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Moving the Mountain and Greening the Sea: The Micropolitics of Speculative Green Urbanism at Forest City, Iskandar Malaysia

Sin Yee Koh, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia, Jalan Lagoon Selatan, 47500 Bandar Sunway, Selangor, Malaysia. E-mail: koh.sinyee@monash.edu

Yimin Zhao (**Corresponding author**), Department of Urban Planning and Management, School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China. E-mail: zhao.y@ruc.edu.cn

Hyun Bang Shin, Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. E-mail: h.b.shin@lse.ac.uk

Abstract: While green urbanism has been discussed extensively in the urban studies literature, less attention has been paid to the micropolitics of its cross-border transplantation. Using the case of Forest City, a mainland Chinese developer-led mega-project in the Iskandar Malaysia, we analyze the different ways green urbanism has been deployed in speculative city-making. The state seeks to position Iskandar Malaysia as green*er* than its global

competitors, while the developer consolidates its brand image and marketing aesthetics with selective "green and smart" techniques, yet at the cost of local residents' habitat. In moving mountains to green the sea, the logic of speculative urbanization prevails and presides over sustainable and equitable green urbanism. Further attention to the complex local power nexus and the micropolitics of speculative green urbanism contextualizes different stakeholders' rationales and practices, and contributes to critical reflections on the entanglement of green urbanism and speculative urbanization.

(Word count: 10,993 words)

Introduction

There is an established body of urban studies literature on the discursive politics of green urbanism, especially regarding eco-cities and (mega) greenfield developments (e.g., Cugurullo, 2013; Rapoport, 2014; Rizzo, 2017). However, less attention has been paid to the micropolitics of cross-border transplantation of green urbanism ideas and practices, especially within Asia. This is somewhat surprising since there has been the emergence of numerous eco-city projects in Asia, such as the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Ecocity (Caprotti et al., 2015), involving partners from different Asian countries. With the rise of green urbanism projects led by mainland Chinese capital, some associated with the country's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the questions regarding the micropolitics of green urbanism within Asia need to be interrogated. To be more specific, how are particular variants of green urbanism transplanted within Asia? To what extent is the materialization of green urbanism shaped by local power relations and politics? How do local residents perceive and make sense of such large-scale green urbanism projects?

In this article, we explore these questions using the case of Forest City, a mega greenfield project to be built on four reclaimed islands totaling 14 square kilometers in the Johor Straits, Malaysia, for a target population of 700,000. The project is located in Iskandar Malaysia, a 4,749-square-kilometer special economic zone in the *negeri*[1] of Johor that was institutionalized as a joint federal and *negeri* government initiative in 2006 (see Rizzo and Glasson, 2012). The project, with a Gross Development Value of US$100 billion, is developed by Country Garden PacificView Sdn Bhd (CGPV), a joint venture company

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[1] Malaysia retains a federal system, with 13 *negeri* (or state) and three *Wilayah Persekutuan* (federal territories). We use the local expression "*negeri*" to distinguish it from the more general usage of the state as in nation state.

between the Guangzhou-based Country Garden Group (CGG) (60% share), one of the largest property developers in the world, and Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd (EDSB) (40% share). EDSB is in turn partially owned by the Sultan of Johor[2] (64% majority share), Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor (KPRJ), a Johor state-owned company (20% share) and Daing Malek, the Sultan's aide and business partner (15.6% share).

While Forest City is to be constructed over a 20-to-30-year timeframe, its development on the ground has proceeded at high speeds. In May 2017, only three years after commencing island reclamation, the first phase of high-rise residential units was handed over to the residents (iProperty, 2017). In July 2019, another 9,000 new residential units were reportedly ready for occupation (Forest City Malaysia, 2019). By September 2019, the first island was 50% reclaimed, with all the commercial and educational facilities in operation (South China Morning Post, 2019).

Forest City (see location in Figure 1) is marketed as a "green and smart" city with a multi-layered mobility system where parking, street level activities (including a light-rail transit system), and residential communal areas are segregated from each other (CGPV, n.d.). It also boasts a "forest-like environment" with vertical greening. Smart technologies are integrated into the construction processes, as well as post-construction urban and building management systems (e.g., smart meters for real-time energy monitoring and artificial intelligence security applications) (CGG, 2019). The high speed of construction has been to a large extent enabled by the establishment of the CGPV-led Industrialized Building System Plant in 2017, the largest fully automated facility in Malaysia with the capacity to produce building materials equivalent to 9,000 apartment units per annum (Chew, 2019).

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[2] Nine of the *negeri*, including Johor, are headed by hereditary constitutional monarchs. The Sultan, the head of state and the head of the Islamic religion in his state, has discretionary powers in appointing the *Menteri Besar* (i.e., Chief Minister), the head of government in his state.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

At first glance, and as we shall explain later, CGG's planning and design concepts for Forest City centers on green urbanism, which is largely in line with the Chinese State's "ecological civilization (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明)" agenda as well as Iskandar Malaysia's green and urban sustainability agenda. However, the extensive land reclamation to secure a "tabula rasa" condition in Forest City questions the project's greening nature. Moreover, the speed and scale of the development raise questions regarding the extent to which the project adheres to these two state-led ecological agendas. Using Forest City as a case study, this article explores the three interrelated research questions outlined in the opening paragraph. In doing so, we contribute to the green urbanism literature through the lens of speculative urbanization and its associated micropolitical dynamics.

The next section discusses the theoretical underpinnings of this article, focusing on the entanglements of green urbanism and speculative urbanization in the context of "ecological civilization." We then explain the case and research methods. The fourth section analyzes the different ways green urbanism has been deployed as an apparatus for speculative city-making. The fifth section highlights the micropolitics of urban development at Iskandar Malaysia to contextualize local stakeholder groups' reactions to the Forest City mega-project. We conclude by highlighting the necessity and significance of attending to concrete/material politics that ground and shape speculative green urbanism.

From Ecological Civilization to Speculative Green Urbanism

The links between nature/ecology and the political economy have long been a central theme

shared by Frankfurt School-inspired environmental critiques and the neo-Marxian approach to urban political ecology (Castree, 2008; Gandy, 2015). While the socio-ecological interdependencies of urban space are foregrounded to criticize capital accumulation and to create "possibilities for constructing different socio-environmental futures" (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 228), such analyses are mainly limited to Western democracies and pay less attention to the role of the state and its partners (e.g., see debates on "neoliberalizing nature" in Bakker, 2010). In China, for example, the presence of a strong state in the urban development sector necessarily implies that there are additional dynamics to the interdependencies between urban development and nature, which may be different to that in Western democracies.

