Realizing the Beckian Vision: Cosmopolitan cosmopolitanism and low-carbon China as political education
In memoriam Ulrich Beck

David Tyfield
Lancaster Environment Centre and I-RICE, Guangzhou

Abstract
'Methodological cosmopolitanism' connotes a profound transformation of the (social) sciences as forms of public reflexive social analysis on learning to live well together through building homes in the world: what may be called the 'Beckian vision', in memory of Ulrich Beck. This short note considers how Beck's concept of emancipatory catastrophism may not be the most productive development of his own programme. This is precisely brought out by a methodologically cosmopolitan analysis of a key East Asian response to the global risk of climate change: innovation of low-carbon cities in China. Instead, these presumptively archetypically cosmopolitan initiatives offer something of a political education regarding the irreducibly strategic power/knowledge dynamics at work – including in ongoing contestation about the very term 'cosmopolitan'.

Ulrich Beck's untimely death has deprived the world of the instigator of a crucial path for the social sciences. 'Methodological cosmopolitanism' is a mouthful, yet it connotes a much more profound transformation than a mere change in tools of evidence-gathering. On my reading, methodological cosmopolitanism (Beck and Grande, 2010) may be summarized as re-orienting the (social) sciences such that they become (again) forms of public reflexive social analysis that actively contribute to the urgent global challenge of *learning to live well together* through building *homes in the world*. This we may call the 'Beckian Vision'. It may be parsed into three elements:

1) The common development of a conceptual ground regarding the very terminology of 'global', 'cosmopolitan', 'global concern' etc… that is *itself* global, cosmopolitan etc…, i.e. a cosmopolitan cosmopolitanism;
2) Achieving this primarily by way sociologically informed and empirical analysis of irreducibly cosmopolitized case studies from across the world, not just in the 'global North' (in order to deflate, if not escape, the intrinsic Euro-centrism of Western social theory (Beck & Grande, 2010)); and
3) Greater deliberate cosmopolitized and cosmopolitan engagement regarding the process of developing 1) and 2), hence in the process developing stronger cosmopolitan connections, amongst both researchers and research subjects and stakeholders.

Given this grand and inspiring vision, and many more personal reasons regarding his generosity, acuity and enthusiasm, working with Ulrich over the past 5 years was an unforgettable privilege; and as such also a responsibility for future work, including

continuation of work begun in the ERC project CosmoClimate.[1] Here, diverse responses to climate change in East Asia and Europe were the starting point for such a programme. This choice in part reflected broader geopolitical and socio-technological changes apparently afoot, regarding a shift in the 'centre of gravity' of global socio-economic (and maybe even cultural and technological) dynamism to the Asia Pacific region. China, of course, is at the heart of this transition.

In this brief piece I want to argue that Beck's (2013, 2015) (final) concept of emancipatory catastrophism may not be the most productive development of his own programme (see also Han 2015), and that this is precisely brought out by a methodologically cosmopolitan analysis, made possible through collaboration with Ulrich, of a key East Asian response to the global risk of climate change: innovation of low-carbon cities in China.[2] Introduced as a critique of climate catastrophism as sociologically unmediated and uncosmopolitized, emancipatory catastrophism develops the argument for both the urgency and possibility of the emergence of cosmopolitan communities of climate risk (Beck et al., 2013). Here, it is the very conjunction of the *globality* and anticipation-of-*catastrophe* of 'global risks', archetypically climate change, that may precipitate the emergence and construction of such a common global normativity. By contrast, engagement with Chinese low-carbon innovation as a (cosmopolitized) political education *about* and *contributing to* (real-time) construction of cosmopolitan cosmopolitanism suggests a more promising approach to realization of the Beckian vision while presuming (and dependent on) no such 'emancipatory' moment.

