Planning for degrowth in big Chinese cities

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Abstract

Discourses on sustainability have led to the development of two distinct ideal societal paradigms: ecological modernization and ecosocialism. Urban planning is on one hand defined by the features of a certain paradigm and on the other hand a vehicle inspiring changes towards that paradigm. China's recent shift in development path as a response to social and environmental issues has a strong salience of ecological modernization. This is evident from the newly enacted national territory development plan. However, the emphasis on promoting competitiveness in wealthy city regions along the eastern coast line and extending economic growth to inland China is argued to be environmentally and socially unsustainable in a long run. For a long-term sustainability, economic non-growth/degrowth is necessary in the affluent cities, while growth opportunities should be channeled to poor regions. This requires a degrowth planning agenda in China and changes in planning rationality and spatial logics over the country. Such an alternative development path can be seen as in line with the ecosocialism paradigm. China's present economic-political conditions and traditional philosophies provide potentials and advantages for such a transition.

Keywords: China, ecological modernization, ecosocialism, urban planning, degrowth

1. Introduction

The emergence of global environmental problems and discourses on sustainability have led to the development of various ideological responses in relation to the societal paradigm and development path. Despite variations, two distinctive camps can be identified: ecological modernization and ecosocialism. The former one pursues green growth within the capitalist society, while the latter advocates overthrowing capitalism and argues for an ecologically friendly socialism. The two strands of societal paradigms for sustainable development confront fundamentally with each other in that they disagree on the possibility of obtaining sustainability within the capitalist mode of production. It is not difficult to imagine an interactive relation between socio-economic-political conditions and urban planning. In particular, a societal paradigm exerts great influences on planning ideologies, and planning practices are able to play a significant role in achieving some of the objectives of that societal ideology.

China has since the late 1970s attempted to build up a socialist market economy. After 30 years of unprecedented economic growth and urbanization, despite rising

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average affluence level, China is now in the predicament of resource scarcity, a wide range of environmental pollution, and social inequality. The fruits of growth have not been distributed equally across the country, but been concentrated in some cities especially along the eastern coastline where average affluence level is much higher than that in the inland and western China. In this context, it is therefore interesting to investigate the contemporary dominant discourse on the development path as an approach to those ecological and social problems and how planning is related to it. A lately enacted national territory development plan represents such a shift in development path.

The paper aims to discuss the potentials of this development path and its planning ideologies in relation to the aspiration for environmental and social sustainability in China, and proposes an alternative planning pathway informed by Chinese ancient philosophy and modern socialist traditions. This alternative points out that the prospect for sustainable development rests on a transition to ecosocialism, for which China has advantages and potentials. This implies economic non-growth/degrowth in affluent and big Chinese cities. With its focus on degrowth and urban planning in a Chinese context, the paper aims to enrich the sustainability discourse and to stimulate research that can link the degrowth paradigm with the urban planning profession. The line of the argument is organized as follows.

The paper starts with a discussion about the varied roles and values of planning in two ideal societal paradigms in the light of concerns over environmental and social sustainability. This part will be limited to a theoretical level. Then, the paper will offer a brief overview of Chinese national developmental strategies since the economic reform, with particular attention given to the recent plan for change in the development path in order to deal with sustainability issues. This will be followed by an analysis of the opportunities and limitations of this planned development path in terms of achieving sustainability. Economic non-growth/degrowth in big Chinese cities is argued to be a precondition for both local and global environmental sustainability. Finally, an alternative planning pathway corresponding to the degrowth paradigm and ecosocialism in the Chinese context will be explored.

2. Urban planning under different societal paradigms

If planning is seen as a vehicle to proactively realize a certain societal paradigm, the role, values, and rationality of urban planning must fit the objectives and characteristics of that paradigm. In the other way around, a certain political economy of a society defines the necessity of urban planning and its features, and a changing socio-economic paradigm corresponds to a changing planning paradigm. The discussion will limit itself to two types of socio-economic-political paradigms, i.e. ecological modernization and ecosocialism. The increasing environmental concerns give rise to the concept of ecological modernization which requires transformations within capitalist society. Ecosocialism is an ideology incorporating a strong sustainability vision and advocating the dismantling of capitalism for this vision. As illustrated in Figure 1, the elements and structures of each paradigmatic society delineates the planning ideology (role, values, rationality), which in turn determines planning strategies, policies, system, contents, procedures, etc. at a more concrete

level. These concrete aspects of planning are also associated with specific contextual conditions at a given time and place. The discussion in this section is limited to a theoretical and abstract level without taking into account concrete contexts. Therefore, the focus is on planning ideology. This will be linked to the next section in an attempt to develop a degrowth planning agenda for big Chinese cities with an emphasis on the third level of the diagram.