In thinking about the transplantation of "green urbanism" practices by Chinese developers across borders, which is the main focus of this article, it is important to note that such transplantation may not be smooth nor automatic. The urban policy and political environments in destination cities may be different. Ambitious city authorities may understand and deploy "green urbanism" in different ways to the Chinese interpretation. How do place-based micropolitics shape and influence the cross-border transplantation of green urbanism ideas and practices in a way that entangles with speculative urbanization in these cities? In this section, we lay out a framework to address this question by focusing on the interconnections between the discursive power of ecological civilization and the material politics of green urbanism. Building upon the perspectives of inter-referencing within Asia (Roy & Ong, 2011) and intra-Asian urbanism (Percival & Waley, 2012), we start by outlining the developments in China that gave rise to the discursive use of ecological civilization in the transplantation of policy and practices from China to destinations in Asia. After a brief review of critiques of green urbanism, we develop a framework that can address the

entanglements of green urbanism and speculative urbanization, paying particular attention to the role of the state.

Ecological Civilization as Ideology

The term "ecological civilization," which first appeared in a former Soviet Union academic journal article in 1984, has been adopted by China's ecologists since the late 1980s (Xu, 2010). The term was used to emphasize the balance between economic and ecological development, which is illustrative of the then influential "ecological modernization" thesis in China (Pow & Neo, 2013). This thesis promotes a "win-win" prospect of balancing environmental concerns and economic growth, and is hence internalizing conflicts rather than challenging or addressing social injustice (Harvey, 1996, p. 382).

Such a problematic prospect, ironically, fits very well with the party-state's search for ideological resources to build a "harmonious society." In 2007, in a report to the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, then President Hu Jintao declared that a key pathway to achieving comprehensive societal development was to establish and embed the concept of "ecological civilization" across all segments of the society. The role of this term as a national ideology was further consolidated in 2017 when President Xi Jinping announced it as a new "Millennium Strategy" (*qiannian daji* 千年大计) for the sustainable development of the nation, before it was enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 2018.

Recent discussions in China (urban) studies have attended to the nature and role of the "ecological civilization" discourse. In examining the discourse in the context of the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city project, Pow (2018) finds that a form of aesthetic governmentality is at work, fusing "bourgeois forms of aesthetic environmentalism with world-class urban aesthetics" (p. 864). Informed and regulated by this discourse, the foundation of urban

planning has been remade in China, shifting the focus from techno-scientific arenas to the emerging concern of eco-aesthetic normativity (ibid.). Nationally, this discourse has been translated into governmental tools that are interlinked to such normativity. For instance, the "National Forest City" (*guojia senlin chengshi* 国家森林城市) title, promoted by the National Bureau of Forestry and Grassland since the early 2000s, has been awarded to 138 cities in China by 2018, including Foshan City where CGG's headquarter is located (National Bureau of Forestry and Grassland, 2019; see Figure 3). To compete for this title, each city is required to reshape their urban (green) space to meet certain criteria and standards (see National Bureau of Forestry, 2005). This demonstrates the reach and power of China's eco-aesthetic normativity, embodied in the discourse of "ecological civilization."

[Figure 3 about here]

Perhaps not coincidentally, CGG's large-scale development project at Iskandar Malaysia is also named "Forest City." It is hence critical to examine how and to what extent this eco-aesthetic normativity, developed in China, has travelled abroad under the expansive reach of "Global China," i.e., the outward expansion of Chinese investments in foreign real estate (Paik, 2019).[3] To understand multiple and dynamic processes of urban political economy, we need to examine the ways through which this normative discourse has been put to "use" by international developers (CGG in this case) and their local partners, whose primary goal turns out to be maximizing economic gains. To do so, we situate the discourse of "ecological civilization" in the context of speculative urbanization, attending in particular

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[3] See the discussion of "Global China" in the introduction to this special issue.

to the articulations between this discourse and concrete and material politics on the ground, both of which are operationalized in the name of "green urbanism."

The entanglements of green urbanism and speculative urbanization

While China witnessed the emergence of the ideological discourse of ecological civilization in the 1980s, the concept of green urbanism had a longer history in the West (see Rapoport, 2014). The critical literature on green urbanism has examined the extent to which the proponents of green urbanism have delivered what was originally envisioned (McCann, 2017). There is also a growing line of enquiry on the discursive politics of green urbanism, focusing on how green urbanism is discursively maneuvered by city elites, especially with regards to eco-cities and greenfield developments (Caprotti et al., 2015; Cugurullo, 2013; Rizzo, 2017). Notably, the actually-existing green urbanism in these large-scale developments tends to be cursory rather than transformative.

Rapoport (2014, p. 138) notes that eco-city projects in Asia and the Middle East are often undertaken to address "larger aims and objectives which are as likely to be political or economic in nature as environmental." In her analysis of green urbanism in the Emirates, Ouis (2002, p. 338) suggests that the large-scale creation of man-made green spaces in the desert environment "is closely linked to the legitimization of power for the ruling sheikhs and the political system of paternalism." Moreover, the produced green urbanism landscapes become part of the region's modernization project. Green urbanism, both in concept and in material form, has hence been socially constructed and imbued with multiple political and economic connotations. As McCann (2017, p. 1818) suggests, the meaning of "green" in concepts like green urbanism and green development "is clearly up for grabs."

Evidently, the specific connotation of "green" in a certain context depends on who is speaking about what type of "green urbanism" to which audience, and for what economic and

political purposes. In the context of speculative urbanization, the discursive usage of "green urbanism" becomes particularly apparent and problematic. In this article, we propose that it is the speculative nature of place-/city-making that exposes the instrumental nature of green urbanism discourse for advancing economic interests.