Chinese low-carbon cities are a key site for investigation of cosmopolitized emergence of cosmopolitanism in response to global risks. China has been host to a large number of high-profile and explicitly cosmopolitized eco-city projects (Zhuang, 2015). More generally, as 'eco'-cities, they are explicitly framed as being orientated, in novel ways, to issues of global ecological sustainability. As 'innovation' they are a key site of the techno-natural-social transformation that underpins so many of the challenges of second modernity; while 'innovation' is also a fetishized buzzword demanding critical deconstruction by a cosmopolitized social theory. And as 'urban' they achieve particular significance with the 21st century emergence of humanity as a predominately urban species; with cities as key sites of ecological footprint, innovation and cosmopolitization; and with cities as thus the key sites of what 'living together' will actually be like in the 21st century. Finally, in China we find how each of these, and other major issues besides, attains global superlatives, including as the site of the largest and fastest (ongoing) urbanization in history that will greatly shape the global environmental impact of 21st century humanity.

Yet there are two other key, but potentially contradictory, reasons for engagement with Chinese eco-city projects for a project of cosmopolitized cosmopolitan studies. On the one hand, in China today two discourses of a new putatively-global ethic of cosmopolitan global concern are emerging that, prima facie, provide rich conceptual and practical ground with which a European-based project of methodological cosmopolitanism can engage. These are the growing deployment of Confucian discourse by the Chinese government of Xi Jinping (Brown, 2014; 2015), framed by the grand slogan of 'ecological civilization' (JRCTSCC, 2012; Brahic, 2014); and a more bottom-up and academic initiative to engage with Confucianism and traditional Chinese thought (Zhuang, 2015; Han and Park, 2014). In both cases, but particularly the more theoretically-substantial latter, these projects build upon what

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[1] ERC grant 'Methodological Cosmopolitanism: In the Laboratory of Climate Change' (ERC-2012-AdG-323719_Cosmo-Climate)

[2] Unfortunately, the early end of the ERC project meant this research was also brought to a premature close.

seems to be the significant promise of Confucian thought for the 'cosmopolitan emergency'. For in key concepts such as *tianxia, tianrenheyi* and *tianxiaweigong*, for instance, Confucianism provides a secular cosmology that not only proffers and prioritizes the harmonious relations amongst humanity, Earth and Heavens – hence amongst ourselves, with the planet and with what may arguably be construed as irreducible human ignorance and uncertainty – but also explicitly has a concept of 'world' itself, as a totality and a legitimate and necessary perspective (Han and Park, 2014).

In both cases, reconstruction of these traditional conceptual resources aims to render them fit for the challenges of the 21st century. And it also aims to reconstruct a crucial connection within Chinese society to these concepts as meaningful and lived, in order to 'ecologize' China itself. The latter aspect is particularly important given the traumatic severance from this tradition, particularly in the Cultural Revolution but also more recently through the compressed (Chang, 2010) blast of capitalist consumerism and individualization (Yan, 2010) that has transformed China since 1978. By engaging, critically and productively, with both these official and bottom-up discourses, therefore, methodological cosmopolitan studies may seem to proceed in reflexively coherent cosmopolitan fashion: working with both emerging discourses of a presumptive and non-Western 'superpower' in the age of the cosmopolitan emergency, *and* with its non-Western peers in the active embrace of developing a non-Eurocentric discourse and terminology of 'global' concern.

Yet on the other hand, a methodological cosmopolitan analysis of eco-city projects, themselves increasingly accompanied by and described and lauded in (neo-)Confucian terms, reveals quite a different challenge. Here, instead of direct connection to emerging abstract discourses of Confucian cosmopolitanism we find a massive divergence between the discourses and realities of these projects. First, as mentioned already, we find a domain of major state-backed top-down joint projects with Western engineering and architect businesses that are accompanied by discourses of vaunting ambition; supposedly building exemplars of a new ecological age in which a largely unchanged model of global consumerist and high-technology capitalism and ecological sustainability will be seamlessly balanced. Moreover, this is also often explicitly Confucian in framing, 'living in harmony with nature' (Zhuang, 2015). However, we also find (with the possible exception of the Sino-Singaporean Eco-city project in Tianjin) a catalogue of utter failure (Zhuang, 2015), with most of the projects – to the extent building is even begun – lying abandoned, empty and fenced off; what we may call ruins of the future. Conversely, to the extent the cities are constructed, they are so *not* as pioneering experiments in ecologically sustainable urbanization but rather as luxury dwellings, regardless of the intentions of the original eco-city master plan. In this context, any 'greenery' takes the form of superficial presentation, making the area slightly more 'liveable' (and hence market attractive) and, indeed, 'Western' in feel rather than a fundamental transformation in the ecological metabolism of living.