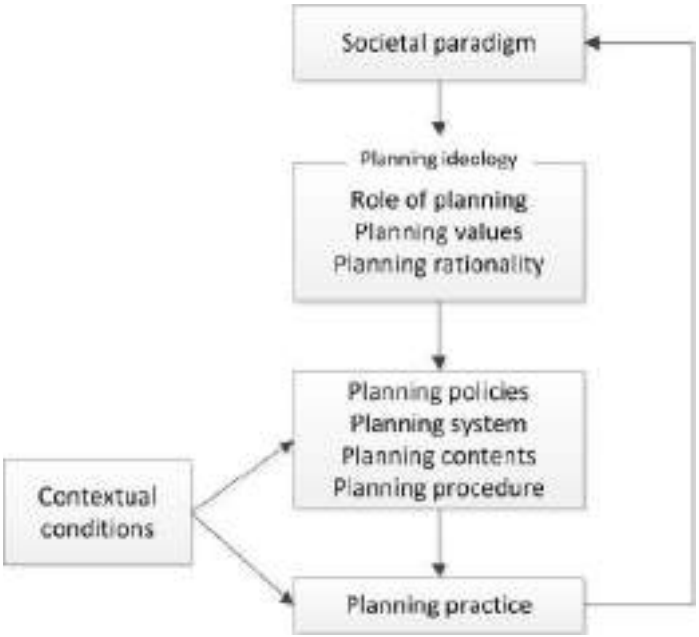

Figure 1. How societal paradigm defines planning paradigm

2.1 Ecological modernization

Ecological modernization theory portrays a paradigm reconciling economic, environmental and social sustainability within the capitalist organization of production and consumption. The adherents of ecological modernization believe that 'there is no principle or theoretical argument making a 'modern' organization of production and consumption and its technology antithetical to sustainability' (Spaargaren, 2000). Reconciliation between economic growth and environmental sustainability mainly relies on the use of market dynamics to resolve environmental problems. The features of an ecological modernization society can be depicted as follows:

1. It is necessary to institutionalize ecologically rational actions into the central social institutions of modernity (such as the economic sphere, the political sphere, the cultural sphere, etc.), i.e. the phrase of 'ecologizing of economy'.
2. Modern science and technology are central institutions for the environmentally induced rationalization of production and consumption (Fisher & Freudenburg, 2001; Jänicke, 2008). Environmentally friendly technologies are the solutions to environmental problems.

3. The innovation and diffusion of eco-efficiency technologies should be carried on by economic agents through market forces, while the state takes the role of 'enabler', providing incentives, standards, and regulations.
4. Ecologizing of economy through market mechanisms requires economizing environmental goods by placing economic values on the environment, characterized as 'economizing of ecology'.
5. The above points suggest cooperation between business, government and social movements in the decision-making process.

The modernization of the existing institutions of society toward environmental sustainability will also influence the practices of urban planning. Constrained by this social and political context, the purpose of planning is to facilitate market processes in order to stimulate economic growth and meanwhile mitigate negative environmental consequences of the market-led economic activities. As an area of public policy which conveys the state's will, the role of planners is to set rules and incentives in relation to land use for capital accumulation in both economically and environmentally efficient ways. It thus draws on a role of growth management. In addition, a cooperative relationship between business, government and social movements implies that planners will have to play the mediator role to balance the interests of various stakeholders in project-led development. Because of the market-oriented planning characterizing the ecological modernization paradigm, planning tends to be issue-based, sectoralized and fragmented, and lacks integration and long-term strategic perspective (Davoudi, 2010). As Blower (2000) put it: 'planning has a necessary but limited role which does not challenge the market/state relationship which is the defining principle of political and ecological modernization'.