In situating green urbanism in speculative urbanization, we take as a starting point Bear's (2020) argument that speculation is "future-oriented affective, physical and intellectual labor that aims to accumulate capital for various ends" (p. 2), which accompanies "an act of labor that has become crucial to the generation of surplus value" (p. 6). Speculative urbanization can therefore be conceptualized as an urbanizing process that involves the production of the built environment and the reproduction of labor in a way that aims for the generation of surplus value, with quick returns and non-productive gains as the ultimate goal. In other words, as Marcinkoski (2018) aptly puts it, land acquisition and urban construction are undertaken in this speculative process "in the pursuit of uncommon financial gains under the presumption of market demand despite the absence of a specific future tenant or consumer" (p. 51, emphasis removed). Such speculative nature of urbanization is further strengthened in Asia where urban policies have witnessed 'real estate turn' that involves governments working with public and private partners to monetize land development (Shatkin, 2016; see also Shin, 2014).

Two further issues loom large in this discussion on speculative urbanization, with regard to its temporal characteristics and technologies of imagination respectively. In discussing speculative urbanization in the context of "fast urbanism" in East and Southeast Asia, where condensed urbanization has prevailed (Shin, Zhao & Koh, 2020), we attend to the speed of development as intrinsic to speculative urbanization. Furthermore, Bear (2020) notes that speculation "proceeds by making value uncertain and then projecting unseen ethical orders using technologies of imagination that can help navigate this uncertainty" (p.

3). For our study, green urbanism constitutes one of such "technologies of imagination", which discursively legitimizes the future-oriented social action that comes with high risks, often being pursued through fast-tracked production of urban space. Such use of green urbanism has also been observed in China, as highlighted by Chien (2013) who argued that such large-scale projects as eco-cities are essentially part of land speculation, i.e., "green grabbing" (p. 186), carried out by local entrepreneurial authorities, using green urbanism as its guise (see also Shatkin, 2016).

The role of the state hence marks another dimension of our reflections on the process of speculative urbanization. Seen from a strategic-relational perspective (Jessop, 2008), the state is critical in fostering the mechanisms and practices of city-making for the purpose of "anchoring ...mobile finance capital into the built environment" (Halbert & Rouanet, 2014, p. 472; Shin & Zhao, 2018). Instead of understanding state actions in isolation, we take "the state as a social relation" (Jessop, 2018) and a site of contention among political forces that involve the mobilization of state apparatuses and resources through the unequal use of state power. This in turn requires treating the state not as a homogeneous, unitary entity but as a site of multi-scalar struggles among different factions of bureaucratic bodies, political interests and capitalist subjects (see Brenner et al., 2003; Zhang et al., 2020).

As we shall later show, the Forest City's project of "moving the mountain and greening the sea" involves the artificial (re)creation of expansive urban greenscapes on reclaimed land. Using green urbanism discourses as justification, this "green" project has been ironically made possible through transnational transactions of plants, gravel, sand and other natural resources (Rizzo, 2019; Tateishi 2018). Furthermore, this project is situated within a complex landscape of changing local politics and political economy in Iskandar Malaysia, where not only different versions of "green urbanism" are foregrounded, but also the diverse and divergent interests of actors involved in local place-based micropolitics. It is

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hence necessary to investigate the entanglement of green urbanism and speculative urbanization by taking into account these political dynamics, with adequate attention paid to the everyday practices and conducts where these different, and sometimes conflictual, actors interact with each other. Before doing so, we turn to introducing the empirical context and research methods.

Researching Forest City in Iskandar Malaysia

Iskandar Malaysia is one of the five economic corridors (i.e., special economic zone) in Malaysia. While the other two economic corridors in Peninsular Malaysia (i.e., West Malaysia) span across two or more negeri, Iskandar Malaysia is the only economic corridor in West Malaysia that is entirely contained within a single *negeri*, i.e., Johor. Furthermore, it is the only economic corridor in Malaysia where the federal government shares equal directive power with the *negeri* government. This is significant as land is under the jurisprudence of the *negeri* government (not the federal government) in Malaysia. This co-directive arrangement means that the federal government has notable, if not equal, influence as the Johor *negeri* government on Iskandar Malaysia's urban economic development. Indeed, Ng's (2020) work details how the federal government, through its government-linked companies, directly shaped the development of one of the flagship zones in Iskandar Malaysia.

In 2006, the federal government announced the establishment of Iskandar Malaysia and the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA). IRDA's organizational structure reflects the equal interests of the federal and *negeri* governments in the development of Iskandar Malaysia. The agency's Chief Executive Officer reports to the Members of Authority (MoA), a board consisting of key federal and *negeri* government officers holding

finance, economic planning and executive portfolios. The MoA, in turn, reports to IRDA's two Co-Chairmen, the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the Chief Minister of Johor. This governance model clearly signals the strategic and multi-scalar state interests in Iskandar Malaysia.

From 2006 to 2016, IRDA has secured cumulative committed investments of MYR208 billion, of which 50% has been realized (IRDA, 2016a). Crucially, the largest proportion of the cumulative committed investment was in property development (53%), including residential (20%) and retail/mixed developments (27%) (IRDA, 2016c). Within the same period, China ranked first in terms of foreign investment into Iskandar Malaysia. It was noted that China's investments were "mainly in property development" (ibid.). In addition to the Forest City project, there are a number of large-scale mixed-use development projects being undertaken by mainland Chinese developers in Iskandar Malaysia (Table 1). As foreign developers cannot operate independently in Malaysia, these developers have formed joint venture companies with local public and/or private entities.

[Table 1 about here]

The significant presence of mainland Chinese developers in Iskandar Malaysia needs to be contextualized into the broader trend of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into Malaysia since 2013. Following China's launch of the BRI in 2013, Malaysia's former Prime Minister Najib Razak had endorsed 14 memoranda of understanding with mainland Chinese companies for economic collaborations.[4] Chinese presence in Malaysia is most

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[4] Following the 2013 general elections where the ruling coalition lost the popular vote but gained parliamentary majority, Najib's administration was particularly keen to secure new FDI sources (Gomez et al., 2020, p. 7).

significant in new large-scale infrastructural and urban development projects such as the

Bandar Malaysia, East Coast Railway Link, and Forest City (Gomez et al., 2020, p. 9).

Notably, these projects are not without controversies. On the one hand, the rapid influx of

Chinese presence in the local construction market raised concerns about the crowding out of

local players (Todd & Slattery, 2018). On the other hand, the anxieties surrounding the

growing Chinese presence were instrumentalized in domestic politics at the juncture of

Malaysia's regime change in 2018 (Liu, 2019). Most importantly, and as we shall later

explain, it has been observed that political patronage by the Johor royal house has enabled

mainland Chinese developers to enjoy leverage in their operations in the *negeri* of Johor

(Hamzah, 2020).

