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**Title:** ‘Just sustainability’ or just sustainability? Shanghai’s failed drive for global excellence

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**Abstract**

A persistent challenge to deliver a socially just and ecologically sustainable development for emerging cities in non-Western countries is that legitimacy and effectiveness often hinge on the normalizing effect of international ‘models’ and ‘standards’ defined by the developed countries. In cases such as Shanghai’s latest urban sustainability programme, a fixation on excelling at ‘global indicators’ has led its promises of inclusive social progress astray. We argue this is not simply because Shanghai authorities didn’t ‘get’ just sustainability, but highlights a more rooted subaltern anxiety that constrains their perceptions on how their programmes should be identified and delivered.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theorisation of how social agency’s ‘logic of practice’ is connected to their positions in the ‘field’, we investigate a shared epistemic deference among Shanghai experts and publics towards knowledge generated from international experiences. This has reproduced a marginalization of the subaltern public in the field of developing sustainable cities.

**Keywords:** just sustainability, urbanization, subaltern, field, Bourdieu, Shanghai

## Introduction

For many late-comers to urban sustainability, especially those with an emerging economy, sustainability agendas are opportunities to (re)establish themselves. Yet no sustainability agenda is developed in a political vacuum and is always a negotiated product at the confluence of global and local possibilities. While since early 2000, there has been an increased recognition of promoting programmes of ‘just sustainability’ which address not only environmental concerns but also social inequalities (see Agyeman, Bullard and Evans 2003; Agyeman 2008), it is also widely recognized that pursuance of *just sustainability* can easily become *just* another rhetoric to revamp old development rationales rather than support inclusive social progress (Lombardi et al. 2011; While et al. 2004).

A particular challenge to less democratic and/or less developed societies is that key indicators for sustainability and how they should be prioritized and achieved are often steered by discussions in the West. Consequently, while responding to domestic disparities, the perceived legitimacy of local actors often hinges on the normalizing effect of international ‘models’ and ‘standards’ (De Lara 2018; Faber and McCarthy 2003; McLaren 2003). A recent example is Shanghai’s latest sustainability programme, the 2017-2035 Master Plan. It was endorsed by both the central and municipal governments with the ambition to set ‘a *Chinese definition* of an excellent global city’ (Feng and Hu 2018, emphasis added). But instead of being based on Shanghai particularities, the Master Plan was articulated through achieving a higher ranking in various global indexes (Shanghai Municipality 2018a). Consequently, Shanghai’s promise of being an ‘innovative, humanistic and green’ city for all, slips into a conventional trajectory found in other Chinese eco-cities where metrics were achieved at the cost of exacerbating social disparities (Caprotti 2014; Chiu 2012; Fu and Zhang 2017; Liu et al, 2019).

As we argue in this paper, this pronounced mismatch between Shanghai's aims and approach are not simply because Shanghai authorities were not committed 'enough'. Rather it underlines a subaltern mentality that conditions the socio-political legitimization and space of sustainability programmes. Being a global finance center, Shanghai as a city is much more developed than most of its peers and is also not a newcomer to sustainable development. In fact, after successful delivery of the World Expo with the theme 'Better City, Better Life' (城市, 让生活更美好) Shanghai was already endorsed by the UN as the world model for sustainable development in 2011 (UNDESA 2011). Encapsulated by a 36-page UN publication titled the *Shanghai Manual*, the city laid out its vision and policy suggestions on pursuing balanced growth, and cultivating an open and sharing multicultural society. Yet strikingly, in the new Master Plan, this *Shanghai Manual* was not mentioned. Instead, various global city indexes published in Japan, UK and US were cited in the first chapter to remind the readers of the 'international status' gap Shanghai had yet to close with top global cities; in addition the new Master Plan (rather than the *Shanghai Manual*) was the blueprint for achieving 'Better City, Better Life'.

What makes Shanghai's case insightful is that it shows how inclusivity and fairness can get lost even when the value of just sustainability was recognized and comprehensive public consultation were in place. On the one hand, the Master Plan saw 'achieving social justice and green development' as its 'foundation' from its very conception (Feng and Hu 2018). As this paper later demonstrates, in terms of its design, consultation and delivery process, Shanghai not only 'ticked all the boxes' but has, to some extent, expanded domestic political consultation to various publics (De Jong 2013). On the other hand, despite being at its early stage, there is already a strong indication that Shanghai's ambition has slipped into a conventional trajectory found in other Chinese eco-cities where sustainability targets are met through what we term 'enclosure' sustainability. That is, an image of sustainability is established by focusing on a collection of metrics and by enclosing social and environmental resources to a select population.

