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[Book Review] Fantasy islands: Chinese dreams and ecological fears in an age of climate crisis by Julie Sze, 2015, University of California Press

## Journal Item

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**Julie Sze (2015) *Fantasy islands: Chinese dreams and ecological fears in an age of climate crisis*, Oakland CA, University of California Press. 235pp, ISBN 978-0-520-28448-7. US\$29.95.**

Sze's second book about ecological change is recommended for readers interested in the drawn-out narrative of the Dongtan eco-city; China's distinct approach to 'eco-desire', especially in relation to islands; or considering eco-towns as 'isolated islands' within the urban hinterlands. For eco-desire, Sze notes that many ecological developments are heavily influenced by ecological modernisation discourses. Sze carves out her story across five chapters in *Fantasy islands*, with Chapters 2 and 3 probably being most interesting and useful for island studies scholars. Chapter 1 ('Fear, loathing, eco-desire: Chinese pollution in a transnational world') attempts to frame China's eco-desire in relation to three factors: "technocratic faith in engineering, reliance on authoritarian political structures to facilitate environmental improvements, and discourse of 'ecological harmony' between man and nature." Sze goes on to demonstrate that the examples in the book (Dongtan, eco-cities near Shanghai, and most of urbanising China) abide by these key factors. The author highlights iconic images of development—such as the Bird's Nest stadium—as a category of eco-images which represent developed China as green and highly organised, rather than hazy, overcrowded, and polluted. To understand the draw of such ecological imagery, Sze asks us to consider the response to pollution in China, but also the response from the world to China, and the roles that intermingle to create various visions of eco-desire, many of these stemming from modern ecological discourses. Not surprisingly, many of these discourses both in the West and East are linked to notions of islands as idylls or utopias which can be reinforced and improved by the premise that an eco-engineered island system can somehow attain perfection as a sustainable eco-future. The raised awareness over pollution of all forms, climate change, and the associated anxieties which stem from much of this discourse propel the eco-fantasy forward into many trajectories. Chongming Island (and Dongtan) is wrapped up in one such trajectory.

In 'Changing Chongming' (Chapter 2) Sze traces the historical timeline of the Dongtan eco-city development. Dongtan was championed by the Shanghai Industrial Investment Corporation, along with the selected master planning and global engineering firm Arup. Obviously much has changed since the original announcements about the Dongtan development in 2005-07, including the construction of a connecting bridge and tunnel to the mainland (completed in 2010). Arup presented a bold vision for the eco-city, with a design that aimed to achieve low mobility levels, zero waste, closed loop heating/cooling, lowered pollution, and even attempted to ensure economic equity for all residents. Much of Arup's work focused on engineering the city in such a way that metrics drove the plan and vision for living in an ecological age. Whether this quest for an engineered ecosystem was ever truly feasible is not completely clear. The dream of Dongtan fell apart in 2009 due to alleged corruption; however, the case study offers much insight into the competing motivations for such a development. The author argues correctly that the top-down development perspective on Dongtan overlooks the general views of the population of Chongming (the *Chongmingren*), and that this oversight mimics the same skewed perspective that Shanghai has about Chongming seeing them as backwards, remote, underdeveloped, and a bit left behind. The clashing views of islanders and those in Shanghai, and perhaps even those of us who study the eco-cities phenomena, are all discussed in this balanced chapter.

A slightly shorter Chapter 3, 'Dreaming green: Engineering the eco-city', pulls the strands of Sze's study of Dongtan as eco-city together, detailing some of the reasons why the development of Dongtan as an eco-city would never work. In the author's view, the eco-development was never really about the people that lived there nor was it about the birds (the island is a designated site under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands). Instead, she argues, it

was mainly about real estate development, coupled with the plan of regional transformation for a greater Shanghai. The connectivity with the bridge/tunnel system supports this view. Sze goes on to state that, from a planning, political, and engineering design development perspective, the use of technocracy is always doomed to fail. The failure of Dongtan serves as an example for other Chinese initiatives. The lesson here for other development sites is that ecological modernisation processes cannot advance when top-down corporate structures rely solely on technocratic advances; any eco-city initiative must be cognisant of all stakeholders, especially those who hold power with respect to the locals. In this case, the islanders or *Chongmingren* were overlooked.

Chapter 4 ('It's a green world after all? Marketing nature and nation in suburban Shanghai') considers Chinese developments of various 'environmental' new towns as framed in a plan called 'One City, Nine Towns', which stemmed from the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005). Each of these towns deserves a book in their own right, and it would be difficult to cover all the aspects here, yet the main point seems to be that when selling real estate, anything perceived as 'green' has an edge in the market. Sze makes it clear that in many cases these are not green technologies in the environmental sense, but rather luxury and higher-quality residences surrounded by open spaces sometimes, resulting in much higher resource consumption.

The final chapter ('Imagining ecological urbanism at the World Expo') uses the Shanghai World Expo to explore issues around the key slogan 'Better City, Better Life', and to interrogate how ecological modernism is/was interpreted currently and at this event. She introduces useful concepts here of 'seeing like a state', credited to James Scott, as well as 'seeing like a city' (Warren Magnusson). From the perspective of nissological studies, it would have been helpful for the book to explore what it might be like to see like an island, and, more crucially, like an islander. Overall, Sze's short book offers island scholars detailed insight into the development failure that Dongtan has become known as, while explaining many of the reasons behind the misplaced motives originally outlined for the eco-city. The book is also an excellent introduction to the way that China frames urban growth in the face of growing global environmental discourse.

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