While Forest City is not the only large-scale development undertaken by mainland

Chinese developers in Iskandar Malaysia, it has been at the center of national and

international media attention for two reasons. First, the scale of the project is unprecedented

in the region, and there are environmental concerns due to the large-scale land reclamation

entailed. As Table 1 shows, the project's site area is significantly larger than other mainland

Chinese developer-led projects in Iskandar Malaysia. Moreover, the project sits in an area

with rich seagrass, mangrove and marine diversity that supports the livelihoods of local

residents in the surrounding fishing villages. The environmental damage caused by the

project's large-scale coastal reclamation would result in irreversible socio-cultural, economic

and environmental impacts (Rahman, 2017a, 2017b),[5] which are externalized to the local

residents further down the coastline (Moser & Avery, 2021). In fact, and as we shall later

show, despite its claim to be "green", the Forest City project itself is unsustainable on

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[5] Forest City is not the only mega-project in Iskandar Malaysia that has caused such irreversible impacts
(see Barau, 2017), nor is it the only project with urban forms that clash with the surrounding peri-urban
and rural areas (see Rizzo, 2020).

multiple fronts - its location on an area of rich biodiversity, the speed and scale of its development, and the short- and long-term implications of its existence.

Second, the media has noted that the involvement of the Sultan of Johor in this project might have assisted in some circumvention of existing planning and development guidelines, especially those that concern the environment (Aw, 2014). In fact, land reclamation for the project had commenced without an approved Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA). The DEIA was subsequently submitted and approved, though the planned land reclamation was reduced from 20 to 14 square kilometers. The project was also caught in between long standing political and power struggles between federal and local state elites (Rahman, 2017a, pp. 17-19), a point which we will return to later.

This article primarily draws upon a comparative research project on the international business expansion of two major mainland Chinese developers' activities in London and Iskandar Malaysia (2019-2021). It also draws upon a project on the sale of cross-border and transnational residential real estate in Iskandar Malaysia (2016-2018). Both projects utilize qualitative methods, including field observations, interviews, and document analyses. Interview respondents include CGPV employees, IRDA officers, local state urban planning officers, local urban development industry players, local urban studies experts and observers, and local youths. On top of this, we have triangulated data collected in Iskandar Malaysia with those from Shunde, China, where the headquarter of CGG is located. Such data includes field notes, interviews with employees and local residents, as well as public reports and internal company magazines. Table 2 documents the respondents interviewed in the respective field sites. Combining views and observations both "at home" and "overseas" gave us further insights into how CGG has consolidated, transplanted and speculated upon its corporate vision of "green urbanism" at Forest City in Iskandar Malaysia.

[Table 2 about here]

Two Versions of Green Urbanism

The articulation between green urbanism and speculative urbanization, as discussed earlier, makes it plain that the discursive power of the former is embodied in the process of translating ideas into actually-existing manifestations that is susceptible to the logic of the latter. At Iskandar Malaysia, we observed that green urbanism has been discursively used by the local state (IRDA) and the developer (CGG and its local subsidiary CGPV) as an apparatus for speculative city-making. While the green urbanism strategies deployed by either party appear to be unrelated at first glance, they are rooted in the overarching logic of speculative city-making of Iskandar Malaysia within which Forest City carves out its own monopoly space that feeds upon money capital from China.

IRDA: toward a "Low Carbon Society"

At the onset of Iskandar Malaysia's establishment, green urbanism – specifically, low carbon society and green technology – has been IRDA's key concern that is also in line with the federal government's agenda. Starting in 2009, the federal government kickstarted initiatives to promote green technology and sustainable development, including the launch of the National Green Technology Policy and the country's voluntary commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 40% by 2020 at the Conference of the Parties 15 (COP 15). Iskandar Malaysia was selected as a pilot area in 2011 for the "Development of Low Carbon Society Scenarios for Asian Regions," a five-year joint research program between Japan and Malaysia. Overseen by both IRDA and local and Japanese research institutes, this program resulted in the Low Carbon Society Blueprint for Iskandar Malaysia 2025 (LCSBP-

IM2025), a key document that bridges Malaysia's global and national climate change responses and Iskandar Malaysia's regional and local development plans and policies (Ho et al., 2016).

One of the 10 priority programs identified is the Green Accord Initiative Award (GAIA), a certification scheme that promotes sustainability in the built environment. The scheme rides upon existing green urbanism certification tools such as the Green Building Index (GBI), the Comprehensive Assessment System for Built Environment Efficiency (CASBEE), Green Mark,[6] and Green Star.[7] According to an IRDA officer (interview, February 2020), the purpose of GAIA is to maintain a high level of *sustainable* green building standards in Iskandar Malaysia (emphasis added):

> GAIA is meant to be like a PhD standard. If you get a GBI or CASBEE, or BREEAM, or LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), that's just your first degree. ...Those who get [GAIA] will need to perform really well. …if they don't maintain that accolade for three years, ...we take away that award. ...the GBI, once you get it, you get it forever. But for us the important thing is that they maintain their green standards all the time. So, we are strict in a way with that but we didn't want to lower the standards. Because we know that *if you want to go green, it should be properly green*. ...here [in Iskandar Malaysia] we are not doing it superficially. ...we mean what we say and we do it properly.

Here, the emphasis on GAIA being a green building certification scheme of a much higher standard than the existing ones plays into Iskandar Malaysia's race to become green*er* than its (global) competitors. In a global speculative market already saturated with eco-city branding and zoning technologies (special economic zones) competing for foreign investment capital (Caprotti, 2014), a home-grown certification scheme that has been successfully pilot-

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[6] Launched by Singapore's Building and Construction Authority in 2005.

[7] Launched by Green Building Council of Australia in 2003.

tested helps in the branding and promotion of Iskandar Malaysia. Moreover, developers "do like the accolade of getting [GAIA] because it helps [to promote] their projects" to potential buyers who may be "climate conscious or… green conscious" (interview with IRDA officer, February 2020). IRDA's insistence on maintaining high green building standards at Iskandar Malaysia is captured more explicitly in the officer's own words:

> If your development comes in with a huge pollution potential, even though you are going to bring in billions of ringgit, we are going to turn you down because we have set out our green credentials and we want to keep it. We don't want to compromise that. ...We want…to make it as green as possible.