Arguably it is precisely the contrast between Shanghai being a well-resourced and relatively high-profile regional municipal, and its persistent dependency on international recognition and approval that makes it especially informative in the subaltern struggle within the (global) ‘field’ of sustainability. As we further specify in the next section, the term ‘subaltern’ in this paper are used to refer to a social actor’s perceived position in the global epistemic hegemony of sustainable urbanization. Following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002), we use the term subaltern not simply to describe the socio-politically ‘oppressed’, but to refer to developing regions’ marginalized status and unequal influence in a Western-dominated discourses and practices. By the word ‘field’ we invoke Pierre Bourdieu’s (1969, 1990) theorization of the effects of power imbalance. From a Bourdieusian perspective, a field is a social space organized around specific stakes (such as promoting sustainability), in which social agencies struggle and compete for power and their ‘logic of practice’ are connected to their positions in the field (Pellandini-Simanyi 2014).

Our argument is a modest but important one: By making visible how Shanghai’s fixation on excelling at ‘global indicators’ led a just program astray, and yet why it ‘made sense’ to local decision-makers and practitioners, we argue that this positional difference of the subaltern has significant impact on how sustainability is translated on the ground. This is an important point that is often implied in various literature but empirically under-explored. While a large volume of studies have repeatedly pointed out how both distributive and procedural justice in sustainability programs can be improved with wider civic engagement and better participatory governance, well-informed local authorities and professional communities (such as in the case of Shanghai) remain susceptible to repeating the same mistakes (see Schroeder et al. 2008; Stirling, Scones and Leach, 2010; Xie, 2009; Zhang and Barr 2013). One of the key reasons, as suggested by this study, is a subaltern anxiety that

frames (or rather constrains) their perceptions on how their programs should be legitimized and delivered. As sociologist Michael Lorr (2012) rightly pointed out, only when one comprehends the *mentality* (or what Lorr calls ‘ideology’) underlying particular urban sustainable developments, can one discern the cause and consequences of these initiatives. It is only when we are able to empathize with the subaltern struggles can we start to identify practical solutions to minimize sustainability commitments go astray.

### **A Bourdieuan lens on the subaltern struggle with sustainability**

Subaltern is not an identity but a *position* (Spivak 1999). More specifically, it is a social actor’s perceived position of their unequal *relations* of power, their marginalized role in epistemic hegemonies. A Bourdieuan interpretation of power asymmetries and social agency through the relational thinking of a field is most helpful in making visible the epistemic deference and power imbalances that shape subaltern societies’ cognitive framework (Go 2013). There are three interrelated ‘thinking tools’ to a Bourdieuan theorization on power and action: habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, 50). Habitus is a system of dispositions (e.g. education, family history) of social agents (be it people or institutions) which structures their present and future practices (Bourdieu 1990). Field is ‘a relatively autonomous universe of specific relations’, a social space with its specific rules and pursuits, occupied by social agents whose position is structured by their set of capital and their relations to one another (Bourdieu 1969, 77).

For example, the global arena of sustainable urban development constitutes a field occupied by different cities, each with their own socio-political configurations (habitus). In this field, each city, such as Shanghai competes for recognition and influence, by strategically investing their cultural,

economic and social resources in exchange for accumulating credibility and domination, or in Bourdieuan terms ‘symbolic power’. It must be added that using ‘Shanghai’ as a totality in the example is not to negate the multiplicities of agencies within Shanghai. To be sure, the ‘field’ of sustainable urban development can also be ‘zoomed-in’ to reveal further details and issue-specific sub-politics within each city. However, a certain level of abstraction is needed to make out the subaltern positioning of Shanghai so as to appreciate how this positioning may shape its deliberations. Furthermore, this vision of Shanghai moving up its position in the global arena of sustainability was not only explicit in Shanghai’s ‘public explainer’ version of its Master Plan (SUPLRAB 2018), but also, as our interview data demonstrates, functions as the overarching justification for channeling (or diminishing) various domestic sub-politics into a coordinated delivery of urban development.

More importantly, field position has a structuring effect on a social agency’s strategy for competing in the field (Bourdieu 1990). The valorization to certain types of knowledge and practice over others, for example, has a formative if not disciplinary impact on a social actor’s calculation on how to elevate their status. The extent of such structuring effect may be especially prominent on subaltern actors. This is because, the position of the subaltern is not a place to stay, but always prompts the urge to transit from the margin towards the center (Sharp 2009). A central irony, however, as Spivak (1999, 270-272) repeatedly pointed out is that the way for the subalterns successfully to make themselves heard in the global arena is to adapt to the hegemonic grammar. Instead of subverting or shaking the hegemonic dominance, their move towards the center would inevitably betray their subaltern experience. In other words, as social actors internalise dominant expectations and norms in the field, the relation of powers and distribution of resources are reproduced (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 139-140; Burawoy 2019). Such subaltern ‘paradox’ was exhibited in the Brazilian city Curitiba’s sustainable urban planning. While Curitiba earned its reputation as a model sustainable city by winning numerous international awards, empirical research pointed out a ‘split between discourse and reality’, as the city’s development was stifled or ‘locked in’ by hegemonic

discourses ‘constructed and reproduced through powerful domestic and international networks’ (Martínez et al. 2016, 358).

