The multi-scalar politics of urban greening in Forest City, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Forest City is a new city project being built from scratch on four artificial islands off the coast of Malaysia by one of China's largest property developers. Designed to accommodate up to 700,000 people, Forest City is created by and for Chinese nationals as a gated, luxury enclave in Malaysia. While Forest City is built on top of Malaysia's largest seagrass field and destroys or damages coastal mangroves, the project is branded as a futuristic model green city, featuring dramatic green walls and lush gardens with intricate planting. The project is conceived as a superstructure, with the surface of the city dedicated to parks and gardens, recreational uses, and pedestrians and cyclists, while car traffic and parking is supposedly relegated underground. Building on recent critical scholarship on urban greening and colonial greening approaches, this article examines the power dynamics and multi-scalar politics of urban greening in a new foreign-built green city. Beyond simply reflecting a growing global enthusiasm for nature in cities, Forest City strategically promotes a particular narrative of urban greening as a way to preclude criticism while serving the project's economic and geopolitical goals.

1. Introduction

Forest City is an audacious new city project created by one of China's top property developers and the largest Chinese urban investment outside of China. Located in Malaysian territorial waters off the coast of the Malay Peninsula between Johor and Singapore, Forest City is a new 'city' being built from scratch on four artificial islands designed to accommodate 700,000 residents. The location of Forest City is controversial for two main reasons. First, it is located along the Strait of Melaka, one of the world's busiest shipping corridors, precisely at a chokepoint at which the strait is just 1.5 miles wide. The significance of the location suggests that rather than being purely a real estate development to cater to Chinese property investors, Forest City may have a geopolitical function in China's aim to expand its economic and political influence (Moser, 2018). Second, Forest City has attracted criticism as it is being built directly on top of the largest field of seagrass in Malaysia, which is rich in biodiversity and provides habitat for endangered species such as seahorses and dugong (Hossain et al., 2019; Rahman, 2017), ostensibly without having first conducted the legally required Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (Lee, 2015; Ourbis and Shaw, 2017).

Forest City is heavily marketed as a futuristic model eco-city that reinvents urban living. Promotional material communicates a variety of 'normative and instrumental benefits' of greening (Cooke, 2020, 138) focused on people rather than the environment, and claims that the multi-layered superstructure that covers most of the project maximizes trees and greenery, minimizes the use of personal cars to reduce pollution and the chance of accidents, and encourages walking and cycling as the main modes of transportation. Although a number of international awards have recognized Forest City's efforts at green building and infrastructure[1], awards that champion greening depoliticize the project and obscure its many troubling aspects (Cooke, 2020; Perkins et al., 2004). This article draws on recent scholarship that critically examines the politics of urban greening, a topic that has been greatly expanded in recent years and rigorously interrogated in a special issue of *Australian Geographer* edited by Cooke (2020). It also engages with scholarship on colonial-era greening to interrogate the power dynamics behind Forest City's greening strategy.

Critical scholarship on urban greening has concentrated primarily on North America, Europe, and Australia, with little published work that takes a critical perspective on contexts in the Global South, particularly Malaysia. Although a growing body of critical research examines the Chinese eco-city model (Caprotti, 2014; Chang, 2017; Chien, 2013; Pow, 2018; Ren, 2017), this article focuses on urban greening in a private eco-city project built by a private Chinese company in a foreign country,

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and the politics of this greening. We outline the eco-rhetoric of Forest City as an example of the green urban aesthetic that is circulating transnationally through Chinese property developers working overseas and interrogate the multi-scalar politics that underpin the project's strategic urban greening.

2. Eco-rhetoric of a 'model city of the future': echoes of colonial greening

There are significant parallels between the European colonial treatment of local plants and ecosystems and how Forest City selectively integrates the local coastal Malaysian context. Chinese property developers and investors in Malaysia are creating a series of gated, securitized enclaves engineered to minimize contact between residents and locals – particularly Malay and Indigenous people – and which wholly disregard cultural traditions, livelihoods, and aesthetics of the local population. This dynamic is brought into sharp relief in the greening of Forest City through its decision to abandon any pretense of recreating local ecosystems that sustain local livelihoods.

Forest City is located within Iskandar Malaysia, a massive Special Economic Zone (SEZ) that, at 4749 square kilometers, is over six times the size of Singapore (Benjamin, 2019). Launched in 2006 as a major corridor for national economic and infrastructure development, Iskandar Malaysia intends to spark growth, attract international investment to Johor, and compete with neighbouring Singapore (Rizzo and Glasson, 2012). Up until 15 years ago, the area that is now Iskandar Malaysia consisted mainly of agricultural land and oil palm (formerly rubber) plantations, dozens of villages, jungle and mangroves, and Johor Bahru, the state capital, a city of about 500,000. Over the past decade, the land within Iskandar Malaysia has undergone a massive transformation (Barau, 2017) as new highways have been constructed, villages evicted and destroyed, and agricultural land and jungle converted to housing, industrial facilities, theme parks, hospitals for medical tourism, and more.