In this sense, IRDA's interpretation of green urbanism is centered on reducing carbon emissions at the regional and local scales and maintaining sustainable green building certification in the long-term. While this program is in line with IRDA's focus on the long-term regional economic, urban and sustainable development of Iskandar Malaysia, it is also closely linked to "urban entrepreneurialism" (Harvey, 1989). Specifically, it is green and low carbon that have been deployed as a local strategy to embrace international competitions and to accommodate "the external coercive power" (ibid., p. 10) of such competitions (see also Shin, 2017). This highlights the political economic context where CGG's strategic marketing of the Forest City as a "green and smart" future city is explicitly situated.

Forest City: marketing "green and smart"

While Forest City is not CGG's first international urban development project,[8] it is the largest in terms of scale and project duration. The Group has its origin in a town and village enterprise (TVE) in construction in Shunde City, Guangdong Province, then managed by Mr

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[8] The Group's first international urban development project is Country Garden Danga Bay, also in Iskandar Malaysia.

Yang Guoqiang. Yang and his partners founded CGG in 1992 after successfully privatizing the TVE. The Group soon made its reputation as a credible and efficient local developer, especially for projects in out-of-town, peripheral locations, mainly through the comprehensive provision of amenities and transport connectivity (Cohen, 2014).

Since the 2010s, "green urbanism" has become a key marketing feature of CGG's property developments. According to two CGG middle management staff interviewed, this started when the Vice-Chairman (Yang's daughter) suggested a "livelier green building look" for the Group's headquarter building in Shunde that was completed in 2014 (interview, September 2019). The result was a building with its facades covered in lush tropical vertical greenery, as if it was immersed in nature (Figure 4). This version of green urbanism reflected "the Founder's vision and imagination of urban futures;" and importantly, became CGG's "nuclear weapon" (i.e., unique selling point) in sales and marketing. In fact, it was the Founder's preference and instruction to have "green everywhere you can see" (*manyan dou shi lüse* 满眼都是绿色）in Forest City's marketing materials. This vision of "green everywhere" has also been transplanted to Forest City at Iskandar Malaysia (Figure 5).

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

In addition to vertical greenery, CGPV has spent considerable effort and investment in creating and maintaining Forest City's overall landscape. A marketing manager of a major local developer explained the local industry's shock regarding CGPV's marketing strategy and expenditure on landscaping (interview, July 2016):

They did a very impressive entrance statement,[9] plus a lot of landscaping that helped to impress people. They brought in landscapes from the Middle East, and they had all these sculptures. [They] created an artificial beachfront. ...They had the financial capability to spend on marketing. ...It was really an eye-opener for the developers in Malaysia... We always spend like 2-3% max in terms of marketing costs from the GDV (Gross Development Value). Whereas [they] were spending like easily 10-15%.

Notably, the transplantation of the vertical green façade from CGG's headquarter building in Shunde to Forest City in Iskandar Malaysia was partly due to the similar tropical climate in the origin and destination cities. This means that it was possible for CGPV to "[bring] in landscaping from China" (interview with local planning officer, February 2020). Moreover, the visual manifestation of a "forest city" helps to reinforce the project's brand name and affiliation to CGG. This in turn facilitates the marketing of Forest City to CGG's existing customer base in China.

In addition to the "green everywhere" look, CGPV has also incorporated various smart building technologies into the post-construction urban management of Forest City. In 2019, its "Smart B.I.A." system received the IDC Smart City Asia/Pacific Awards under the Smart Building category (IDC, 2019). The system is an Internet of Things sensing platform and an artificial intelligence city application that enables remote and automatic online monitoring of energy consumption and building security. Here, the incorporation of smart building monitoring technologies appears to cohere with IRDA's version of green urbanism, though their impacts are yet to be validated. Nevertheless, mainland Chinese buyers may find building security features such as face and fingerprint recognition attractive as these are increasingly prevalent in new development projects in China.

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[9] Forest City signages and landscaping appear on both sides of the six-kilometer motorway from the highway exit interchange to the show unit.

To wrap up, two green urbanism strategies are articulated here to meet their respective discursive and political-economic aims. On the one hand, the local state (IRDA) has used the GAIA certification scheme, which is part of the broader LCSBP-IM2025, to position Iskandar Malaysia as a forerunner in green city competition to attract foreign investments. On the other hand, the developer (CGG and its local subsidiary CGPV) has used the "green everywhere" look and selected smart building technologies to consolidate a strong and consistent brand image, which is particularly important as the company relies heavily on its existing customer base in China to facilitate sales. Underlying these two seemingly different green urbanism strategies is the shared logic of speculative city-making: the success of Forest City's branding brings international attention (which can be translated into investment capital) to Iskandar Malaysia, and vice versa.

The Micropolitics of Speculative Green Urbanism

As a "green and smart" project incorporating smart building technologies and green urban infrastructures at the city scale (e.g., car-free groundscape and waste management system), Forest City would have been apt as a showcase befitting IRDA's green urbanism aims. However, despite the scale of the development and its longer-term green urbanism promises, this project was not originally catered for in Iskandar Malaysia's Comprehensive Development Plan (interviews with local planning officers and academics, August 2019 to February 2020; Khazanah Nasional, 2006; IRDA, 2016b). The unplanned nature of the project vis-a-vis Iskandar Malaysia's urban and regional development plan is problematic for two reasons. First, the introduction of a city-scale project with a targeted population of 700,000 has significant downstream and longer-term local and regional infrastructural impacts such as water supply, power supply, and sewerage treatment. Second, the very idea

of the project, with its massive land reclamation, could not have fit into IRDA's broader green urbanism aims for Iskandar Malaysia.

What then, in the first place, made the Forest City project possible in Iskandar Malaysia? After the project received green light to proceed from the *negeri* of Johor, what are the micropolitics that have shaped the translation of CGPV's ideas into actually-existing green urbanism in Forest City? How have the actually-existing green urbanism been perceived by local stakeholder groups? Here, we contextualize the materialization of Forest City to the place-based micropolitics of speculative urban development in Johor. We then highlight the perspectives of local stakeholder groups who also play their own roles in perceiving, producing and contesting this speculative green urbanism at Forest City.