The problem lies not in the aspiration for (and in Curitiba’s case, success in) global recognition itself but highlights a particular subaltern insecurity. As we demonstrate in the Shanghai case, the desperation for legitimacy and the pressure to progress have turned Shanghai’s original pursuit of a just sustainability into just another short-term race of metrics. Despite its multi-layered coordination and consultation, the Master Plan has not construed new global excellence, but has paradoxically reinforced gaps in social and environmental justice.

### **Embedding Shanghai’s 2017-2035 Master Plan in China’s Quest of Just Sustainability**

It is useful to put Shanghai’s Master Plan in the wider context of Chinese pursuit of sustainability. While many studies on pollution and emission controls have examined how metric and target-settings have served as ‘index-evaluation systems’ for China’s central government to monitor performance at the provincial and municipal levels (Hsu, de Sherbinin and Shi 2012, 40; Kostka 2015; Li 2019), Shanghai’s Master Plan was not a top-down mandate assigned by the central government. Rather, Shanghai Municipality was responsible to design and deliver an urbanization plan which concretizes China’s official development principles of ‘innovation, coordination, green, open and sharing’ (Shanghai Municipality 2018b). Thus, its identification of goals and pathways have made the Master Plan a particularly insightful case in understanding the ambition and limits of China’s pursuit of sustainability. Conversely, key characters of China’s domestic rhetoric on sustainability also helps to contextualize the making of the Master Plan.



At one level, China seems to ‘get’ sustainability in a way that many Western societies still do not. While China’s official rhetoric falls short of adopting academic terminology, the ethos of China’s environmental governance in the past 20 years bear close resemblance to that of the just sustainability discourse. Firstly, there is a dual commitment to both *inter- and intra-generational* justice. In contrast to the more influential interpretation of ‘sustainable development’ given by the Brundtland Report which emphasized protecting inter-generational justice (WCED 1987), in Chinese discussions, this concept has been given a ‘spatial’ dimension. That is, development is only considered sustainable if it meets the needs of a region or a nation without endangering the ability of people in other regions and nations to meet their own needs (Ye 1995). This echoes Agyeman and his colleagues’ (2003, 5, emphasis added) definition of just sustainability: ‘the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, *now, and into the future*, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems’. Secondly, China mirrors the just sustainability’s call for *pro-actionary* capacity building (Faber and McCarthy 2003; Walker 2009). That is, responsible and fair development is not simply about the equal distribution of environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’. Rather, it should minimize environmental and social injustice being produced in the first place (De Lara 2018; Broto and Wetman 2017). Shanghai in particular is a regional hub seeking scientific solutions to sustainability problems. In fact, Shanghai’s Master Plan was originally launched in 2016, which was over-written by the current 2017-2035 Mater Plan a year later. A key update in this later version was an emphasis on the role of science and innovation in a sustainable future. For example, the 2035 Mater Plan has pledged its R&D (Research and Development) investment to be 5.5% of the city’s GDP, up from the 5% pledged in the earlier version (Shanghai Municipality, 2018a, 21; 2016a, 92).

But at another level, China’s quest for a socially just and ecologically sustainable development program is also deeply rooted in its position as a developing country. In the second half of the 20th

century, the emphasis on intra-generational equity was necessary and instrumental for China to negotiate a fairer share of responsibility at international conventions. Entering the new millennium, the political importance of the intra-generational equity rhetoric has shifted to appease domestic unrest evoked by socio-economic gaps and expanding environmental degradations (Barr 2012). The concept of ‘ecological civilization’ was proposed by China’s former President Hu Jintao in 2007 to reassure the public that ‘social justice and fairness must be of great concern in development’ and promised that ‘disadvantaged social groups can fairly enjoy the benefits of development’ (China Daily 2007). Chinese president Xi Jinping’s 2019 address at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum stressed that inclusive sustainable development holds the ‘golden key’ to world problems and pledged to promote co-development with its international partners. In short, for Chinese authorities, sustainability agendas have always been closely tied to their perceived political legitimacy and competence. The Shanghai 2035 Master Plan is arguably one of China’s new showcases in boosting its global status, and as the data section demonstrates, its conception was shadowed by the same anxieties.

