ANALYSIS

Investigating the Landscape of Sino-German Cooperation in the Field of Urbanization and Cities – Identifying Key Trends and Blind Spots to add Value

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THE MACRO CLIMATE

Growing Consensus: Time for a New Approach to Urban Development

As the **New Urban Agenda**[1] was just adopted at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito, Ecuador, with an emphasis on **people, community and liveability**, there is a growing consensus that it is time for a new approach to urban development.

Over the past three decades, **China** has experienced a **wave of urbanization on an unprecedented scale and speed**. The proportion of the population living in urban areas rose from less than 20 percent in 1980 to some 55 percent in 2014[2], and is expected to reach 60 percent by 2020. This has brought with it a host of challenges, which have primarily been addressed through technical solutions. These have included a broad range of international cooperation projects – mainly based on the model of one-way technology transfer, with little engagement with the local culture and community – in the fields of green, ecological, sustainable, low-carbon, smart cities. More recently, there has also been an official commitment to integrated, inclusive and '**people-centred**' **urbanization** (as part of China's National New-type Urbanisation Plan which pledges to increase China's urban population to boost domestic demand and growth, by giving more rural migrants permanent urban residency rights, while following a 'human-centered and environmentally friendly path'[3]), though the emphasis seems to be largely on infrastructure and the provision of housing. Germany, with its environmental expertise and long-standing presence in China, has been one of the major **contributors** to this know-how exchange and capacity-building.

In Germany and Europe, meanwhile, governments – and cities – are themselves facing **new challenges**, notably in coping with **migration** and refugees. This has revealed a lack of flexibility and innovation of institutions and government administrations, while, at the same time, the power of civil society actors who have filled these gaps has become all the more apparent[4]. Another challenge for Germany is the acute shortage of housing in cities, leading to a big debate about affordable accomodation.

Some of these challenges are unique to Europe, but China also faces the pressure of migration – from rural to urban areas, while the high price of real estate in major cities has also become a major headache for many Chinese citizens, even as some smaller and inland urban areas struggle with unsold housing stock built in the boom years before 2012, leading to the widely reported phenomenon of 'ghost towns' or neighbourhoods.

And while urban planning in the two countries takes place within a very different framework (particularly in the field of e.g. land ownership, which in China is dominated by the state), the recent developments in Europe have also changed the paradigm of cooperation: while European nations (and the EU itself) on the one hand see themselves exercising a global responsibility, they also increasingly need to demonstrate concern – and effective results – regarding domestic problems. Thus, it can be argued that international cooperation with China needs to be a two-way win-win process. It is this program's belief that there is a potential for learning from both sides, as opposed to the one-way knowledge transfer that has been so far the norm.

THE TOPOGRAPHY

From Building Houses to Building Communities and Belonging in Cities

What are the current **trends** and where are the **missing links** for cities, as they seek to move towards liveable city models? Firstly, we believe that '**culture**' is a fundamental building block (sometimes referred to as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development[5]). This is not a new idea: It was promoted at the World Summit on Sustainability Development (2002) and the UNESCO United Cities and Local Governments conference (2010), in existing frameworks and models in China. This is reflected in the fact that both Shanghai and Shenzhen have been given the title 'City of Design'[6] as part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (since 2008), and by the 'Hangzhou Declaration of Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies' (2014).[7] In practice however, its importance is still often underrated, and it remains underused, with its role sometimes misunderstood as being limited to 'cultural (industry) sector clusters'. In fact, **culture in all its dimensions – from cultural heritage and identity, cultural entrepreneurship to creativity and vitality – is a common thread** that runs through the economic, social and environmental fields of the urban fabric. A sustainable city depends on a sustainable culture.

Another missing link is '**social innovation**'. This not only implies looking at challenges from a societal development point of view (rather than from e.g. a technological or economic development perspective), it also relates to processes of interacting to bring forth new ideas: '**The new does not come from technological artifacts, but is emerging through new social practices, including new ways of governing, organizing, communicating, consuming, partnering and relating, negotiating etc.**'[8] Thus, worldwide, and also in China, social innovation is increasingly seen as providing new ways of solving complex problems, by involving a wide range of stakeholders in rethinking these issues and co-designing solutions using collaborative methods of communication.

Addressing these missing links is particularly significant, at a time when urbanization models are being questioned after creating a huge tension between progress and conservation, economic growth and community/social stability. There is now a growing awareness that building people-centred and liveable cities is **not just about building houses, but about** '**building belonging**' **in cities**. Yet, while a **few urban pioneers** have begun to speak out about such problems, their concerns have yet to get through to many mayors and local government officials, for whom GDP output per square metre often remains the major parameter of success. It is this program's belief that greater grassroots involvement, and more emphasis on local culture, can play a part in changing this.