Most visitors to Forest City arrive at the airport in southern Johor and travel through construction sites and vacant land until they enter the private highway built and maintained by the developer, Country Garden Pacificview (CGPV)[2], and finally cross a causeway to arrive in Forest City. Although the project is still in its early stage, with land reclamation activities and construction visible everywhere, many buildings are complete or close to completion, including a high-end hotel, the visitor gallery that contains a model of the project and sales staff, over 60 condominium towers, an office tower built on a mall, and a private international school with an Olympic-sized pool (Fig. 1).

Once inside Forest City, there is a particular type of 'green' aesthetic that contrasts sharply with the surrounding landscape. The same species of vine is planted on each storey of every building; there are spectacular green walls in high-traffic areas such as the visitor gallery, hotel, and shopping area; and extremely labour-intensive manicured gardens are everywhere, surrounded by water-intensive grass (Figs. 2a–c). Promotional material brands Forest City as a 'green living paradise', which 'will bring the symbiotic coexistence between city and nature to a new height' (CGPV, 2021a), but upon closer inspection, these promises remain unfulfilled. Lush 'green' walls are made of plastic and concrete, fiberglass or plastic animals dot the landscape to provide a sense of tropical nature without attempting to provide an actual habitat for these animals (Fig. 2d). A great number of the plants used throughout Forest City are not indigenous to the Malay peninsula, but were imported from the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere in Asia during the British colonial occupation. They are now commonly used in decorative urban planting

in former colonies, including Malaysia and Singapore (Table 1). Rather than prioritizing local coastal species or plants culturally valued by Malays (Adnan and Othman, 2012), Forest City creates an ornamental oasis that paradoxically exacerbates existing biodiversity and environmental challenges, rather than promoting greater resilience.

Forest City constitutes a significant example of the global mobility of Chinese policies, ideas, and aesthetics relating to urban greening that ignore the socio-ecological context (McCann, 2017) and recall colonial greening practices. The superficial nature of Forest City's urban greening illustrates a particular notion of what it means to be 'green' that is at odds with urban ecology and biodiversity conservation practices, which use native species to foster local ecosystems. The development's green space is highly homogeneous and decorative and has little capacity to foster meaningful interactions between people and the environment (Gill et al., 2009). The coastline of Forest City is a beach composed of imported sand and little attempt is made to recreate the mangrove habitat that typifies the coastlines of Singapore and southern Johor. While recent studies have conducted statistical analyses to understand the proportion of imported to indigenous species (Abendroth et al., 2012), we suggest that the proportion of imported versus local species is less important than how local plants are used for aesthetic rather than ecological purposes. None of the plants found in nearby mangrove ecosystems have been selected for Forest City, while generic plants that signify 'the tropics', such as coconut palms, are used throughout the project's green areas.

Forest City has no collectively shaped public spaces or commons, and there is presently no way for residents to have kitchen gardens and fruit trees, both cherished among local Malay populations and nearby coastal villages under threat from developers. The project makes a minor concession to the seagrass beds: Forest City was initially planned to be one big island, but CGPV later split the project into four smaller islands to create the narrative that the field of seagrass would return in the narrow channels between the artificial islands. Rather than considering sustainability in a holistic manner, Forest City's inclusion of 'green' building practices is more literal, primarily achieved 'through the planting of green plants' (Koch, 2014, 1133).

3. The multi-scalar politics of urban greening and green infrastructure

While Forest City is promoted as a beautiful green oasis that is ideal for raising a family or for retirement and a strategic place to invest, we suggest there are multi-scalar politics that underpin its 'green' identity. Scholars have examined the politics of urban greening, sustainability and resilience narratives, and planting in terms of national political and economic objectives (Cugurullo, 2016; Koch, 2014; Rizzo, 2020) and (settler-)colonialism (Bigon and Katz, 2014; Porter et al., 2020), which provide frameworks for thinking about the power dynamics in Chinese urban mega-developments overseas. Urban greening is never neutral, and we suggest that the politics underpinning Forest City's extravagant greening and branding can be divided into three main strands spanning multiple scales.