The primacy of market mechanisms within ecological modernization theory suggests utilitarianism in urban planning, which pursues maximizing individual pleasure rather than collective well-being. With utilitarianism's emphasis on the summation of individual self-interests, planning based on such philosophical thinking may tend to ignore the distributive aspects of burdens and benefits. Since market mechanisms usually benefit the already better off considerably more than the worst off, planning is likely to contribute to unequal distribution between social groups. In neo-liberal market economy, individual pleasure is usually measured by monetary values. As such, cost-benefit analysis becomes the most popular method to evaluate the goodness of consequences and the basis for decision-making in, e.g. infrastructure planning (Campbell & Marshall, 1999). Nature in this case is economized, seen as a capital stock useful for human beings. This instrumentalism with respect to nature ignores the inherent value of nature.

The typical planning strategy under ecological modernization takes the name of 'smart growth' or 'compact city'. This strategy is considered to be able to both enhance a city's diversity, economic viability which fulfills the vision of growth and counters urban sprawl (Qiu, 2006; Bunce, 2007). However, ecological modernization's emphasis on technologies to secure environmental sustainability encounters limits in the case of the smart growth (Xue, 2012). While it is possible to economize on land use and adopt a densification strategy for a short term, undeveloped land will have to be taken up when the opportunities for densification

are exhausted. Planning under the ecological modernization paradigm is weak in coping with long-term environmental sustainability. Furthermore, as argued by Davoudi (2010), ecological modernization's belief in a technology-based approach to environmental policy is likely to lead to a technocratic and elitist planning process.

2.2 Ecosocialism

Ecosocialism also attempts to build up an ecologically benign society. In contrast to ecological modernization theory, ecosocialism is an ideological and theoretical field associated with Marxism and thus fundamentally challenges capitalist productivism. As ecosocialists believe that ecodestruction is inherent to capitalism due to its relentless capital accumulation which drags nature wantonly regardless of ecosystem's inherent regulation, an ecologically viable alternative – socialism - should replace the capitalist mode of production, its institutions and worldview, if ecological breakdown and even the demise of our species is to be avoided (Kovel, 2008). Socialism undoes the separation of the producers from the means of production, the absence of which is argued to be the essential condition for the ecodestructive dynamics of capitalism. By attaining a freely associated labor and thus ending the alienation form nature, people will have a strong ecological consciousness. Key characteristics of an ecosocialist society are:

1. Fundamentally, ecosocialism requires the public ownership of means of production. This change in property relations will liberate labor from being a commodity for sale on the market. Released from the chains of capital, humans would become freed from the false addictive needs of consumerism (Kovel, 2008).
2. In relation to the first point, the overcoming of separation of producers from means of production leads to the predominance of use values over exchange values which is for profit-making and maximizing surplus in capitalism. Production is to satisfy social needs rather than driven by profit motives.
3. The realization of use values implies that nature is not treated as a commodity. Instead, the intrinsic value of nature is respected. All elements including human beings are integral parts of the ecosystem.
4. As a society embedded with ecological values, ecosocialism acknowledges ecological limits to growth and insists that production should stay within these limits. Therefore, human needs ought to be altered towards authentic needs and sustainability. This will lead to a new ecosocialism civilization beyond capitalist consumerism (Löwy, 2007).
5. Technological development in ecosocialism does not aim to accelerate capital accumulation and pursue exchange value, but is directed to the enhancement of use value and restructuring of needs.
6. Democracy is emphasized at all levels of production and decision-making in order to rule out hierarchical and exploitative relations of labor and avoid totalitarianism.

Within an ecosocialist society, planning will play a more significant role than that in the ecological modernization society, because communal ownership of means of production and discarding market mechanism make planning a public decision in

relation to the goals of development, production, investment, and allocation of resources. As a result, planning becomes a central institution of ecosocialism, in stark contrast to its role as serving the purpose of market in the ecological modernization paradigm. To realize the goal of ecosocialism which is 'a new society based on ecological rationality, democratic control, social equity, and the predominance of use value over exchange value' (Löwy, 2007), planning must place great emphasis on *social purposes* and *ecological sustainability*. Thus, under ecosocialism, focus on economic growth as well as competitiveness as overarching goals would soon be in violation with the primary concerns for social and ecological sustainability. As other public policy areas in ecosocialist society, planning is liberated from the imperatives of capital and profit-making. In the transition to ecosocialism, planning should in some cases counter and supplant market mechanisms in terms of converting the growth-oriented role of planning at the strategic level and containing the amount of land allocated for industries, houses, highways, airports, etc. at the spatial level.