THE PATHWAYS

Merging Official Cooperation Frameworks and People-to-People Relations

With a history of 45 years, Sino-German relations have an **outstanding foundation**, with a **dense framework for action** already existing **on all levels**. This ranges from the unique high-level annual intergovernmental-consultations – co-chaired by China's premier and Germany's chancellor, and in which all ministers participate – to more than 40 bilateral agreements and dialogue mechanisms (some dating back to the late 1970s), coordinated by various ministries and related agencies or city associations on both sides. These include **some 10 programs** related **specifically to the topic of sustainable cities, future cities**, eco cities, and low-carbon cities – notably the '**Sino-German Urbanization Partnership**', launched in 2015. The framework also includes city-to-city partnerships – there were 105 such bilateral relationships as of 2016, ranging from formalized full partnerships to project partnerships – as well as some 400 inter-university cooperation arrangements, including about 15 alone in the field of architecture and urbanism, with six even running double degree programs.

Some of these exchanges have been more fruitful than others. In the field of policy framework setting, for example, German cases have inspired China's legal and policy system in areas including renewable energy and transportation. Others have, for various reasons, been less successful. But what is certain is the existence of a good capital of trust, and strong long-term relationship foundations, a fertile ground in which to plant seeds.

The question is, how can we make use of this capital to 'cultivate' this ground, and harvest more impact in terms of our key goal of liveable cities? Areas where this potential could be leveraged to fill gaps include:

1. United Nations: New Urban Agenda. 2016. URL: https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/. 07.11.2016.
2. World Bank, population data: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=CN
3. Xinhua News: China unveils landmark urbanization plan: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-03/16/c_133190495.htm /16.11.2016.
4. 2014. Migration Policy Institute. URL: www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Mainstreaming-Germany-FINALWEB.pdf. 07.11.2016, p. 5.
5. http://www.agenda21culture.net/index.php/docman/-1-393-zzculture4pillarsden/file
6. http://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/shenzhen
7. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/images/FinalHangzhouDeclaration20130517.pdf
8. Definition based on Howaldt/Schwarz 2010. http://www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/de/Soziale_Innovation/index.html

→ **More cross-fertilization** among sector dialogues. It is widely acknowledged that city making needs interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial platforms.

→ More emphasis on the issue of sustainable or liveable cities in **sister-city relationships**.

→ More systematic integration of **sister-city relations into the state-level bilateral programs**, something currently only in its fledgling stages.

→ Dialogues have been mainly top-down. We propose **far more 'vertical' cooperation**, with integration of bottom-up exchanges, and official dialogues combined with people-to-people dialogues.

In particular, dialogues should be opened up to new cooperation partners, including actors from the **private and third sectors**. → **The Actors**, below The latter, in the form of civil organizations, has been active in the field of urban issues in China, and is increasingly networking with its counterparts from abroad.

Furthermore, the most dynamic platforms for cooperation are increasingly **not the traditional 'exchange bridges'** set up by governments, but **new spaces such as co-working spaces** and creative hubs in big cities in both China and Germany, which allow foreign and Chinese innovators to work together. Such 'pathways' may encourage more profound inter-linkages than con-

ventional 'exchanges', and it may be worth considering integrating such spaces as tools into official dialogue platforms.

In this context, it should be noted that concerns have been raised that China's **new law on the activities of overseas NGOs**, which takes effect in January 2017, will make it harder for foreign non-governmental organizations to register offices in China or to find local partners. Yet while some particularly sensitive areas are likely to feel the impact, some Chinese experts argue that the new law actually formally enshrines the principle of cooperation with foreign NGOs in other sectors and, though it requires foreign groups to register with state security, it will also reduce some administrative restrictions on the activities of such organizations.

Similarly, **the participation of citizens in the city making process** in German is being increasingly enabled by digitalization, and such trends hint at the potential for similar new spaces in China. While government control of the internet in China is tighter, Chinese local authorities do in theory seek public comments on a limited number of urban issues via social media and other online channels, and many young people see the **internet as the best platform for expressing their views.**

THE ACTORS – A new Generation of Entrepreneurs and Change Makers

It is important to note that in China, social engagement does not necessarily take place through non-governmental organizations in the European sense. As mentioned above, China's formal NGO sector is subject to more legal constraints. But if we **take a wider perspective**, there are an increasing number of grassroots, bottom-up actors involved in individual initiatives that are helping to change China's cities.