First, urban greening in Forest City is potentially highly profitable to Chinese property developers as it is calculated to attract particular demographics of Chinese nationals: retirees looking for clean air and a warm climate; Chinese families looking for a clean, safe, and moderately priced place where their children can attend an English-language international school; investors seeking to purchase a vacation home or property for short-term rentals; and investors looking to expand their portfolio of foreign properties. On Forest City's website, Country Garden Chairman Yeung Kwok Keung describes Forest City as:

> The city with the perfect climate, sea views, clear blue skies and fresh air all year around. The city covered with idyllic parks and no vehicular traffic, forming an ideal environment where everyone can enjoy the sun, a swim or a carefree stroll. (CGPV, 2021b)

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[2] Country Garden Pacificview Sdn Bhd is a 60−40 joint venture between the private Chinese developer, Country Garden, and Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd, a Malaysian government-linked company and associate company of Kumpulan Prasarana Kerajaan Johor.
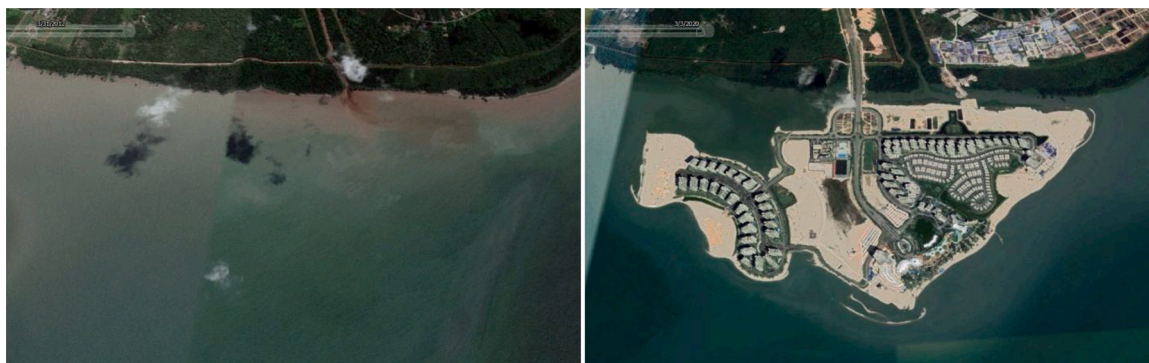
Fig. 1. Satellite images of Forest City's location along the south coast of Johor, Malaysia, 2012 and 2020 (Source: Google Earth Pro).

Fig. 2. a–d – Forest City's signature vines, green walls, manicured gardens, and artificial animals create a feeling of luxury and lush yet controlled nature. (Source: Author) (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article).

Plant coverage – in the form of green building façades, manicured gardens, and tropical palms – is presented as synonymous with a 'natural' environment and corresponding health benefits. Branding a project as 'green' or 'ecological' allows its real estate to 'fetch a premium in the market' (Pow, 2018, 879), not only for its perceived sustainability, but for the lifestyle it implies. As Pow and Kong (2007, 146) argue in their study of gated villa compounds in Shanghai, cultivated 'nature' marketed to middle-upper class Chinese families by real estate developers is attractive not only because it provides a natural refuge or oasis away from the city, but because it acts as 'a territorial symbol of an elite lifestyle'. In Forest City, the target demographic of middle- to upper-class Chinese nationals is reinforced through promotional materials, which feature images of Chinese families strolling on the beach and having picnics.

Second, urban greening and mastery over the landscape are intertwined with narratives of surveillance and control in Forest City to reassure potential residents and investors that they will be safe from the Muslim majority population that surrounds the project. Forest City's carefully curated 'eco-aesthetic' marks its space as physically distinct from surrounding Malay and Indigenous villages, while security features, including AI facial recognition technology, reinforce its separation

and affirm for potential buyers and investors that it is a Chinese project. Similar to former French and British colonies – where planners strategically incorporated lush greenery, green belts, and garden city ideals to create segregated, disease-free oases of 'civilization' for colonial administrators to feel safe from the 'wild' surroundings and populace – Forest City associates control over the built and natural environment with exclusivity, comfort, and health. Control over the unruly or 'dirty' natural environment (Steele et al., 2020) is crucial, as gated urban compounds are presented as necessary to promote 'happiness', 'harmony', and 'freedom' (Pow and Kong, 2007, 144). Green spaces are highly manicured for luxury recreation, passive observation over active use, and consumption by paying customers, as Forest City's private security polices who is allowed to enjoy these spaces.

Within its bounds, Forest City controls not only the type of plant and animal species that are allowed to exist, but the type of citizen who is allowed to inhabit the city. Access to the green city of the future is highly variable and contingent on ethnicity, wealth, and socioeconomic status, shining a light on inequity and lack of accessibility (Anguelovski et al., 2020; Gould and Lewis, 2017). Further, the environmental costs of the new city are not felt by its residents, but are externalized (Koch, 2014; Pow, 2018) farther down the coastline, threatening Malay and

Table 1
Plant species imported by the British during their colonial occupation dominate the planting in Forest City.