Moreover, while a cosmopolitan and/or Confucian approach would counsel intense involvement of those who would (and possibly do already) live on the site, the top-down state-consultancy set-up of these ventures makes no such efforts, with 'local people normally separate from this process of conception' (Zhuang, 2015: 143). Indeed, while some of the eco-cities may imagine city plans that maximize both cosmopolitan conviviality and human interaction (*Cf* Salat, 2015) and ecological sustainability through housing density, in many cases the prior preference amongst Chinese builders and government for a modernist gigantism prevails. The result is expensive 'ghost cities' that minimize human interaction, even amongst the few people who do move there. Finally, and of no less significance, is the

unbroken continuation (and even growth) of Chinese governmental use of Confucian discourse of harmony with nature and the world, even regarding aspirations for future eco-urbanization.

In short, then, what is not much in evidence is meaningful growth in concern regarding global risks, nor a gradual shift to an urban form that maximizes the common and shared creativity – perhaps to forge their *own* solutions – of cosmopolitan spaces of 'living together well' and of 'homes in the world', as an emancipatory catastrophism would presage.

A methodologically cosmopolitan analysis here would explore how both the propagation and growth of these discourses *and* the continual failure of their realization emerges from the conjunction of a particular set of (cosmopolitized) power relations and power-knowledge technologies. This includes a CCP committed to maintaining its monopoly of legitimate control alongside deepening global economic liberalization *and/by way of* the techno-nationalist project (Zhao 2010) of restoring China to its 'rightful' place at the centre of global geopolitics, technology and culture; the fragmented authoritarianism of this regime (Lieberthal 1992), which produces local governments dependent on continual land sales and development for fiscal revenues and the cycles of localized but big-money corruption this has engendered (Chen, 2013); Chinese citizens, pre-eminently as intensely status-competitive consumers (Anagnost 2006; Yu, 2015), seeking financial security through real estate investments, particularly those promising high-end and 'Western' standards of living; and global (largely western-domiciled) engineering consultancies, with proprietary control of the most advanced technologies and business processes, seeking new markets as Chinese urbanization continues at extraordinary pace while Western cities present substantial infrastructural legacies and are heavily affected by continuing economic malaise.

Evidently, this brief characterization cannot do justice to the complexity and diversity of the actual actors, subjectivities and power/knowledge technologies involved across the landscape of Chinese eco-cities. The purpose of this analysis, however, is to highlight the cosmopolitized dominant power relations currently shaping – and being shaped by – projects of low-carbon innovation in China, such as eco-cities. For this, in turn, brings out important lessons for a methodological cosmopolitan interest in construction of 'real-existing' cosmopolitanism. In particular, what the Chinese eco-city examples clearly show is that 'cosmopolitanism' is *really not* an *a priori* goal to which diverse cultural agents around the world are reaching, more or less successfully; but rather that 'cosmopolitanism' itself is simply a new, and undoubtedly strategically pivotal, arena for ongoing strategic and power/knowledge construction – and, as always, to the advantage of a particular 'some' and the disadvantage of particular 'others'.