New actors range from start-ups to social entrepreneurs, from creatives to volunteers. The **rapid growth of industry** in China over the past two decades, along with the rise of a young, technologically literate generation keen to encourage innovation in the country – has led to the rise of the grassroots creative: **the bottom-up maker**. Creative spaces are helping to encourage young people to set up their own enterprises, a significant number of which focus on urban-related issues, from city bike apps to environmental technology. In a nation where direct political involvement by the public is limi-

ted, it is often **these entrepreneurs and technological and social innovators** who are helping to create a **new social fabric** and responding to the challenges of modern living.

Inspirational leaders from this generation seek to test new models of city making, as well as creating new spaces for community building. They are **neither mainstream yet, nor are they explicitly against the mainstream,** but they are seeking fresh approaches, which may affect the status quo.

In Germany, meanwhile, bottom-up makers in the form of social entrepreneurs have played an important role, particularly over the past two years, as an agile and active civil society has reacted quickly and innovatively to the challenges of migration and integration, following an **influx of refugees** that has threatened **to overwhelm many traditional German institutions**. Yet it has also been argued that Germany's highly-deve-

loped **social welfare system** and the resulting expectations of government provision, complemented **by a refined non-profit sector**, have separated the flourishing German start-up scene from societal impact, and

left it within the boundaries of the for-profit sector[9]. As a result, the German social innovation ecosystem lacks larger sources of investment for new approaches, especially in terms of scalability for social entrepreneurs[10].

THE SOIL – A Desire for Change and a Search for Values

So what is the 'soil' – the values and cultural fabric of the land – in which future liveable city making can grow? In our CITYMAKERS Dialogues, one frequently raised topic was the **search for meaning** and purpose to life that characterizes many young people in China today, the urban middle class – some 225 million people[11] – in particular. This is seen as a response to the dramatic changes in Chinese society over recent decades, which have produced **a disconnect from tradition, rising social inequality, and a sense of an overemphasis on economic values**, which some see as leading to a crisis of social values and cultural identity.

Such issues, along with the environmental problems resulting from rapid modernization and urbanization, as well as concerns about food safety and the education system, have led some wealthier citizens simply to seek to leave China, or at least to move their families abroad. But others are eager to find solutions to such problems, implying a willingness to embrace a different approach to urbanization. A cleaner urban environment, safer roads, and food safety are high on their list of priorities, **while some are concerned about a loss of culture, heritage and the distinctive characteristics of individual cities.**

Another value which some feel has been lost in contemporary China is **trust**. Even a recent study by the official Chinese Academy of Social Sciences[12] suggests that mistrust is common in Chinese society, both between citizens, and between citizens and authorities.

There are increasing echoes of such concerns in Europe, too. Some urban residents are increasingly disenchanted with city life, and tempted by the idea of returning to the land and a simpler, more traditional existence. And while **many citizens continue to embrace diversity and remain optimistic** and socially engaged, others **appear overwhelmed by the growing complexity of society** – and the world – as migration increases and the common future of Europe looks less certain than for many decades. This sense of a loss of security, has played into the rise of nationalism and populist politics in Germany and other European nations – described in a recent survey by Ad Hoc International as 'Xeurophobia[13].' This highlights the need for building inclusive communities that are guided by concepts of collaboration from co-living to co-creation. Only community-building enables fragmented societies to promote inclusion and hinder alienation among citizens.

THE FIELDS – New Areas for Cultivation: 'The Future of Living', 'Urban Agriculture' and 'Heritage Sensitive City Making'

Cities are complex systems and city making is **thus a broad arena**. The CITYMAKERS program has identified three key areas for further attention, all of them relevant to the topic of liveable city making:

The Future of Housing and Living: Promoting community integration and generational interaction, as well as openness and global values, was identified as a key goal by both Chinese and German participants in the CITYMAKERS Meet-Up. Chinese participants highlighted the difficulty of integrating migrant workers into cities, along with the problems caused by expensive housing, leading to urban segregation and social division. Much new housing also suffers from poor

construction quality, not always ideally located for other needs. Proposals included creating **Sino-German Urban Pioneers**, local city-based think tanks, to discuss such issues, and to research issues such as purchasing land to build housing cooperatives, along with **a starter kit on 'community-focused living space.'**

Urban Agriculture: Long popular in Germany, urban gardening and farming has been a difficult undertaking in Chinese cities, with most land swallowed up for development. Yet in a traditionally agricultural society, where many recent rural-urban migrants have experience of growing their own crops, more and more Chi-