Scientific name	Local name	Origin (general region)
MUSSAENDA ERYTHROPHYLLA	Pink Mussaenda	West Africa
TRIMEZIA STEYERMARKII	Hand of God	Central America
PHYLLANTHUS MYRTIFOLIUS	Ceylon Myrtle, Mousetail Plant	Sri Lanka
FICUS LYRATA	Fiddle-leaf fig	West Africa
CALATHEA LUTEA		Latin America
ECHINOCACTUS GRUSONII	Golden barrel cactus	Mexico
PHILODENDRON SUBINCISUM		Mexico
HELICONIA PSITA 'AMERICAN DWARF'	Bird of Paradise	South Africa
PHOENIX ROEBELENII	Pygmy date palm	Vietnam, South eastern China, Laos
CYCAS RUMPHII	Queen sago palm	Southern and eastern Indonesia, New Guinea, and Christmas Island
BOUGAINVILLEA	Bougainvillea	South America

Source: Plant species imported by the British during their colonial occupation dominate the planting in Forest City.

Indigenous villagers who are dependent on fishing, mussel farming, and other maritime activities for their livelihoods (Azman et al., 2012). While the state of Johor faces increasing droughts (Chuah et al., 2018), swimming pools are included on every floor in at least one of Forest City's luxury condos underway.

In carefully curating the natural environment through the use of imported sand, generic tropical plants, and even plastic green foliage, Forest City controls the integration of nature in the city, in line with how CGPV perceives potential (Chinese) buyers' tastes. The separation of untamed, mangrove-covered coastlines from Forest City's securitized, gated grounds occurs through physical destruction of the natural environment, and is paralleled by the exclusion of unwanted residents. CGPV's recent introduction of an eco-museum – which includes a re-creation of the local mangrove ecosystem, showcases extinct species, and features a salt-water tank into which the developer is slowly introducing organisms from the natural environment (Forest City Video, 2020) – is a stark example of this segregation. Residents can interact with a contained, sterilized version of nature in a museum setting, but return to the comfort of artificial beaches, swimming pools, and palm trees when they leave.

Third, the international proliferation of 'green' real estate developments may preclude criticism of and mask China's geopolitical motives, particularly given that Forest City is strategically located along the narrow Strait of Malacca, through which 80 % of China's crude oil imports travel (Chen, 2010), and adjacent to major ports in both Malaysia and Singapore. Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has been one of the fiercest critics of Chinese-constructed megaprojects in Malaysia, referring to growing Chinese investment in Malaysia as a 'new version of colonialism' (Jaipragas, 2018). We suggest that the ornamental and aestheticized 'green' nature of Forest City distracts from the underlying geopolitical dynamics of the project, selling Forest City as a futuristic model green city based on normative, seemingly apolitical and benevolent ideals of sustainability that are politically difficult to criticize and can be used to justify almost anything (Rosol et al., 2017). The ambiguity of what is truly 'green' renders sustainability a powerful discourse that can be employed to increase the legitimacy of political regimes and private corporate interests (Koch, 2014). In sum, Forest City's excessive urban greening and green rhetoric works to justify its location in an area that is both geopolitically contentious and ecologically vulnerable.

4. Conclusions

Although urban greening in Forest City is presented as normative, apolitical, and broadly beneficial to residents and the environment, it encompasses transnational multi-scalar politics and may mask a variety of economic and geopolitical motives. Specifically, we suggest that CGPV instrumentalizes urban greening to appeal to Chinese buyers, control access to the gated new city, and preclude criticism. In doing so, Forest City draws from narratives of urban greening within China that promote social exclusivity and environmental health benefits, illustrating how property developers and investors from China are key actors in circulating norms and aesthetics from China internationally and exemplifying the global mobility of urban greening approaches often devoid of socio-ecological context (Cooke, 2020; Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann, 2017).

Future research will provide further insight into how urban greening and green infrastructure perpetuate neo-colonial power dynamics, the privatization of urban space, and the foreignization and financialization of real estate. Through the case study of Forest City, we suggest that contemporary urban greening echoes colonial-era devaluing of local indigenous plants, ecosystems, and planting aesthetics, as the project's foreign developer imposes imported norms and values associated with urban greening. Further studies may shed light on the extent to which Chinese developers more broadly are greening overseas urban megaprojects as a strategy to shift focus away from China's predatory lending or 'debt colonialism' (Daniel, 2018; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011), land grabbing (Zoomers et al., 2017), and *de facto* territorial expansion (Moser, 2018). Finally, additional research can examine how urban greening in foreign Chinese projects differs from those within China, the extent to which Chinese developers are replicating domestic urban greening practices overseas, which actors are circulating these green ideals, and how urban greening models are adapted to local contexts. China has received media and scholarly attention for its innovation in urban heritage, technology, and eco-cities, but the geopolitical roles of its various new city projects across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean remain underexamined, particularly in relation to the political nature of their greening.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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