For concerns of ecological integrity, urban planning would need to replace anthropocentric thinking with ecocentrism ethics showing human obligations for non-human nature. This requires planning to show fundamental concern and respect to the inherent values of non-human life and to preserve the richness and diversity of life forms. It also means abandoning the dominant economic rationality as a determinant of decision-making in the planning process (such as cost-benefit analysis in transport planning) which tends to value things according to their instrumental use for humans in a monetary form. The dominance of ecological rationality necessitates a long-term strategic and holistic horizon in planning, as environmental issues have transboundary and transgenerational effects and refer to many sectors and population groups.

The issue of 'limits to growth' is addressed by transformation of needs from a quantitative to a qualitative dimension (Kovel & Löwy, 2002). The implication of this is that planning should aim to combine 'selective degrowth' and 'selective improvement'. The former could include degrowth in the size of the population, urban sprawl, high-speed transport infrastructure, consumption of cars, per capita consumption of dwellings and other material items, export and import, etc. However, the selective degrowth should arguably accompany selective improvement of social services and welfare for the deprived within the city, including affordable housing, medical care, education opportunities and mass transit.

This last point is also associated with the social purposes of urban planning, which concerns social equity and distributive justice. An ecosocialist society does not mean there are no conflicts, e.g. between different population groups in relation to social needs or environmental protection. As a society aiming at no domination and exploitation at all levels, it will be partly the task of planning to solve the conflicts through land use for different activities and purposes based on the principle of social justice. Since the potential for devastating conflicts over distribution of resources is much higher when human activities are to be kept within the ecological limits, the interests of the marginalized and vulnerable population should be fully represented by urban planners, who would to some extent need to work as advocates. In addition, social justice should also be promoted in a deontological approach, which, for

planning, suggests participant diversity, democratic discussion and transparency in the planning process. The role of planners, according to Löwy (2007), will be to present their expert views rather than make decisions. The promotion of democratic process is to avoid top-down and authoritarian decision-making.

3. A recent shift in China's development path: from trickle-down strategy to balanced development

China's development strategy since the economic reform in 1978 can be characterized as a 'trickle-down' policy, which encourages a proportion of population and regions to become rich in the first place and then let other regions catch up later on. With preferential treatment for the eastern coastal areas, most of the country's limited resources and growth-stimulating measures are devoted to a few selected cities (Yao & Zhang, 2001). During the late 1970s, the entire 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, five cities were selected as special economic zones, and 14 cities were designated as coastal cities of open economy, the majority of which are located along the eastern coast line.[2] They are cities open to international investment with preferential development policies. Some of these cities have gradually grown into metropolitan areas and evolved into national or regional growth centers making a vast contribution to the growth of the national economy. However, an overall repercussion of this strategy has been imbalanced development across the country in terms of income, material living standards and social welfare (Kanbur & Zhang, 2005). After 30 years of reform with formidable growth rates, the trickle-down policy is not as effective as what has been expected by the Chinese government. The beneficiaries are those living in mega-cities where wealth is concentrated and polarized, accompanying on average higher per capita consumption levels and a widening gap with populations in impoverished regions.

This period is characterized as a period giving priority to economic growth as its ultimate development goal. Since growth-oriented policies of promoting housing market, attracting foreign investment and constructing large infrastructures are closely related to land use and urban development, physical planning has taken on a local pro-growth role by providing land and proposing large infrastructure projects. Planning decisions are justified based on economic efficiency and technical feasibility (Yeh & Fu, 1999). As a result of decentralization of decision-making to localities, deregulation of market and local government's priority on urban growth, urban planning has difficulties in intervening and controlling development but always has to change to meet the policies of governments on different levels (*ibid.*). In environmental terms, the aftermath has been loss of valuable land resources due to rampant economic development zones and building construction boom, and local environmental degradation.