There is warranted skepticism towards what President Xi (2019) heralded as China’s ‘unswerving’ commitments to a green development. But given the economically driven nature of these initiatives, many China observers worry that short term economic gain will always trump social values and that inequality will be masked as meritocracy (Chiu 2012). Our findings reiterate this concern. When short-term (economic and cultural) productivity pushes values such as diversity, empathy and solidarity and collaboration aside, it perversely widens the socio-economic gaps that Shanghai set out to close.

## **Methodology**

The paper is informed by our research on China's environmental governance in the past decade. Empirical research was carried out between 2018 and 2019 as part of a larger project on sustainable urbanization funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Due to China's heightened censorship towards international scholar's research activities, government officials we were in contact with all declined to be interviewed, but they nonetheless put us in touch with key experts they worked with. In the end, we interviewed 10 individuals whose work has fed into or who have been involved in the drafting of the Shanghai 2035 Master Plan. This includes 1 urban planning expert, 4 academics of urban and development studies, 2 environmental protection professionals, 2 state-owned energy company managers and 1 manager in a private energy company. As Dan Guttman and colleagues (2018, 130) argued, the effect of 'the shadow of state' in China has blurred the distinction between state and non-state actors. While our interviewees are 'non-state actors', their work with the government is conditioned upon their adherence to the state's vision of development. Public service units (such as urban planning academies) and large businesses with close government connections occupy 'core roles' in devising and delivering environmental governance (Guttman 2018, 133). As such, these non-state actors and the sector they work in are conduits of the state's vision. Given our restricted sample size, we do not claim that our study represents a comprehensive account of the Shanghai expert community's experience and discussions. However, similar to other small sample studies published in *Society and Natural Resources* (e.g. Löfmarck and Lidskog 2019 and Pilgeram 2019), our study nonetheless provides valuable insights on how both the achievements and shortfalls of the Master Plan was rationalized and legitimized. Furthermore, we also want to highlight that both our field observation, informal conversations with officials and related professionals have affirmed that the making of Master Plan since 2016 has effectively forged a network of experts who have come to a cohesive perspective on how sustainable urbanization should be delivered in Shanghai. While these individuals may not agree on specific issues, as is demonstrated in the data section, there are similar patterns of views and thinking processes that are evident across the five professions we interviewed.

The interviews were conducted by Xie in Mandarin. They each lasted an hour on average and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were analyzed in Mandarin before being translated into English. The translation was carried out and verified by both Xie and Zhang to ensure accuracy. The interviewees were asked of their interpretations of urban sustainability, their views on the social, economic and environmental challenges of Shanghai's urban development, their experience and/or view on the public engagement process in the making and delivery of the 2035 Master Plan. In addition to fieldwork notes, our analysis was also informed by an extensive review of official publications and press releases which are archived on Shanghai Municipality's website ([www.shanghai.gov.cn](http://www.shanghai.gov.cn)) and grey literature published by quasi-government institutions (such as the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute and the Shanghai Academy of Environmental Sciences). In addition to a systematic review of academic publications on Shanghai urbanization in general, we've identified 28 academic papers on the 2035 Master Plan published between 2014 and 2019 through Chinese Wanfang database. These, along with various media reports, help to provide a more rounded view on domestic debates on the Master Plan.

We followed an iterative and multi-levelled coding process (Yin 2010). Xie first applied closed coding to the transcripts which were embedded in the interview schedules. Examples of codes used in this process include 'intention', 'incentive', 'process', 'activities', 'expectations', 'side-effects', 'evaluation of outcome'. Aided by fieldwork notes, further literature review, writing analytic memos and discussions between the authors, the transcripts were re-analysed through a process of open coding to allow for conceptual themes (Layder 2013; Campbell et al. 2013), such as 'excellence', 'legitimacy' and 'public accountability'. As the data section shows, the interviewees were frank and critical to the Master Plan's shortfalls. They did not shy from sharing embarrassing mistakes they or their colleagues have made. Yet one intriguing underlying theme in our interviews is how the 'global' has a constant presence in the interviewees' reasoning and evaluation of the

Shanghai Master Plan. Thus, we conducted axial coding to identify connections among the open codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Codes used includes 'imaging the global', 'epistemic deference' and 'reinforced marginalization'. While codes were agreed by both Xie and Zhang, the actual coding process was done by Xie to maximize consistency.

