

***Towards a Liveable and Sustainable Urban Environment:
Eco-Cities in East Asia***

LYE LIANG FOOK and CHEN GANG, eds.

Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2010, 222 p.

Economic developments in East Asia since the end of World War II have fascinated many observers. From Japan's post-war recovery like a phoenix coming back to life, to the rapid growth of the four "little dragons," and to the reemergence of China as a global economic powerhouse, developments of East Asian nations have astounded and impressed the world in the past few decades. In this context, there has long been a debate about the East Asia model.¹⁾ More recently, the focus has shifted to China and the so-called "Beijing Consensus" as the Chinese version of East Asia's success story.²⁾ Many developing countries in other parts of the world hope that they can learn from East Asia and duplicate its successes.

Yet, what is lacking in the discussion of the East Asia model is how East Asia's development trajectory has been evolving, and how nations are moving beyond simply developing their economies. Among other things, these nations are focusing more on sustainable growth now, with heavy emphasis on eco-friendly development by relying more on clean and green energy. This book edited by Lye Liang Fook and Chen Gang records such efforts of East Asian nations in building a more livable and sustainable urban environment.

A collection of papers first presented at a workshop organized by the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore in February 2009, the book focuses on a specific new aspect of development in East Asia: establishing eco-cities or developing eco-friendly projects. As the editors explain, the ultimate purpose of the book is to strengthen the call for more action to put into practice the many good ideas, concepts, suggestions, and experiences about sustainable development that are already out there (p.17). To build successful eco-cities in East Asia is a comprehensive project, which requires concerted efforts by governments, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and individuals to work together for a better future.

The editors are research scholars at the East Asian Institute of National University of Singapore, while the contributors are scholars, officials and environmental specialists from various East Asian countries. Together, they highlight the best practices that are useful to policy makers as Asian governments attempt to transform urban areas into a more livable and sustainable environment.

As the editors suggest in their introductory chapter, an eco-city must be economically, environmentally and socially sustainable (p.7). The convergence of economic, environmental, and

1) For studies of the East Asia model, see, for example, Ming Wan (2007) and Zhiqun Zhu (2009).

2) For examinations of China's development model, see, for example, Halper (2010) and S. Philip Hsu *et al.* (2011).

social and cultural needs is at the core of sustainable development of eco-cities. On the environmental front, eco-cities must have important features such as the application of green technologies, environmentally-sustainable transportation, rational use of space, green-belts and parks, and cultural and heritage conservation. On the economic front, eco-cities must be able to contribute to the growth of the economy through attracting investments and generating employment. On the social and cultural front, eco-cities must be able to meet social demands, including promoting interactions and strengthening the bonds among different ethnic and religious groups of a society.

The first two chapters focus on the theoretical evolution of the concepts and key ideas of eco-cities and the urgency of finding a more sustainable model. Chapter one provides a strategic overview of urbanization in Asia and then discusses the objectives and goals of eco-cities in the twenty-first century as well as the policies and measures to achieve them. Chapter two highlights three critically interdependent perspectives: the escalating global climatic crisis and the need to find a sustainable way forward, the global financial turmoil and the importance of a new development model, and the uniqueness of Asian cities due to their rich culture and history and the necessity of using non-Western paradigms to understand contemporary Asian societies. The rest of the book adopts a more specific focus by examining examples of eco-cities or eco-friendly projects being undertaken in Japan, China, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, their achievements and challenges encountered, and the way forward. These chapters offer insight into what each of these countries is doing to implement the eco-city projects.

Since Sir Ebenezer Howard launched the “garden city” movement with the publication of his *Garden Cities of To-morrow* in Britain in 1898, urban planning in the form of garden cities in which man lives harmoniously with the nature has shaped the development of cities in Europe and elsewhere. In more recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of making our environment not only beautiful but also sustainable, and many countries are moving from building “garden cities” to developing “eco-cities.” After the oil crises of the 1970s, the movement to establish eco-friendly cities began to take shape. The term “eco-city” emerged near the end of the 1980s. Concepts such as “ecopolis” and “amenity town” appeared in Europe and Japan respectively in the 1980s.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many Asian cities are under the dual pressures of continued growth and environmental protection. Urban planning is facing tremendous challenges now. Eco-cities are crucial for the future of human beings as half of the world’s population already live in urban areas, and in some industrialized regions, the number is as high as 80 per cent. The world’s population had reached seven billion by 2011 and continues to grow, posing serious challenges to the global efforts to attain a better future for our children. The editors and contributors of this book explicitly call our attention to the urgency of developing eco-cities or embarking on eco-friendly projects as a means of achieving sustainable development in Asia and elsewhere.