Environmental problems have to some extent been addressed in the process of economic growth. In the recent couple of years, the inequality issue has become a

[2] The five special economic zones are: Shenzheng, Zhuhai, Shantou, Xiamen, and Hainan (province). The 14 coastal cities of open economy are: Dalian, Qinhuangdao, Tianjin, Yantai, Qingdao, Lianyungang, Nantong, Shanghai, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Zhanjiang, and Beihai.

political concern. At the national level, a new development strategy addressing balanced and harmonized development substitutes the single-minded pursuit of high economic growth rates in certain regions. Evident from the twelfth five-year plan for economic and social development (2011-2015), as well as several recent government policy documents, China's state government has been trying to limit the speed of economic growth and set more comprehensive goals focusing on changing the economic structure, building an equitable society, and reducing environmental impacts. Such a shift stems from the rising inequality which threatens political and social stability and from a realization of environmental limits to growth. This shift is clearly illustrated in the authoritative and legally binding national territory development plan issued in 2011, the first of its kind in China's modern history (National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2011).

This national plan sets out the idea of pursuing efficient, balanced and sustainable regional development upon the basis of designation of four types of development priority zones on the country scale. Within this frame, the spatial economic, population and land development strategies are made for each zone. The four types of priority development zones, their key functions and development strategies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of priority development zones, functions and development strategies

	Cover areas	Functions	Development principles
Development zone to be optimized	Three city regions along the coastal line, which are economically well developed[a]	• Key regions of lifting the country's international competitiveness • Locomotive of national social and economic development • Regions of national innovation • Influential regions capable of participating in global division of labor • Economic and population concentration area	• Upgrade economic structure and develop green economy • Optimize spatial structure, contain urban sprawl and industrial areas • Contain population scale • Optimize infrastructure distribution • Optimize ecological pattern
Key development zone	Cities in middle and western part of China with potentials of developing economy and concentrating population	• National economic growth center • Pivot enhancing balanced regional development • Economic and population concentration area	• Enlarge city scale • Speed up population concentration • Develop modern industries • Improve infrastructure • Protect environment
Limited development zone	Main production areas of agricultural products, and	• Provide agricultural products • Important areas	• Limit extensive and intensive industrialization and

	key ecological function areas	guaranteeing national ecological safety	urbanization
Prohibited development zone	Representative ecological systems, areas of endangered species and valuable natural and cultural heritage	• Key protection areas of national natural and cultural resources • Gene pool of endangered species	• Prohibit extensive and intensive industrialization and urbanization

a The three city regions are: Bohai Economic Rim (economic hinterland surrounding Beijing and Tianjin), Yangzi River Delta region, and Pearl River Delta region.

The areas designated as the zone to be optimized are in line with the definition of big and rich cities in this article. For these city regions, even though economic growth is not explicitly stressed, the pursuit of enhanced competiveness and sociotechnical innovation clearly indicates the influence of globalization and a neo-liberal climate on the selection of development strategy. The assumption behind this strategy is that growth will automatically continue, therefore government interference will change its role from growth stimulation to growth management addressing the quality of growth. For the key development zone, policy concentration on growth stimulation continues to be the first priority, allowing for urban spatial and population growth and subordinating the social and environmental concerns. As stated in the plan, the overall purpose of a balanced regional development is to *extend* economic growth from the east to west and from south to north, in order to form an economically polycentric and network spatial structure. It can be seen from the above that the state attempts to shift its development path from a single-minded pursuit of economic growth to the ecological modernization model. It clearly stated in the plan that 'the building-up of the development zone to be optimized and key development role relies on the market mechanisms, while the government will channel the means of production to concentrate in those areas through making plans and policies' (National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2011).

Emphasis on GDP is superseded by *competitiveness* as an overarching goal for the wealthy regions. According to the plan, to realize the goals in the development zone to be optimized, concrete urban planning strategies include containing urban sprawl, industrial areas and scattered development of economic development zones, enlarging space for service sectors, transport, residences and public infrastructures, promoting compact city development, specifying the functional specialization of cities surrounding the central city in order to advance economic connection and regional competitiveness, controlling inner-city population scale of mega-cities and increasing the capability of peripheral cities in attracting inhabitants, protecting farmland, other types of undeveloped land areas and green open land between cities. However, the question is raised: are the ecological modernization policies capable of obtaining an ecologically and socially sustainable society across the whole country?