To unpack this ironic 'necessity' of *the global* in the interviewees' making sense of *the local*, in what follows, we first investigate how Shanghai identified its actions plans. Findings suggest a shared pressure among experts to seek not local particularities but global indexes as legitimizing device for their decisions. We then examine the paradox in which Shanghai's comprehensive public-consultations have effectively become a public education campaign. A prominent factor for this paradox, we argue, was an epistemic deference that attaches higher value and credibility to expert knowledge, especially those generated from developed countries. Finally, we discuss how the Master Plan's intended inclusivity seemed to slip in a usual trap of 'enclosure', which not only physically 'walls off' space and resources to a select population, but also re-enhances an enclosure of social mentality.

### **Identifying and legitimizing action plans: Power of the 'global'**

The experts we interviewed were both practical and strategic. They were practical in the sense that all of them had an acute sense of embedding sustainable development with Shanghai particularities. As put forward by Interviewee 5, 'For us professionals, the Master Plan is not simply drawing up a vision, but about addressing practical problems. There are capacities that Shanghai yet need to develop and there are also chronic problems to be dealt with'. This attentiveness to the specificities of

real-life concerns was also reflected in the Shanghai Master Plan's official explainer for public audiences. That is, it did not simply state the will of developing Shanghai into 'a charming and inclusive city', but it vividly illustrates what life would be like in such an urban space:

...the future Shanghai is a place where people may jog in the green spaces close to their homes, and sit on the grass for a rest after jogging to watch birds fly by. As for drama lovers, they may watch plays right within their neighborhood instead of travelling afar to a grand theater. They may even voice their views about the play and improvise out of fun and interest. For kids, they may play safely without worrying about being scratched or run down by speeding vehicles. In a city with no neglected corner, everyone attends to each other, cares for each other and supports each other. (SUPLRAB 2018, 4)

We draw attention to the level and types of details included in this public explainer is telling. For example, the reference to theatre lovers poking fun at each other after seeing the latest show would strike a chord with many Shanghai residents. The Master Plan did not shun from confronting the 'ugly' part of Shanghai life either, thus the note on freeing children from the worry of being 'run down by speeding vehicles'. It is safe to say that the Master Plan was envisioned as a development agenda that spoke to Shanghai's daily life.

But our interviewees also confirmed that they needed to be highly strategic in introducing and validating action plans. Given Shanghai's past experience, an effective way to mobilize resources in revamping Shanghai's sustainable development was to invoke 'global' rhetoric.

Many would say that the 2010 World Expo has brought forward Shanghai's urbanization by 20 years... most of it [the city's infrastructure] were built around that time but the height of

that urban development is already past tense...Shanghai is relatively developed and internationalized... But it experiences thorny problems at a level that few other cities are dealing with, such as the ageing population... Shanghai needs to take a step further, on a par with international excellence, like New York, London, Paris and Tokyo (Interviewee 6).

As pointed out by the academic, Interviewee 6, global exposure, such as the 2010 Expo has stimulated welcoming changes in Shanghai's urban space. But sustainability is not a one-off campaign. Shanghai needs to revive its commitment from 'past tense' to handle evolving social challenges. This was echoed by Interviewee 1, who described global ambition as necessary to revamp Shanghai's urban development as it was time to 'reorient Shanghai to corresponding changes in China and in China's global role'.

Language of 'the global' is also tactical in legitimizing action plans amid alternatives. Not only were rankings between Shanghai and other metropolis in various global city index cited in the Master Plan to make the case for the necessity of Shanghai's (re)development, they also functioned as key benchmarks for Shanghai authorities to keep their own action plans in check. Fieldwork for this study was conducted when Shanghai was 18 months into the delivery of the Master Plan. Yet how the overarching aim of how 'excellence' should be translated practicality remained 'very vague' and to be negotiated (Interviewees 1 and 4). It is not unusual for experts closely involved with the Master Plan to draw on the 'international' to back up their views. Interviewee 5 who worked in the environmental protection agency, compared the specification of targets in the Master Plan to a process of 'gaming', in which quantitative comparison to international experience often assumed a significant role in the negotiation and 'selling' of their proposed action plan.

Simple (cross-country) comparison of technical indicators actually says very little, but the decision-makers like them... The making of the Master Plan was filled with gaming strategies... [for every agenda we propose] we need to build in quantifiable references to other international cities ... The authority may be at a loss with your argument on why we cannot should pursue target A and not target B, but if you frame your argument as “we can’t reach Tokyo’s standards, but we can be like Singapore”, then the official may say well, Singapore is not too bad, we can accept (to be like Singapore). We had to justify [our proposals] this way. (Interviewee 5)

For consulted professionals, a prerequisite of translating the sustainability vision into reality is to first translate their projected action plans into indexes used by various global city rankings. Such translation added weight to the professionals’ recommendations on the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ of urbanization. This is not so much because these indexes *clarified* Shanghai particularities, but because they provide a short-cut to *legitimize* how expectations and priorities should be set.