Complex Local Power Nexuses

As mentioned earlier, land is under the jurisprudence of the *negeri* government in Malaysia. On top of this, amongst the *negeri* governments in Peninsular Malaysia, Johor retains relative autonomy vis-a-vis the federal government on economic development decisions (Hutchinson, 2020). Furthermore, as the hereditary ruler and major landowner in the *negeri* of Johor, the Sultan holds considerable *de facto* power in various matters of the state, including urban development (see Hutchinson & Nair, 2020). Since land is a key asset and instrument for speculative urbanization and capital accumulation, it has become the source of contestation and negotiation between key stakeholders. Indeed, Ng's (2020) account of the politics of urban transformation in Johor highlights the presence of parallel governance structures of land development within Iskandar Malaysia, with the federal government consolidating its influence in one area (Iskandar Puteri where Forest City is located) and the Johor *negeri* government exerting its influence in another area (Johor Bahru city center).

With regards to the urban economic development of Iskandar Malaysia that is supposed to be equally co-directed by the federal and Johor *negeri* governments, it has been noted that "the far-reaching involvement of the federal government in areas that are under the remit of the state [negeri] government caused considerable tension" (Hutchinson, 2015, p. 98). In particular, the federal government's interventions in speculative urbanization in Iskandar Malaysia "seriously reduced the autonomous revenue-earning potential" (Hutchinson, 2015, p. 102) of the Johor *negeri* government. In sum, land related power nexuses in Iskandar Malaysia remain an important undercurrent that shapes speculative urbanization in ways that foreign developers such as CGG may not be fully aware of prior to their entry into the local urban development market. Hence, mainland Chinese developers accustomed to urban political economy in China may find that they are unable to directly transplant their knowledge, practices nor networks to Iskandar Malaysia.

On top of the federal-*negeri* power relations, there are also additional layers of the power nexus at the local scale. In the nearby fishing villages affected by the Forest City construction, "local level Napoleons" filter information, "siphon off" money compensations that were meant for the villagers, or subcontract business opportunities (e.g., fishing boat licenses) to their family members and cronies (interview with local observer, September 2019). Moreover (ibid.):

> Sometimes the developers actually want to do something about the damage that they caused but there are these layers in between that stop it. And the average person who has no connections suffers.

This suggests that, even if CGPV was genuine in their compensation and social engagement initiatives, their efforts may not achieve the desired effects due to the presence of opaque and complex layers of local power nexuses. It is within this complex landscape of

power relations that local stakeholders differentially perceive actually-existing green urbanism at Forest City.

"We cannot say anything": local officers and academics

While the local planning and city council officers personally disagreed with the project in terms of its scale of development and the potential impacts of its extensive land reclamation, they felt that this was a top-down directive that they could not contest as rank-and-file officers. As a local officer lamented, "sometimes we don't agree but we are forced to agree… we are government servants, …you know, we follow our rules, we only do our jobs" (interview, February 2020). The only available option was mitigation and "damage control" to reduce the urban and environmental impacts of the project. An illustrative case involved the local planners' response to the constraints caused by the Forest City project on water supply.

A local planning officer interviewed explained that water supply by the local city council is usually planned ahead based on population projection (interview, January 2020). However, as the Forest City project "suddenly injected a lot of population" into the area, the current and planned water supply is unable to cater for three of the islands. As a way to "reduce the damage [through] damage control," the local city council has imposed planning approval conditions such as requiring CGPV to submit water supply proposals for 2025 onwards when the current water supply can no longer cater for the development's water supply.

While resigned to adopt an attitude of "damage control [following] the aftermath," the officer nonetheless acknowledged that mainland Chinese developers have the technologies and technical skills to actualize their large-scale development projects within a much shorter time frame compared to local developers. The officer explained that there has been an

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iterative process of learning from and adjusting to each other as various phases of Forest City are constructed on site.

> At first of course we had a lot of conflicts. We tried to understand: "Oh, actually their thinking is like this." We should also try to accept [their views and ways of doing things] and listen to them. So if it's something [concerning our] laws, we cannot compromise the minimum [safeguards]. But beyond this, can we consider [their proposals]? We see how to [be] flexible in interpretation and execution to make the environment better. It's not a very static kind of interpretation, "A is A." We try to see what is their justification behind their design and their wish list.

In this sense, CGPV had to engage in repeated consultative discussions with local authorities on the transplantation and translation of CGG's "green and smart" brand image at Forest City - something that perhaps was not initially anticipated on their part. A local observer remarked that "some parties within [CGPV] used [the Sultan's involvement] as a license to do whatever they want, ...which is why initially they didn't do the DEIA, because they thought they could get away with it" (interview, September 2019). This again points to the complex local power nexus that foreign developers may not intuitively understand, in order to effectively achieve their desired urban development outcomes. While the support from a powerful local elite may be sufficient for similar urban development projects elsewhere, in this case the battleground involved other powerful stakeholders such as the federal and *negeri* governments, which have their own economic, political, and civic agendas. In fact, in the case of the DEIA, another layer of complexity came in as the massive land reclamation at the Singapore-Malaysia maritime borders led to the Singapore government raising diplomatic concerns to the Malaysian federal government (see Rahman, 2017a, pp. 23-24).

In terms of the attractiveness of Forest City's "green and smart" offering, one of the officers informed us that local residents preferred "landed housing with a garden" in

suburban areas "which is more comfortable" rather than high-rise apartments (interview, February 2020). This suggests that local residents may not find Forest City attractive as their housing option. We observed that local families - temporary visitors and not Forest City residents - visit the artificial beach and public recreational water features at Forest City on weekends (Figure 6). However, public access to these facilities is not guaranteed as the project is, after all, a private development.

To a large extent, this "green and smart" city and its green urbanism features have been developed primarily for foreign investors and Forest City residents rather than for local populations. Indeed, based on his analysis of publicly available property sales statistics, Ong (2017) found that 98.54% of Forest City units (Phase 2-10) were sold to foreign buyers. This suggests that the developer was speculating on the purchasing power of foreign buyers for the success of its Forest City project, implementing various promotional measures to attract them especially from China: Mainland Chinese buyers contributed to 70% of the 16,000 apartment units sold in 2016 (Tan & Yong, 2017). Moreover, priced at RM700,000 onward, these units are well above the affordability of local populations.[10] Indeed, Lim and Ng (2020) highlighted that the Forest City development contributes toward the exacerbation of housing affordability in the *negeri* of Johor. This leads to a further question: who are the local beneficiaries of this "green urbanism" development?