9. Ryland, Naomi: Social Business in Germany. A closer look at Germany's social business landscape and the key actors shaping it. 01.07.2015. URL: http://thechanger.org/resources/social-business-germany. 07.11.2016.
10. McGath, Thomas: Alternative economy: the rise of social innovation in Berlin. 30.03.2015. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-busi
11. http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21701760-communist-party-tied-its-fortunes-mass-affluence-may-now-threaten-its-survival-225m

nese social entrepreneurs are starting to pioneer in this field – from NGOs establishing farmer's markets, to 'we-gardening' community initiatives. Such initiatives contribute to sustainability, promote food safety, and provide opportunities for unemployed or marginalized young people. Promoting knowledge by linking grassroots participants from both countries, training volunteers to educate interested citizens, and **setting up garden spaces and demonstration gardens in twin cities could all encourage this growing trend**, and help advocate for policy change.

Cultural Memory, History, Heritage: As noted above, worries about the loss of heritage and distinctiveness in Chinese cities are a concern, while culture plays a key role in creating liveable cities. Previously, culture has not been a focus of urbanization-related cooperation between China and Germany. However, thinking about cities more culturally will add value and provide more holistic solutions. There are many areas of potential cooperation, from research on shared 'Sino-German cultural heritage' in China, to sharing examples of best practice based on Germany's growing emphasis on preserving cultural memory. Society organizations and grassroots

actors on both sides should be encouraged to contribute to the process of city making, including in dialogue with top-down administrators – a contextualized approach to grassroots involvement in China is vital.

Further topics not yet on the agenda within urbanization-related cooperation, which complement our approach of social entrepreneurship in city making, include: **Social impact investment** and financing (including the development of social impact assessment tools), and further legal and policy frameworks for social entrepreneurs (e.g. tax incentives). The role of water, and its links to power in China – where many areas of the country are affected by severe water-shortages, and **water** is often diverted to major cities to meet their needs – has also been proposed as a topic suitable for investigation through a fresh and interdisciplinary lens.

Integrated urban development and **urban governance**. – already on the agenda both domestically in China, and in the field of Sino-German cooperation – were highlighted as equally important during our CITY-MAKERS Dialogues.

TERRAIN – Leveraging the potential of City-to-City Cooperation

While many have argued in the past that international cooperation projects do not necessarily need city frameworks and official memoranda of understanding to be viable, **we believe that twin-city structures can be a great catalyst**, providing experiential spaces and a reference framework for innovation – particularly when it comes to city making cooperation, which requires top-down municipal-level and political commitment as much as bottom-up engagement. What could be better than a city-based platform as a starting point for prototyping projects for the future of city making?

Nevertheless, many questions remain: how to make use of these twin-city partnerships, bringing them to life whilst making them a platform for cities to learn from each other and together – to help bring the transformative change needed? The reality is that, currently, the majority of the more than 100 Sino-German city partnerships remain mostly on the level of exchanges (delegation visits, student exchange programs etc.) while few have so far **moved on to implementing substantial projects with tangible added value for both sides** [14].

The STRATEGY-Lab at the CITYMAKERS Meetup **identified various fields of action**, including the challenges of finding areas of joint interest, and matching needs as well as offerings between Chinese and German cities, particularly due to their different city size and scale of challenges. Partnerships also tend to be very sectorial focused, with one department in the city administration having the lead, and a relatively limited number of stakeholders actively involved. Institutionalizing partnerships in the long term can also be difficult, as officials change, and city representatives can find it hard to motivate and mobilize internal stakeholders. Goals are thus not always achieved, while complex issues such as sustainability or climate change can be too challenging for such a framework. Cities also often do not sufficiently involve citizens in activities related to the partnership.

However, we believe in the potential of these partnerships, and see new prospects for leveraging this. More engagement and communication by those involved in the partnerships – including a willingness to learn from each other, via 'active listening'– can enhance their

impact. Greater publicity and praise for the efforts of those involved in such partnerships, both within the partnership and among their colleagues and senior officials not directly involved, can **boost the value attached to these cooperation arrangements**, emphasizing the successes and value generated along the cooperation journey as much as the final project results. The newly set up Sino-German Urbanization Partnership, meanwhile, offers encouragement, since it aims to support city-to-city cooperation in the field of urbanization.