Similar to many other cities, a challenge for Shanghai to develop a sustainable and fairer future lies in how to translate that vision into feasible, effective and (politically) accountable actions. Global indicators function both as a powerful source of socio-political mobilization and as an important justification device. For Shanghai professionals, the strive for global excellence paradoxically enabled and constrained them.

### **Symbolic Value vs. Symbolic Power**

While global experience undeniably holds a Bourdieuan symbolic power in guiding Shanghai’s urban planning, it does not mean that local voices were ignored. Regarding the making and delivery



of the Master Plan, two contradictory stories could be told, both of which are true. On the one hand, the multi-level public engagement and consultation programs that the Master Plan initiated was arguably ground-breaking in China. The working group of the Master Plan was made of 40 research groups, 22 expert committees and 16 district governments. Planning authorities from neighboring provinces, such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang were also consulted to ensure regional coordination (SUPLRAB 2018, 12-13). More importantly, public consultation was seen as a critical element in validating the Master Plan, as put forward by Interviewees 5 and 6:

It's called "planning with the door open". Once the draft is done, it needs to be publicized to the society, out in the open, for at least a month. (Interviewee 5)

Public consultation is a procedural must now...it is only when we get all the feedback from the public can we proceed to the next round [of revision], only then can the Master Plan be officially promulgated (Interviewee 6)

To engage with the public, Shanghai Municipality set up a Public Participation Group which rolled out a 'Public Vision Survey' in 2014, and founded a 15-member public consultation committee to feed into the Master Plan (Fu 2014). Local news media and online social platforms were also mobilized to publicize the renewed initiatives. Public seminars, forums and art competitions were held at various levels to make public informed and engaged (SUPLRAB 2018). According to official statistics, a total of 1810 suggestions were received through three rounds of public consultation, of which 707 were said to be incorporated into the Master Plan, 818 were already addressed, and 285 were listed as 'under consideration' (Shanghai Municipality, 2016b). Interviewees recounted that feedback from public surveys helped to underwrite commitments towards certain issues, such as building more schools and public facilities around residence areas (Interviewees 1, 7).

However, interviewees suggested that the opposite could also be said. Interviewee 9, a senior civil society campaigner who took part in the Master Plan's various outreach, described the public's contribution as 'symbolic' as many of these assimilations were on minor details, or as described by Interviewee 5, corresponded to what was 'originally included' and that 'the Master Plan didn't change much after the public consultation'. Interviewee 4 and his colleagues who worked at the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute, were put to the task of writing brochures for a general audience to publicize various aspects of the Master Plan. Although intended as a two-way engagement, it effectively turned into one-way public education:

Realistically, there are only a few topics that ordinary urbanites can contribute to, such as general visions, residential facilities etc. Big issues, such as water and energy supply or waste disposal, all require professional knowledge, otherwise one has nothing to say. (Interviewee 8)

Of course, we can assimilate some of the public opinion, but such planning is naturally something for the professionals... Shanghai government made sure that the Master Plan was drafted by experts that have the most advanced knowledge in their field. As a result, it is a highly sophisticated piece of work informed by scientific calculation and comprehensive designs. (Interviewee 4)

Globally, there have been many successful initiatives in empowering bottom-up participation in urban sustainability (see Cuthill 2004; Zhang and Barr 2013), yet the power asymmetry resulting from knowledge asymmetry remains a challenge. While the *value* of public consultation was fully recognized, there remained a practical barrier for the *substance* of public opinion to inform or compete with the 'most advanced knowledge' (Interviewee 4). Previous studies on just sustainability initiatives in New York have also noted that Town Hall meetings were 'more ceremonial than real', in

which the aim of engaging with the public was ‘really to sell a plan that was already made’ (Angotti 2008; Rosan 2012, 966).

Succumbing to professional expertise on ‘big issues’ (Interviewee 8) may be a particular barrier for just sustainability in regions that had a marginalized voice in the global sustainability discourse. Imported frameworks used in shaping Shanghai’s agenda naturally had different priorities. For example, Interviewee 4 re-called that the planning for new commercial center in Pudong drew on experience from a number of global cities and topped a range of relevant international metrics. However, bicycling lanes, a public facility that would have been common sense to many private citizens, completely escaped the minds of globally-informed experts. In the absence of models closer-to-home to follow, international (i.e. Western) templates of sustainability, along with its scientific and political technicalities, easily take overriding authority in shaping what good urban development ‘should’ look like.

