive voices engage in global warming politics as if the problem is not overall carbon emissions, but new emissions that threaten the current state of the ecosystem, and its political and energy hierarchy. When Paul Krugman positions the 'march of the meat-eating Chinese ... who are, for the first time, rich enough to start eating like Westerners' as emblematic of the integrated global food and energy crisis, he presumes that the present practice of Western consumption is the homeostatic standard that is being threatened by other persons seeking more than their proper place in the food chain allows (2008). This Malthusian logic is exemplified by the cover of the January 2008 issue of *Mother Jones*, which posed the bristling question, 'The Last Empire: Can the world survive China's rush to emulate the American way of life?'

Through the modality of implosion that makes all energy use and carbon emissions commensurable and the ecological logic of a homeostatic system, moral equivalence is given to the lives of all persons in the present and future while at the same time normalizing present economic hierarchies. This justifies practices that act on specific populations—particularly rural Chinese populations whose desire for contemporary urbanized lifestyles

threatens the conditions of possibility of those who already live them—in the name of equity. However, these patterns often amplify unequal resource distribution through the management of specific populations (in this case the residents of Huangbaiyu) so as to maximize the overall benefit to the system—or ecosystem. Of course, the intention is that the lives of all populations will be improved through practices of sustainable development, but when there is a difference between subjects and objects of action, the operation of power between persons limits the conditions of possibility for equity.

Instituting ecological governance

The China-US Center for Sustainable Development emerged, according to its management, out of a consensus between China and the USA for the need to create a 'mechanism for action' to promote sustainable practices in China. Formed by a Memorandum of Understanding in 1999, the mission of the CUCSD is to promote sustainable development design principles through a unique network of public-private partnerships. The China Secretariat is housed within China's Administrative Center for Agenda 21, while the Portland, OR-based International Sustainable Development Foundation houses the US Secretariat (see Table 1). The Chairmanship of the China Secretariat is taken up by Deng Nan, Deng Xiaoping's daughter. With McDonough chairing the US Secretariat, and following the principles set forth in the book he wrote with chemist Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way we Make Things*, the CUCSD argues that sustainability is an issue of design.

Unlike the China Secretariat, the US Secretariat is not housed in a government office and represented by various ministerial officials. As a non-profit organization, the US Secretariat raises funding through a 'Founder's Circle': mostly Fortune 500 corporations that make multi-year commitments of \$50,000 per year to sit on the

Table 1. China-US Center for Sustainable Development: Institutional organization and Huangbaiyu project partners

Leadership	Deng Nan Chair, China Secretariat	William McDonough Chair, US Secretariat
Execution & Operation	Administrative Center for China's Agenda 21, Ministry of Science & Technology; Beijing, China (Host, China Secretariat) Board of Councilors = Ministry Representatives	International Sustainable Development Foundation; Portland, Oregon (Host, US Secretariat) Board of Councilors = Fortune 500 Companies
Huangbaiyu Implementation Partners	<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Tongji University, Institutional Advisor</p> <p>Benxi Sustainable Development Village Coordinating Committee, Government Representative</p> <p>Local Developer, Financial Investor</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/> <p>Benxi Municipality Nanfen District Sishanling Township</p> </div>	

US Board of Councilors for the CUCSD. In this role, US corporate representatives are granted high-level direct access to the Ministries of Science and Technology, Land and Resources, and Construction.

In a conference room at the Beijing Hotel in September 2002, the first Joint Board meeting of the CUCSD concluded with a mandate to develop a rural sustainable community 'based on cradle to cradle design principles as a scalable model for the revitalization of China's rural communities' (CUCSD, 2005).⁴ The CUCSD worked through local municipal (Benxi), district (Nanfen) and township (Sishanling) governments to implement the project, and selected a local businessman, Dai Xiaolong, to act as developer and investor.