[Figure 6 about here]

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[10] The average house price in Johor in 2018Q2 was RM327,173 (source: Valuation and Property Services Department, Ministry of Finance), while the mean monthly household disposable income was RM5,966 in 2016 and RM6,923 in 2019 (DOSM, 2020).

Local academics and urban experts generally expressed skepticism toward the Forest City project. They reasoned that there are abundant land resources in Johor for urban developments, and it was unnecessary to resort to large-scale land reclamation. Furthermore, the impacts of land reclamation are "transboundary" and cannot be confined locally (interview with urban planning academics, August 2019). With regards to the green urbanism proclaimed by the Forest City project, an urban sustainability expert responded skeptically, going as far as branding it "greenwashing" (interview, September 2019):

> Forest City always has that claim to be sustainable - low carbon, carbon neutral, green, and so on. I'm not sure. I mean, as academics we have to be very objective about this. But looking at it, to some degree I think it's a lot of greenwashing. ...In the very first place, if there is no need to reclaim an island - Johor has such an expanse of land area and all flat in the southern area - is there really a need to reclaim and especially in an area which is so sensitive with respect to the ecosystem and ecology? So, in the first place when that is done, I don't think it is sustainable. Whatever claims you put in there, to me it's useless.

Nonetheless, the local academics and urban experts interviewed shared a similar ambivalent stance with the local planning and city council officers: "What has been done has been done. We cannot say anything. We have no say in what decisions they [i.e., the high-level decision makers who approved and supported the Forest City project] are making or what they have decided upon" (interview, August 2019).

The undersides of green urbanism: voices of the people

When asked about their first impressions about Forest City, a group of local youths expressed a sense of alienation and of impending change to their existing culture and ways of living (group interview, September 2019). One of them criticized that the "green everywhere"

façade of Forest City was not natural or authentic,[11] while another spoke about the loss of village culture and heritage as a result of the mega development. Below are some excerpts from this conversation (authors' translation from Malay):

> Youth A: I felt weird the first time I entered Forest City. As villagers, when we go to the city we feel that it's not right. We feel that it is strange or unfamiliar, something that we can't accept.

> Youth B: I felt weird because they built so quickly. There's the fear of collapse. The village environment became different. It feels like the city is coming nearer to the village, so we have to be prepared to accept this reality.

> Youth C: I felt disgusted. Because the name is "Forest City," but I see that the development is not a forest (laughs). There is a lot of green, but they planted it. The plants are not original, they are fake.

> Youth D: My first impression is, I felt a bad aura. I think the village heritage has disappeared. Lost. So [Forest City] is like a threat to us.

The youths also spoke of water and electricity disruptions in their village as a result of the construction works at Forest City. They felt threatened by the increasing presence of foreign construction workers in their village (Figure 7). For, in the earlier stages of construction, some villagers became victims of road accidents involving construction vehicles as the construction was literally in their backyard (interview with local resident, September 2019). Anecdotal evidence shows that there are waste disposal and drainage issues in the temporary construction workers' quarters located near the villages (group interview with local youths, September 2019). This suggests that the idea of a "green and smart" city is only manifested in the saleable areas which are visible to the public and potential buyers; it is

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[11] Indeed, Moser and Avery (2021) note that plastic green foliage and plastic animals were used to create the illusion of "green" walls and lush tropical landscapes throughout the development.

not extended to other places such as their workers' quarters, which are by and large rendered invisible.

[Figure 7 about here]

In the production of Forest City, such invisible undersides of green urbanism are unequally experienced by local stakeholder groups. While the discursive power of "green and smart" has been significant for the strategic marketing and branding of the project, it has also unevenly transformed the local way of life and endangered local and trans-local environmental dynamics. As was discussed earlier, green infrastructures and technologies require constant inflows of capital, which tends to produce speculative real estate projects for excessive financial gains appropriated mostly by non-resident investor buyers and development coalitions. Such speculative green developments target potential individual investor buyers whose socio-economic profiles are distinctively different from those of local populations, and who are more likely to leave their properties vacant if high-rent tenancy demand does not materialize. The logic of speculative urbanization thus prevails and presides over green urbanism, and this is in turn embodied in the selective actualization of "green" development plans. Such an environmentally speculative pattern has also been observed in some other projects recently pushed through China's BRI (see Harlan, 2020), as well as in similar developments in the Gulf (Rizzo, 2017).

Conclusion

Drawing on the case of Forest City, this article has examined the micropolitics of cross-border transplantation and translation of green urbanism in Asia. Local micropolitics play a

significant role in shaping the mobilization of discursive green urbanism for speculative city-making. Once a top-down directive was made to proceed with the Forest City project at Iskandar Malaysia, all that the local rank and file government officers can do was to adopt mitigation strategies to assist in the materialization of the project (which is backed by powerful local elites) while ensuring the alignment of the project to existing local green urbanism guidelines to a certain extent. Nonetheless, while Forest City is an unplanned and unanticipated urban development project for Iskandar Malaysia, it is, after all, a major, and perhaps the biggest, source of foreign investment and urban capital that is in line with IRDA's broader economic development strategies that hinge upon speculative city-making.

With regards to the discourse of green urbanism, we find that the "green and smart" features at Forest City have been primarily undertaken for marketing and branding purposes in the course of speculative city-making of Iskandar Malaysia, constituting "technologies of imagination" that speculation accompanies (Bear, 2020, p. 3). Moreover, these technologies and the completed "green" environment are to be exclusively enjoyed by the residents within this private city, suggesting that the success of speculative urbanization hinges in part upon those whose purchasing power enables them to invest in the end-products of the developer. Importantly, the private "green and smart" city has been created upon encroachments onto existing local habitats, threatening local livelihoods. This greenfield mega development, like many Chinese eco-cities that purport to embody green urbanism and ecological civilization, "blur[s] the lines between artificial and 'natural'" (Caprotti et al., 2015, p. 504). The project cannot be said to be "green," "sustainable" or "low carbon" because its creation and continued operational existence rely heavily on the unsustainable exploitation and deployment of existing resources, locally as well as globally. Indeed, sand for land

reclamation is transported from Teluk Ramunia (lit. "Ramunia Bay")[12] and grazed from local hills (Rahman, 2017a, p. 36), while plants are imported from China and the Middle East to create the manicured "green city." New and completely artificial "greenscapes" have been (re)created on the back of active and speedy destruction of the natural habitats upon which the new city stands. Mountains have been moved to green the sea in the speculative making of Forest City. The creation and maintenance of Forest City rely on a vast supply chain, stretching across and beyond the local, that is not necessarily, if at all, environmentally friendly or low carbon.