It would be unfair to say that Shanghai did not invest in participatory governance. Through the scope and intensity of its public consultation, the Shanghai Municipality ticked almost all the boxes of public outreach, and expanded the socio-political space in significant ways. But comparing to the weight that was ‘naturally’ (Interviewee 4) prescribed to international experiences, the value of public opinions in shaping the big picture remained minimal, or ‘symbolic’ as in the words of Interviewee 6. Given the technical complexity of urban planning, the epistemic power asymmetry between the experts and the lay public is inevitable. However, in the case of Shanghai, there seems to be a double epistemic deference: a deference to technical knowledge and a deference to international knowledge. Unsurprisingly, then, lay opinions are not something to be explored but something that needs to be educated into a collective consensus.

## **Inclusive or Enclosure Sustainability?**

In 2016, the year before the Master Plan's formal launch, China's income inequality was among the world's worst, with the socio-economic gap was most prominent in major cities like Shanghai (Ni 2014; Wildau and Mitchell 2016). The Master Plan was introduced partly to tackle this glaring disparity with inclusive and shared development (Shanghai Municipality 2018a).

But evidence to date indicates that Shanghai's intended just sustainability program may turn out to be just another economic boost in the name of sustainability (Pow and Neo 2013). In the Global Urban Competitiveness Report jointly released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the United Nations Programme for Human Settlements (UN-Habitat) in September 2019, Shanghai surpassed Hong Kong in terms of economic competitiveness, despite the fact that there was still 'large space for improvement on being a liveable city' (Ni 2019). The aggravating social imbalance Shanghai faced was open knowledge. Even the Chinese Communist Party's publication *Banyuetan* warned against Shanghai's threatening level of socio-economic disparity (Ge et al. 2019). The old central districts, such as Jing'an, Xuhui and Huangpu remained a harbour for the wealthy where residential flats were sold at 60,000 RMB (approximately 8,500 US dollars) per square meters. Meanwhile, only a few miles away, neighbouring districts that were once crowded with factories such Zhaibei, Yangpu, and Putuo remained what the locals refer to as hubs for the 'poor wretches' (Ge et al. 2019). Thus while Shanghai ranking rises in various international urban indexes, it seems to form new 'ecological enclaves...for premium users that ignore wider distributional questions about uneven access to resource politics' (Hodson and Marvin 2010, 311; Caprotti et al. 2015).

The 'oasis' of resources and opportunities the Master Plan helped create is not simply a physical enclave of prosperity but also an administrative 'enclosure' that has more profound effects on social justice. Similar to many cities in emerging powers, domestic wealth inequality and concentration of

employment prospects have a double-down effect on cities like Shanghai to draw large inflows of surplus labor. Historically, population control has been at the center of Chinese urban development (Han and Wang 2013). While Shanghai's population had already soared to 24.15 million by 2015 (Shanghai Statistic Bureau 2011), the Master Plan called on an 'unyielding defense' (*laolao shouzhu*) of a population cap of 25 million by 2035 (Shanghai Municipality 2018a, 11). To achieve its sustainable urbanization, Shanghai has relied on two approaches.

Firstly, the Master Plan effectively relied on the strategy of 'environmental gentrification' in which the city becomes greener by pushing uncompetitive groups further to the margin (Checker 2011). To turn Shanghai into a city with 'a 90% coverage of green and public space larger than 400 square meters within 5 minutes of walking distance by 2035', it needs to reduce the population in its central district to below the 2015 level (Shanghai Municipality 2018a, 29, 65; Shanghai Year Book Committee 2016). Thus, the Master Plan aimed to build satellite towns to relocate the population (Shanghai Municipality 2018a). Although many of these satellite towns borrowed heavily from designs in world class cities, such as 'Thames Valley' London, they remain unattractive to the public for lack of infrastructures that speak to local needs:

Irrespective of urban infrastructure or social welfare provision, these areas [new towns] have a huge gap to close in comparison with Shanghai's central area... This will be a big problem in the next ten years. (Interviewee 6)

In addition to putting up with under-developed services in schools, hospitals, and as most employments are still concentrated in the city center, residents relocated to these new towns are likely to face prolonged daily commute to work. By nudging populations with less economic means to move further out of the central districts, the Master Plan has expanded and enhanced a geographic segmentation of social inequality (Liu et al. 2019).