4. The necessity of economic non-growth/degrowth in big cities

Recently, a report based on an evaluation of Chinese cities' sustainability index positively concludes that 'some of Chinese cities (rich ones) have been able to *couple* economic growth with gains in sustainability' (Urban China Initiative, 2012). Through an investigation of 112 cities, the report reveals a positive correlation between income and environmental sustainability score, in line with the environmental Kuznets curve hypothesis (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, some caveats need to be addressed. Given the environmental indicators chosen in the report which takes the form of environmental impacts per unit of GDP, an increase of the environmental sustainable score merely means an increase of eco-efficiency, hardly suggesting a decline in aggregate environmental impacts, i.e. absolute decoupling. Thus, a higher environment sustainability score can only indicate that environmental impacts do not increase as fast as economic growth, which is *relative* decoupling. Economic growth in the already rich cities is still at the cost of environmental quality and resources, however with lower environmental costs than before due to efficiency improvement. This general conclusion is supported by an in-depth study on the housing sector in Hangzhou. Residential energy consumption in Hangzhou in the past 20 years has increased but at a slower rate than GDP growth in that building energy efficiency has been increased considerably (Xue, 2012).

One point worth attention in the report is that the correlation between eco-efficiency and economic growth is not as strong in high-income cities as in low-income cities. It indicates that growth in wealth in already rich cities may no longer predict further gains in sustainability (Urban China Initiative, 2012). This can be attributed to the fact that the room for eco-efficiency to improve is decreasing when it is high at the outset. Therefore, continual growth in rich cities or regions cannot be obtained without further degrading the natural environment. The idea that continual growth in those big cities would not undermine the future growth in the impoverished regions is hardly plausible, especially if the national-scale environmental load is to be kept within acceptable limits. To achieve the goal of poverty elimination, environmental protection and satisfaction of long-term needs requires economic *degrowth* in the rich regions. Priority for growth should be channeled to poor regions in inland China and low-income population groups. Giving priority to the worst off regions would be an appropriate response to the fact that resources are limited.

Development in the rich regions has already exceeded the capacity of their bioregion. Such a realization constitutes one of the reasons for avoiding further population immigration and location of resource-intensive industries in those cities as pointed out in the national territory development plan. No doubt, the national territory development plan represents a departure from the previous strong commitment to economic growth in the decades since the 1980s. But it is no more than a strategy framed by the growth paradigm, seeking a combination of competitiveness and social and environmental sustainability. Altogether, this shift in national development strategy does not indicate an escape from the growth paradigm. I am sympathetic to the idea of transferring factors of production to the lagging behind regions and the designation of key development zone as well as its development strategies to

eradicate poverty. However, a strategy oriented towards promoting competiveness of the rich city regions actually aims to convert the growth sectors from being the second industries to the service sectors, a substitution which is usually claimed to be less environmentally harmful. However, the environmental consequences of the service sectors are argued to be not as low as expected (Næss & Høyer, 2009).

In addition to the above argument for economic degrowth in big cities, as far as the local environment of the big cities per se are concerned, degrowth is also relevant. Big cities in China usually suffer from overcrowding, high population density, traffic congestion, noise, water and air pollution, lack of open space, slums and social segregation more than the medium- and small-sized cities (Chan & Yao, 1999). These environmental and social problems have been in part attributed to the agglomeration effects of these city regions, which attract continuous in-migration of floating population and concentration of economic activities, which exceeds the local ecological carrying capacity. Local environmental quality has been moving along a downward curve, adversely affecting citizen's health and eroding the significant economic gains (*ibid.*). To alleviate these pressures on big cities, coordinated development strategies which pursue economic degrowth in the wealthy regions and fuel the growth potential in the middle and western China are needed.