In the making of such large-scale "green" projects, specific features of green urbanism and green technology have been consistently branded as their unique selling point in an increasingly competitive market for speculative capital investments and economic growth. It is in this context within which various (eco-)cities have competed globally to become the "greenest" (Rosol, Béal & Mössner, 2017). Ironically, these green infrastructures and technologies are materialized for the benefit of speculative investors, oftentimes to the detrimental exclusion of local populations who are left to bear the negative costs of such "green" pursuits. The logic of speculative urbanization thus prevails and presides over sustainable and equitable green urbanism. While the local states may accord financial commitments to such projects, especially at their onset, such commitments may be subject to geopolitical vicissitudes, shifting scalar politics as well as the changing interests of local politicians (see also Goldman, 2011; Shin, 2014). These shifts, in turn, result in short- and long-term impacts, often negatively due to high risks embedded in such projects, on the social, economic, cultural and environmental sustainability that are initially promised and branded by those behind such projects.

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[12] Southeast coastal area of Johor, about 140km from Forest City.

The research findings regarding speculative large-scale green urbanism developments are largely comparable to similar developments elsewhere in the global South (e.g., China and the Middle East), which other scholars have previously documented (e.g., Chien, 2013; Cugurullo, 2013; Rizzo, 2017). A further comparative analysis, such as that of Rizzo (2020), would certainly be productive in uncovering the similarities and differences in the discursive use of green urbanism across sites, as well as the transplantation of green urbanism discourses and strategies between different sites of origin and destination. This approach presents promising future research agendas, given the scale and geographical spread of BRI-related speculative and infrastructure development projects in many destination countries and cities. We call for more attention among urban geography scholars to critically interrogate how transplanted speculative green urbanism discourses and strategies are operationalised, how they interact with and are shaped by local power nexuses, as well as their short- and long-term implications on local communities and the environment.

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Table 1. Large-scale mixed-use development projects undertaken by mainland Chinese developers in Iskandar Malaysia

Developer	Project	Site area (ha)	Gross development value (RM, billion)	Number of residential units
Country Garden Group	Country Garden Danga Bay	22.26	10	9,539
	Forest City	1,386	100	160,000
Guangzhou R&F Properties	R&F Princess Cove	46.9	24.5	7,258[a]
Greenland Group[b]	Greenland Danga Bay	5.5	2.2	2,205
	Greenland Tebrau	52	18.4	20,000

Notes:

[a] Phases 1-5 (https://ehome.kpkt.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/172)

[b] A Chinese state-owned enterprise established and owned by the Shanghai Municipal Government.

Sources: Choong (2013), Chow (2015), Cole (2015), Mahrotri and Choong (2016), Murugiah (2017), Ong (2017)

Table 2. Respondents interviewed (total: 28 interviewees)

Respondent group	Locations of in-person interviews	Number of respondents
Country Garden employees (current and former)	Iskandar Malaysia, Shunde	1, 5
Local state urban planning officers	Iskandar Malaysia	3
Local urban development industry players	Kuala Lumpur, Iskandar malaysia	5, 1
Urban studies experts and observers	Kuala Lumpur, Iskandar Malaysia, Singapore	2, 3, 1
Local residents	Iskandar Malaysia, Shunde	4, 3

List of figure captions

Figure 1: Location map of Forest City
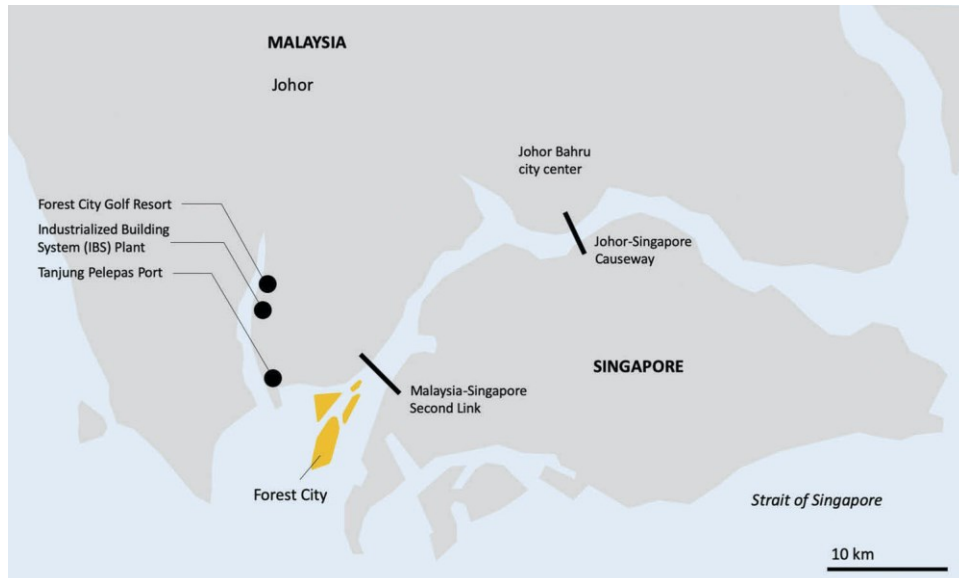
(Source: map by authors)

Figure 2: Forest City, Iskandar Malaysia

(Source: Photo by authors, 4 September 2019)

Figure 3: "Forest City, building together," a billboard installed by Foshan municipality

(Source: photo by authors, 20 August 2019)

Figure 4: Country Garden Group headquarter in Shunde, China

(Source: photos by authors, 19 August 2019)

Figure 5: "Green everywhere" at Forest City, Iskandar Malaysia

(Source: photos by authors, 4 September 2019)

Figure 6: Local families at Forest City public areas on a weekend

(Source: photos by authors, 30 November 2019)

Figure 7. Entrance to the workers' compound in the neighboring village

(Source: photo by authors, 5 September 2019)