A more powerful administrative instrument Shanghai used in its urban planning is the *hukou* (house registration) system. *Hukou* is different from a residence or work permit. In fact, less than 50% of those currently living and working in Shanghai have a Shanghai *hukou*. Rather, *hukou* functions as an official recognition of municipal responsibility. Upon granting a city's *hukou*, one is recognized as a citizen of that city and thus has full access to its welfare provisions, such as pension, children's schooling, health insurance and housing subsidies (Song 2014). In other words, without a Shanghai *hukou*, one can work and contribute to its growth for an entire working life without being able to draw on its various social support mechanisms, or being considered as a 'Shanghainese'. Acquiring a Shanghai *hukou* has always been notoriously difficult. 'There is huge pressure to accommodate newcomers' explained Interviewee 6, 'so from a planning perspective, many non-Shanghai residents will have to live in satellite towns where social services are not comparable to the city proper'. In contrast to this stringent control over domestic inflow of migrants, Shanghai endeavors to attract more foreign talent; in the words of Interviewee 3, 'Shanghai is not really open to newcomers; it keeps them out and only takes in whoever it needs.' Part of this comes from the pressure of boosting Shanghai's global index ranking on cultural competitiveness, for Shanghai is still substantially behind New York, Los Angeles and London in terms of its foreign population (SIIS Research Team on City Diplomacy 2015, 31-5). Through this highly purposeful selection of whom to be 'admitted in' and whom to be 'kept out', Shanghai is also redefining what constitute 'Shanghainese'. Instead being an identity that embraces values such as diversity, empathy, solidarity and collaboration, progressive urbanization has closed down 'Shanghainese' into a badge for the economic and knowledge elites.

As Shanghai attempts to sustain a world-class excellence through geographically distancing those less accomplished and through administrative 'walling off' its prosperity to the non-selected, it has turned the intended inclusivity upside-down, and into what we call an 'enclosure sustainability'. We

use this term not only to describe the ‘enclaves’ of space, resources, networks, and opportunities, but also an enclosure of social mentality of what a sustainable urban space is and whom it is for. Our fieldwork suggested that Hukou, along with its multiple implications on housing, education and access to other social welfare remained the most prominent factor in skewing Shanghai’s Master Plan into ‘enclosure sustainability’. But as China began to ‘experiment with metrics and quantification of the value and virtue of its citizens’ (Wong and Dobson 2019, 220) through its newly established social credit system powered by facial recognition and big data, the question remains whether or not these national surveillance measures will result in new forms of urban exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Shanghai is but one of many cities in the world that is wrestling with sustainability ambition turned sour (Lombardi et al. 2011; Prudham 2009). Studies in North America and in Europe have repeatedly demonstrated how sustainable programmes have been hijacked by business and political interests and been reduced to a short-term ‘sustainability fix’ (Long 2016; While et al. 2004) and how ‘genuine’ inclusivity is difficult to achieve (Angotti 2008; Lombardi et al. 2011).

But Shanghai’s experience sheds light on particularities that many subaltern societies are struggling with. Sustainable development symbolizes an opportunity to implement long-term strategies that will put these emerging cities economically and politically on a par with their counterparts in developed countries. Consequently, in addition to *recognizing* local needs, authorities are often tasked with *being recognized*. Societies in the developing world are more vulnerable to the ‘global’ imaginary in the sense that global recognition functions as a legitimization device and as a containment for the deliberation and delivery of action plans. To be sure, it is widely recognized that there are multiple pathways to sustainability and even what constitutes ‘sustainability’ remains a contested

topic (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans 2003). Delivering sustainability is ‘necessarily a political process’, which requires an ‘opening up’ of debate to include diverse perspectives, ‘whereby assessments become necessarily positioned and partial, constructed in relation to the social-economic-political subjectivities of the analyst’ (Stirling, Scones and Leach 2010, 64). But global late-comers to urban sustainability may be confronted with an additional challenge for such reflexive. For entering the global arena of sustainable development, their subaltern positions ironically make it difficult for them to ‘see’ their local needs (e.g. bicycle lanes), to attach values to their local particularities (e.g. what constitutes ‘Shanghainese’). For Shanghai, a more empirical rather than ‘index’ based agenda setting (as data section 1 indicates), an open-ended public dialogue (as data section 2 indicates) and a step away from the ‘enclosure’ view of sustainability as an elitist luxury (as data section 3 indicates) may help to steer the Master Plan back to its original intentions.

It is not difficult to pinpoint ‘what’ went wrong in Shanghai’s just sustainability plans. But it is perplexing ‘why’ well-informed and well-intended experts and authorities were prone to repeat such mistakes. As China’s showcase metropolis, Shanghai enjoys much more financial and human resource than many emerging cities. But it is precisely Shanghai’s inability to resist being dominated by Western indexes, *despite* its (economic) privileges, that makes it most revealing on how the primary subaltern position of cities like Shanghai in the developing world constrains their perceived options in their catching-up in a *global* field of urban sustainability. It is too early to ‘conclude’ where the Master Plan will eventually lead Shanghai, but its experience to date may be an informative if not a warning tale to many other late-comers to urban sustainability in their search for a good life.



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