5. Planning pathway to degrowth in the Chinese context

The current climate of the Chinese government's public policy is dominated by the discourse of ecological modernization and its interpretation of the planner's role, which is evident from the national territory development plan. The approaches to the environmental and social problems in the urban context as identified in the ecological modernization paradigm have a very limited potential for obtaining sustainability in a long run. Furthermore, taking a global perspective, the limited natural resources may not support a global affluence level where China is on a par with the present wealthy countries, since technological improvements cannot develop fast enough (Xue et al., 2012). The gaps in affluence level across the country require differentiated regional development strategies. As agued, economic non-growth/degrowth in the affluent regions is necessary for long-term environmental sustainability, while for social equity growth opportunities should be given to the poor regions.

A departure from the growth paradigm to degrowth requires reframing planning rationality and spatial logics. Coordinated and synergetic regional planning which aims at weakening the status of big cities and providing development opportunities for other regions are required. For those wealthy cities and regions, the traditional role of planning in attracting capital and industries under the domination of economic rationality should be shifted to containing growth and promoting social development. Planning should pursue a just and environmentally friendly city rather than focusing on competitiveness.

Degrowth in big cities in the Chinese context refers to decline in the size of population and per capita material consumption level which can include car ownership, dwellings, high-speed transport infrastructure and other material

commodities. Current policies trying to curb population influx into big cities are regarded as socially unsustainable because local authorities of big cities tend to employ the household registration system to protect the interests of the locals at the cost of the interests of the immigrants. Greater emphasis should be given to social injustice between population groups at the city level in terms of unequal education and medical services, and housing affordability. What matters in the degrowth paradigm is not local GDP which has been a single-minded pursuit of Chinese cities in the past three decades, but development with the concern over environmental sustainability and social equity inside and outside the big cities.

On the other hand, planning strategies should aim to upgrade peripheral cities and rural regions to stimulate growth in a socially sustainable manner, as growth will really make a difference in those regions. Note that planning efforts should also be made to decouple the environmental impacts from such growth as much as possible. This requires certain planning solutions in place to obtain high eco-efficiency in land use and energy consumption.

The requirements for revision in planning for degrowth is distinct from current planning practices in big cities that are still endeavoring in competition with other cities in local economic growth. A body of literature has supported Marx' (1858) conclusion that a capitalist market economy is subject to a growth imperative (Gordon & Rosenthal, 2003; Fotopoulos, 2010; Harvey, 2010). The market-oriented economic reforms in the late 1970s have given the neo-liberal thinking a dominant position in China over the last three decades. As such, it is difficult to accept a degrowth paradigm both at the ideological and practical levels. Nevertheless, China's economic system is different from its Western counterpart's capitalist market economy. Some socialist features can still be identified, like public ownership of land resources and the state-owned enterprises. This implies that compared to traditional capitalist societies, China can to a larger extent choose to grow or not. As claimed by ecosocialists, a socialist society does not exist for profit-making and environmental degradation is not inherent to such a society. China as a country claiming to be a socialist country has more potentials and advantages to transit towards ecosocialism (Pan, 2006). The proposed alternative development path for economic non-growth/degrowth fits well with the themes of the ecosocialist paradigm. Moreover, the principles of ecosocialism are compatible with traditional Chinese philosophy (Pan, 2006; Xue et al., 2012). The degrowth planning agenda can be seen as a vehicle inspiring the transformations to ecosocialism.

6. Conclusion

The paper has discussed the limitations of urban planning defined by the development path shaped by the ecological modernization paradigm as a response to ecological deterioration and social inequality in China. Instead, ecosocialism, which is in accordance with China's socialist features and traditional philosophy, provides an alternative development path for long-term sustainability. This entails urban planning to discard a neoclassical/capitalist economic rationality and takes on the role of promoting social justice, articulating the intrinsic value of nature and restructuring human needs. The practical implication is planning for differentiated

and coordinated regional development across the country, with a degrowth planning agenda in the wealthy city regions. Planning should assume the responsibility to facilitate the transition toward an ecosocialist society.

As argued by Kovel (2008), ecosocialism should be universal in order to be successful. This means that if sustainability is to be achieved on a global scale, apart from China, the advanced industrial societies may also need an ecosocialist revolution. Their higher affluence and consumption levels make this transition more urgent than in the developing countries.

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