It is in this way that we may understand – but also imagine productive intervention in – the extraordinary conjunction of continual and unstoppable political evocation of explicitly 'cosmopolitan', but also explicitly *Chinese*-as-(superficially)-Confucian, global concern with its persistent 'failure' in practice. For only when seen as a major *political* project of strategic power/knowledge of global (and certainly regional and national) hegemony – and with arguably realistic chances of success – does it become intelligible that the official Chinese commitment to 'ecological civilization' and a neo-Confucianism is *both* utterly genuine *and* largely untroubled by persistent 'failure', including vis-à-vis Confucian abstract categories (*Cf* Zhuang, 2015). Indeed, in this respect, Chinese thought and government was arguably ever thus (Campbell, 2015): Confucianism is a pragmatic knowledge of state- and self-

government (usually paired in practice with an authoritarian Legalism), not an ethics, and Confucius was a sage not a philosopher.[3]

Chinese low-carbon innovation, in short, studied explicitly with a view to developing methodological cosmopolitanism, is an object lesson in the predominance of *realrationalität* over *rationalität* (Flyvbjerg, 1998), including in *the very formation of a cosmopolitan cosmopolitanism*. But it is thus also a cosmopolitized *political education* – illuminated by work in China by a European scholar – for work committed to constructive engagement in actually building cosmopolitanism. In particular, it points towards the need for methodologically cosmopolitan work to be *phronetic* (Flyvbjerg et al., 2013): a form of strategic practical wisdom seeking primarily to illuminate the given, dynamic, changing (but also *per se* irreducible) power-relational landscape of a specific domain of cosmopolitized socio-technical change so as to assist active participation of diverse parties, and not just given dominant agencies, in the construction of emerging futures. 'Real-existing' cosmopolitanism may thus emerge as a product – not an *a priori* starting point, as in emancipatory catastrophism – of a programme of explicitly cosmopolitized phronetic engagement with major projects, around the world and not just in East Asia (or the global North), of world-producing socio-technical and cultural change. And, of course, this would also thereby instantiate the revitalization – in form, substance, process, personnel, institutions and extra-academic relevance – of social (and socio-natural) research.

This cosmopolitized phronesis approach also provides warnings and reframings regarding engagement with contemporary abstract discourses of Confucian cosmopolitanism in China, for both its official and its unofficial variants; the potentially contradictory 'other' arm, above. First, working with official Chinese discourses of Confucian cosmopolitanism and ecological civilization *as if they are philosophical discourses* is likely to prove quickly to be disappointing, frustrating and maybe even highly counter-productive from the perspective of formulating a cosmopolitan cosmopolitanism. For the more substantive and thus, almost inevitably, critical in various ways such engagement is, the more it is likely to be framed as the malevolent meddling of 'external forces'. Conversely, to the extent it *does* succeed, it will likely have contributed – unwittingly but precisely *as such*, unaware of the different, intensely political game it is actually playing – to the propagation of global hegemony of a specific and constitutively un-cosmopolitan project of Chinese civilizational nationalism under authoritarian CCP leadership.

Conversely, regarding bottom-up formulation of Confucianism, it becomes an imperative for a programme of methodological cosmopolitanism actively to engage with leading Chinese (and Sino-sphere) scholars who are involved in a project of reformulating a Chinese (neo-Confucian) cosmopolitanism. Yet, this project too has much to learn from this political education. For it is when framed as a specifically pragmatic and strategic project of the innovation of power/knowledge technologies – albeit highly abstract, philosophical ones, including the concept 'global' – that this work not only has the greatest chances of fulfilling its goal of revitalizing human thought and ingenuity in the face of global-risk-society; but also Western-based scholars and social theorists (like this one), who have grown up with the common-sense juridico-discursive distinctions between knowledge and power, have the greatest chances of coming to shared understanding of the much more pragmatic paradigms of both their Chinese research objects and collaborators.

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[3] This is not necessarily to praise the essential pragmatism of Chinese thought. As Xu (2012) argues, for instance, the over-pragmatic interpretation of Marxism in China through the Mao period, and even to today, is a key aspect of the agonizing turbulence of this period of Chinese history.

While going straight out in search of evidence for or against emancipatory catastrophism thus promises disappointment, jeopardising realization of the Beckian vision amidst the cosmopolitan emergency, therefore, this indirect, power/knowledge focused and phronetic approach to methodological cosmopolitanism may yet work meaningfully towards it. There would be no more fitting and urgent legacy to the work of the original cosmopolitan cosmopolitan, Ulrich Beck.

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