Global warming and other environmental externalities of unregulated growth compel countries around the world to take action now to translate eco-city concepts into actions. With continued

industrialization and globalization, the challenge to human environment has never been so acute. The eco-city movement in East Asia reflects the region's response to globalization; it also enriches the "East Asia model" of development.

This is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship on East Asia's globalization and urbanization. Most of the books on eco-cities or eco-friendly projects are written either from the Western perspective or concentrate on the practices of Western countries. By examining how the concepts of eco-cities are applied in the Asian context and outlining a model of urban development, this book contributes to our understanding of Asian perspectives on eco-cities and the Asian model of growth. The book suggests that building eco-cities is fraught with difficulties and is a process that has to be constantly monitored and even micro-managed to achieve the desired outcomes. Developing a more sustainable model of growth also helps promote human rights and social justice. The creation of low-carbon eco-cities is ultimately local: actions must start from the local level by citizens, corporation, and local governments.

The chapters are written in easy-to-understand language. Readers will be impressed by the contributors' enthusiasm about eco-cities. One minor drawback of the book is that it may have underestimated the political, economic, cultural and social differences among these nations in their common pursuit of an eco-friendly objective. The editors and contributors could have devoted more space to discussing the various obstacles to more sustainable growth that exist in each of these nations. Though some questions remain unanswered in the book, such as how to overcome difficulties in implementing the eco-city projects in East Asia, the edited volume helps raise awareness of the importance and urgency of developing a new model of growth as East Asia continues to modernize. If we all heed the calls of this book, the objective of a livable and sustainable urban environment can be achieved sooner in East Asia.

Zhiqun Zhu 朱志群

Political Science and International Relations, Bucknell University, Pennsylvania

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Revolutionary Spirit: Jose Rizal in Southeast Asia

JOHN NERY

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011, 280p.

Written on a research fellowship at the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, this book with a yellow cover perhaps betrays the author's sympathies for the current Aquino administration in the Philippines. It also seems to pay respect to the memory of the 1986 EDSA Revolution. In analyzing Rizal's modest place in Southeast Asian history and thought, the book offers a timely contribution to the sesquicentennial commemoration of the birth of the First Filipino.

It is a highly readable yet quite irritating companion volume to the body of writings by and on Rizal. F. Sionil Jose provides a pithy foreword, revealing that he "can even believe" Rizal's retraction of his "anti-Catholic" writings, a view contrary to that of Austin Coates whose biography on Rizal was republished by Sionil Jose's own publishing firm. Nery, however, takes the position that it "did not happen and is actually irrelevant to Rizal's achievement" (p. xix). While I agree with this position, the challenge nevertheless remains for one to write an in-depth examination of the retraction to once and for all determine which Rizal was really the Rizal of December 1896 and hopefully, end the debate.

After a message from the ISEAS director, a preface and a very long acknowledgement, which could have been appended to the former, Nery begins with a discussion of what he calls "the uses of error" on the factual inaccuracies, misinterpretations and distortions made by scholars, and authors who have written about Rizal. The reasons and explanations for them, as Nery tries to discern, are clearly articulated, particularly Miguel de Unamuno's "erroneous" characterization of Rizal as "a poet, a hero of thought and not of action" (p. 23), a "Tagalog Quixote-Hamlet" (Unamuno in Retana 1907, 479), which reading drew an objective rebuttal from T. H. Pardo de Tavera, with Nery concluding that Unamuno had read his own life onto Rizal's. On the contrary, Rizal, for Nery, was no dreamer but "a kinetic actor" who "was perpetually wrestling with his will" (p. 28). Unamuno's views continue to dazzle scholars; the latest anthology that carries his work is not the one edited by Daroy and Feria (1968), which Nery had cited, but *Himalay* (Melendrez-Cruz and Chua 1991), an anthology of Rizal studies by the Cultural Center of the Philippines in which a Tagalog translation of Unamuno's essay is included. A useful chronology from Rizal's birth to contemporary times, which have a bearing on Rizal, is part of the introduction.