The CUCSD's focus on rural urbanization should be understood within the context of ecological rationalities discussed above. In 2030, China is projected to have a population of 1.6 billion, 60 percent of which will be urban (Zhou and Lin, 2005; Jie, 2007). If such rapid growth in construction and consumption continues in the patterns of the industrial revolution, McDonough has warned audiences across the USA and China of 'mutually assured destruction'. In valleys such as Huangbaiyu, cries over the devastation that

may come from sharing the fruits of capitalism with China's vast rural populations engender anger rather than agreement. Rural residents have witnessed the income of their urban comrades outpace their own from 3.3:1 (*People's Daily*, 5 December 2005) to as much as 6:1, when urban in-kind subsidies are included—making this the largest urban-rural income gap in the world (Dong *et al.*, 2006).

The promise of Huangbaiyu as a 'new development path', and the basis of its popularity in the Western press, is that if the CUCSD can develop a 'prototype' of rural urbanization that can be scaled to allow the increased quality of life of 800 million rural Chinese without increased carbon emissions, then it may be possible to allow the vast majority of the planet's population to enjoy the fruits of 'the next industrial revolution' without upsetting the ecosystem that has allowed the minority to enjoy the benefits of the first industrial revolution.

It is from this perspective that McDonough's description of the Huangbaiyu project as a reciprocal gift should be understood: by becoming the object of a radical intervention in their way of life, the population of Huangbaiyu gives a gift of security so that the minority of the world's populations may maintain their present, industrial

lifestyle through the sacrifices of the rest of the world's population. At the same time, from the perspective of the subject of sustainable development—those invested in maintaining the present levels of energy consumption—this radical intervention is a gift to the people of Huangbaiyu, as it gives them the improved lifestyle that the CUCSD perceives they want, while allowing them to remain in the valley.

The plan for sustainable development

In the narrative accompanying the master plan completed by William McDonough + Partners, the key principles of the Huangbaiyu design are outlined. Required use of technical and biological nutrients in cradle-to-cradle cycles and renewable energy sources lead the ecological requirements of building. Relocating all 400 households from their current residences in 12 distinct areas into a new centralized 'community', it argues, makes renewable energy distribution possible, as well as increasing the goals of 'convenience and comfort'. With the community 'powered by the sun' and fuel coming from waste 'positively affecting the community's carbon balance' (McDonough, 2004), this 'sustainable community' will ensure that growing rural consumption will not alter global carbon calculus.

At the groundbreaking of the Huangbaiyu project, it was estimated that total costs for the 400-household development would be almost \$5,500,000⁵ over 3 years of phased construction.⁶ While government subsidies for arable land generation would cover a portion of the development cost, \$3,300,000 was left outstanding, or \$8341 per house.

While some journalists who interviewed me assumed that as a 'sustainable development' project in the 'developing world', the Huangbaiyu project was a philanthropic venture—perhaps reinforced by McDonough's language of the gift—it was not. Following McDonough's dictum that commerce is an agent for good and that only the market is

scalable, from the outset the residents of Huangbaiyu were supposed to pay for the privilege of moving into the master planned sustainable community. Without government or philanthropic investment in construction of the master plan, a burden of \$8341 is left on each family.

The median household in Huangbaiyu would have to work 6.58 years to earn that sum, and at the national household savings rate of 16 percent (IMF, 2005), would have had already to be saving for more than 41 years—at this rate and income level—to give the gift of sustainable development to the developed world. Forty-one years ago families in Huangbaiyu lived within the commune system, when there was no cash to earn or to save—and where they were then, as now, an object of radical intervention to benefit the development of a larger system.

During China's communist apogee it was private property and accumulation that was held as 'backward', preventing the development of socialist subjectivity necessary for the equitable relations amongst humanity to develop. Now the Huangbaiyu master plan—through the modality of implosion and temporality of homeostasis evident in ecological rationality—categorizes the individual house design and construction, and household management of forest plots for sustainable wood supplies as 'backward'. Throughout CUCSD planning meetings for Huangbaiyu, the village residents' present methods of habitation and energy supply were discussed as 'inefficient uses of national and natural resources'. But inefficient for whom? When? In the Huangbaiyu 'prototype' for sustainable development, the rural poor are being asked to pay more to eat, to sleep, *to live* so that their lives will not increase the carbon that is now seen to be putting the 'planet in peril'.

