

THE WORD "ECO-CITY" first took off with a book written in 1987 by Richard Register, a green thinker based in California. Now what may become the world's first city with the word in its name is beginning to take shape in the unlikely setting of a smog-shrouded expanse of salty mud on the northern Chinese coast. Around a lake that not so long ago was a sewage farm, energy-efficient apartment blocks are going up. Electric buses ply the still largely empty streets. Public litter bins are equipped with solar lighting so that residents can find them more easily at night. China's urban growth is warming up the planet, and the elaborately named Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City is being touted as a cool solution.

Few other countries could dream of building a large city from scratch, let alone an eco one, but China has the advantage of an autocratic approach to urban planning (and to governance in general). It can decree that a piece of land will become a green city, commandeer it and sell it cheaply to developers. That is how the eco-project began in 2007 when Singapore proposed a co-operative green-city venture. China's leaders agreed, having recently awoken to the environmental horrors wrought by breakneck urban expansion. Later that year the party formally declared that its goal was to build an "ecological civilisation". The 30 square kilometres of inhospitable terrain near the northern port city of Tianjin became a test bed.

China has tried a couple of eco-city projects before and failed. About 60km (40 miles) farther along the coast to the east of Tianjin, in Caofeidian, work began in 2009 on an eco-city aiming for 500,000 residents by 2020. Yet most of the site remains a wilderness, too remote to attract developers. In Shanghai, plans a decade ago for a similar-sized eco-city on an alluvial island became entangled in local corruption and never got off the ground. But Tianjin's, with strong backing from central and local governments, is making progress.

To give it a flying start, officials designated it as China's first industrial park devoted to the animation industry. The \$690m state-funded zone opened in 2011 and has attracted hundreds of businesses. To lure in more residents, the government built a Victorian-style school in brown brick with lavish facilities, including a room full of stuffed animals to help children learn about nature ("all real, except the tiger and the panda," says a proud teacher). A 350-bed hospital, supposedly one of the best in China, is due to be completed next year, at a cost of \$110m.

Public resentment of China's deteriorating environment, particularly the noxious haze over its cities, is growing

At a control centre a dozen officials watch a giant screen displaying readings from heating and water systems, as well as feeds from closed-circuit cameras at traffic intersections. "If an emergency happens, we can respond," says an official surveying the images of lifeless streets. Officials are not deterred by the "ghost city" label. The city opened two years ago and now has 10,000 residents. By 2030 it aims to have 350,000. Work is due to begin this year on subway lines that will make it easier for locals to get to Tianjin, currently about an hour's drive away, and nearby industrial zones.

The government has a powerful incentive to support the project. Within China, public resentment of its deteriorating environment, particularly the noxious haze over its cities, is growing, and abroad the country is being criticised for its contribution to global warming. In 2006 China became the world's biggest emitter of carbon from energy, overtaking America; it is now spewing out nearly double America's level (see chart 5). The spread of Chinese smog across the region is worrying neighbours such as South Korea and Japan.

The price of progress

5

Carbon-dioxide emissions, tonnes bn

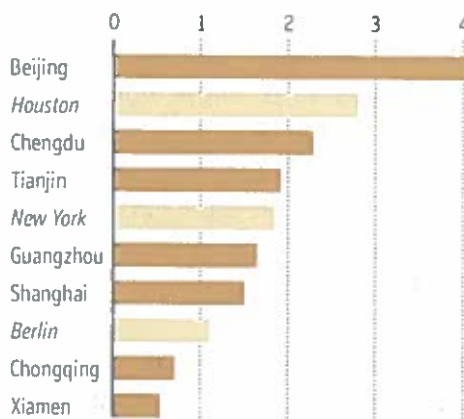


Source: EDGAR

Many people, many cars

6

Private passenger cars, selected cities, 2012, m



Source: China SignPost

Ho Tong Yen, the Singaporean CEO of the eco-city's development company (and a director of Mr Register's Californian consultancy, Ecocity Builders), says he believes many of the eco-city's methods will eventually become "a key part of urbanisation in China". A decade ago, he recalls, Chinese officials he met at conferences would boast about their cities' GDP growth. Now they brag about how green their cities are.

A work in progress

This sounds like a bit of a stretch. China's urban landscapes appear to be the antithesis of green: smog, foul-smelling streams and canals, roads jammed with exhaust-belching cars, shoddy buildings erected with little heed to building codes. But growing public discontent with the urban environment is beginning to change at least the rhetoric of officials, and in some cities their actions as well. In recent years about a third of China's 600-plus municipalities have announced plans to turn themselves into eco-cities. The central government has imposed stricter controls on emissions of carbon and smog-forming pollutants. In March the prime minister, Li Keqiang, declared "war" on pollution. Smog, he said, was nature's "red-light warning against the model of inefficient and blind development". It was a remarkable admission of urbanisation gone wrong.

Since there is no agreed definition of an eco-city, local governments interpret the term to suit themselves. They often use it as an excuse for prettification, or worse, for seizing yet more land from farmers and using it to build luxury housing, with golf courses next to them (because grass is "green"). Even the eco-city in Tianjin, a drought-prone area, has a golf course, supposedly irrigated with recycled water. Mr Register himself is not altogether bowled over by the project. In 2012 he wrote that its layout, with the wide streets and long blocks typical of modern Chinese cities, looked "every bit as if created to encourage driving". Its plan for 20% of its energy to come from renewable sources does not sound much bolder than the nationwide target of 15% by 2020, against 9% now.

And for all its claims to greenery, the eco-city lacks a vital ingredient: a thriving civil society that is free not only to protest about the environment but to put pressure on the government to live up to its promises. The party talks green and sometimes even acts tough, but all the while it has been scheming to prevent the growth of an environmental movement. It does not want residents to set their own agenda for the way cities are run.