RESOURCES – Building Capacities for Co-Creation and Creative Approaches

The 'natural resources' of talents for city making in China need to be further exploited: Linked to the necessity for urban and social innovation, **new competencies** (e.g. **transversal thinking, creativity in leadership, immersive learning, facilitation techniques**) must be acquired. This requires newly designed curricula to prepare future leaders on all levels – from community leaders and social activists to municipal managers – to tackle the challenges of city making with creativity and with an open mindset. **With regard to the resources and capacity for Sino-German cooperation** building, new formats of cooperation can underline recognition of the potential for more learning **with** each other, rather than simply from one another, and the importance of co-creating as a means of learning. Such an approach would provide a vision for potentially more impactful and deeper exchanges between Germany and China → **Learning Journey**, p. 26

Process support and accompanying will also be needed, both to support the design of projects in their initial stages, accompanying them through mentoring and monitoring, and finally leading to the scale-up phase of good practice sharing, capacity building and further funding acquisition. Successful city cooperations seek to explore internal resources and align interests with their city's stakeholders before engaging in a Sino-German collaboration. → **Intra City Creative Labs**, p. 27

To promote the development of liveable city making, we also propose several specific, practical 'landscaping tools', including support mechanisms and activities that serve the following:

→ **Incentivising** best practice via **an Award for Liveable City Making**
→ **Creating Deeper Understanding** via activities including: CITYMAKERS Compass, CITYMAKERS Fellows (Focus Group Support), CITYMAKERS Summerschool and Learning Journeys
→ **Developing & Accompanying**: Project Support Labs and Mentoring
→ **Incubating & Scaling**: CITYMAKERS Start-up Hubs and a Feasibility Study for Setting up Fund)

Furthermore, we propose designing new practically-oriented **learning offers**, beyond traditional university and vocational education, to help grow young entrepreneurs and ventures. Chinese and German cities have seen a rapid proliferation of start-up incubators. Developing such supporting tools in the context of Sino-German cooperation would offer a strategic advantage, benefiting from Germany's strong sustainability know-how and with unique experience of heritage-sensitive city making, in combination with China's flair for business model innovation. → **Incubator for Start-Ups,** p. 27

CONCLUSIONS

→ Based on our observation of the Sino-German city and urbanisation cooperation landscape, we conclude at this stage: Though still a niche group, there is a **critical mass of dedicated city makers** with Sino-German connections and experience individuals and professionals who are focused on the common good and want to make a change towards liveable cities.
→ Despite the challenge of significant differences (in terms of system, politics, perceptions, protectionism, laws etc.) there are **spaces for transformative bottom-up action in both countries** and an excellent fertile ground of Sino-German relationship capital and frameworks.
→ The key to '**cultivating' this ground** is to establish a supportive and enabling environment, in which the skills and commitment of actors on both the official and grassroots level can be fully harnessed, to bear new fruit in the field of **liveable city making**.

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12. 王俊秀 and 杨宜音 (2013): 中国社会心态研究报告. 中国社会科学院.
13. https://nefia.org/sites/default/files/adhoc_15_EN_total_issue_NEU.pdf
14. See e.g. study by Engagement Global (currently in the making) and also projects presented at http://www.stadtmacher4986.com/content/language1/html/53265.asp

The above is an analysed based on first observations within the projects time frame. Site investigation to be continued.
For comments and feedback please contact: kh@constellations-international.com

SINO-GERMAN
CITYMAKERS & THINKERS

How to add value to the sino-german cooperation on urbanization?

international understanding

Eye Level

SINO-GERMAN URBANIZATION PARTNERSHIP

Eco-City
低炭生活
Low Carbon

multi sensory approach

Street level lens
人和社会

Focus on
4# tier Cities
3# tier 三,四线

Connecting civil society with government dialogue

political Dialogue
政治对话

Energy Efficiency

GAPS blindspots

Alternative incentive system

city size

AFTER

BEFORE

INDEX FOR happiness in the city

cities & More

Technological Cooperation

rural areas
乡下

Public Private Partnership

Citymakers livability index

playfullness

Heritage Preservation
遗产保护

City to City partnership

BER Gießen HAMBURG Duisburg
上海 满洲

Social Jino-vation

Public Space Participation

Creative and Culture Industries II Interdisciplinarity

Sister City Makers

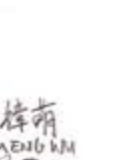Citymakers Incubator

BOTTOM UP activities exchange
市区 交流

Learning Programme

Interdisciplinary Summer school
暑期学校

Kiez-Tandem

Benjamin Fellows

PROJECT IDEAS

Think Tank

Leming from the street-level

le petit flaneur
Le flaneur

Meta sister city mapping

吴梓荫
Yim Eng hui

STUDIO WU