The lessons to learn from Huangbaiyu come from the failures at the core of the project's foundations: if the promise of urban sustainability is improvement in the physical and social experience of a shared life, plans for this life must begin from a

realization that those who have already eaten at capitalism's table should be the first to pay for their accumulated carbon waste, rather than designing systems that put the cost of clean-up on the backs of those who have not yet tasted the fruits of industrial capitalism. The market logic that makes all carbon emissions commensurate does not generate equity, but gives rise to an ecological rationality that operationalizes sustainable development as an intervention on some for the benefit of others. Perhaps it is because this rationality serves to maintain the lifestyles and hierarchical positions of those who read and write about the Huangbaiyu project that it has been so widely heralded as a visionary step toward sustainable development.

The ethical quandary of the epoch of global warming is not only whether we will alter our own means of producing and consuming energy so that our finite world may continue to give us life. It is also whether we will allow a global consciousness to blind us to the inequitable burdens put on some populations for the benefit of others. As long as the criteria for sustainability are defined for one population by another population, and there remains a 'we' and 'you' in the discussion and practice of sustainability, then sustainability will remain no more than a trump card in the politics of unequal resource distribution for the benefit of the already powerful.

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Notes

- 1 While 社区 is translated as 'community' in English, 社区 has a different historical, political and spatial denotation than its English translation. It does not imply a voluntary association of persons, but a planned spatial form within the existing government hierarchy. See Bray (2005, pp. 181–193) for discussion.
- 2 I lived in an existing farmer's home within a district of Huangbaiyu for portions of May and July 2005, October 2005–October 2006 and February–March 2007.
- 3 After the electrical fire, each family was allotted 20,000 renminbi (\$2860) through the local level government (Sishanling) to rebuild their homes. The 'Benxi Sustainable Development Village Coordinating Committee', the local government coordinating committee for the CUCSD, acted to have this payment made directly to the Huangbaiyu project developer, Dai Xiaolong. Each family was told that they could live in a house in the demonstration village, or receive no payment or future government support. Both families spoke of this process as coercive. As of December 2007, only Phase One, or 42 of the master plan's 400 houses had been constructed, and only two occupied. The houses still lack biogas and solar power, and there is no plan to provide such technologies any longer. All 400 houses were to have been completed and occupied by summer 2008.
- 4 At this time, 17 corporations sat on the US Board of Councilors. In alphabetical order, they were: BASF, BP, Broadleaf Foundation, Ecoworks Foundation, Ford, Gazeley, HP, Intel, Johns Mansville, McDonough + Partners, PGE (Portland General Electric), PSI (Professional Supply Inc.), Portland State University, Steelcase, Vermeer, Wildwood Mahonia and WSP. Of these, BASF, BP, Ecoworks Foundation, Intel, Vermeer and Wildwood Mahonia have been the most involved in Huangbaiyu. Intel's Peoples and Practices Research Group partially funded my dissertation research.
- 5 An exchange rate of 7:1 was used for all RMB to US\$ conversions.
- 6 Costs of development have risen dramatically since the original commitments made in 2003 and construction began in 2005. Both the rising cost of cement and other goods, as well as faulty construction and significant fiscal mismanagement have led to an estimated doubling of the cost of building Phase One, or 10 percent of the total development. At this rate, total costs would run to \$11,430,000, with the unsubsidized costs accruing \$17,400 per house. As the present work deals with the motivations and intention of the master plan itself, the original calculations are used.

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Shannon May is based at the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Correspondence address: P.O. Box 15275-00509, Langata, Nairobi, Kenya. E-mail: shannon.k.may@gmail.com