

Diagnosing Beijing 2020: Mapping the Ungovernable City

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Urban theory regularly formulates and individuates the city as inherently ungovernable. By this I mean that the city is a space comprised of social actors that elude the embrace of government. 'The city is thus both a problem for government and a permanent incitement to government', write Engin Isin, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose in their insightful paper, 'Governing Cities'.¹ For them the notion of the diagram is particularly illuminating as something not merely ideological or ideal, but as something that is functional yet somehow intrinsic to its effects. Examining these effects in urban mapping can guide our diagnosis of the city through attention to 'the particular lines of force each diagram imagines between the virtuous and vicious powers immanent to the city'.² Such lines of force cannot be read directly, but must be diagnosed from histories, symptoms and surfaces. More often than not the maps generated by urban planners fail to explicitly identify these competing force-fields; labels instead evoke the prevalent metaphors for governance ideals. From the garden city of the late nineteenth century, to the streets-in-the-sky proposed by modernism to today's new urban villages, each presupposes a particular form of civil disorder: those elements hidden from surveillance must be made transparent; the illegibility inciting confusion and chaos must be ordered; the alienation of individualism and privatisation must be stemmed by invoking earlier social aspirations.

If one traces the genesis of urban theory and its diagrams from conceptions of the Greek *polis*,

as do Isin *et al*, 'it might be said that the specificity of the nineteenth-century problematisation of the city occurs at the point at which the city ceases to be a *model for good government* and becomes concretised as a *milieu of government*'.³ As we turn to Beijing, however, in an attempt to diagnose a city through its imagined future, we should first understand that the two terms have always been co-terminous in Beijing's conceptualisation. For this reason urban theory ideals derived from the knowledge structures of the European Enlightenment and Western modernisms find resonance in China today, particularly in the wake of the resurgence of scientific rationality during the Reform Era (1978-1989). Chinese planning, which John Friedmann has characterised as 'orthogonal' or 'Euclidean', generally presents itself as value neutral and engineering-based, incapable of addressing the 'wicked problems' inherent in market-based development.⁴ In recent years a confluence of pressures infusing the Chinese city has led Chinese planners to adopt the postmodern discourse of sustainability, however these strategic aims are largely superimposed upon earlier modernist statist practices.

Not only do modernist epistemologies remain largely unexamined amongst Chinese urban theorists and practitioners to date⁵, but 'good governance' is animated by alternate valences. The ideal did not mean, in the Athenian sense, debates conducted within the *agora*, but rather, in the Confucian signification, the paternalistic patterning of empire – spatially embodied in the ordering of

the imperial city – after familial hierarchies. Many of the historic patterns in the spatial administration and design of Chinese cities – uniformity, regularity, hierarchy, cellularity, and ritual symbolism of urban space – continue to support governmental control of society: ‘Chinese cities are bound into a regional and national system of governance that extends below the municipal level down to that of the street and household’.⁶ Beijing, now characterised by the ‘off-ground’ architecture distinguishing neo-liberal privatisation, is attempting to mitigate the damaging effects of rampant development on the social fabric, cultural heritage and the environment by practicing sustainable urban planning. Yet we may wonder, as in the more general case of the city diagram, whether these new mappings of Beijing function primarily as strategic rhetorical metaphors that mask unnamed, imminent threats to governance.

Before examining Beijing through its future mappings, it is instructive to consider how urban historians assess the current relationship of the capital to its historic diagrams. In *Beijing: The Nature and Planning of a Chinese Capital City*, Victor F.S. Sit examines its three thousand year history, including eight hundred years as China’s capital and cultural and political centre of the Liao, Jin, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. At its very inception Beijing was laid out according to the rules for a ‘ruler city’ (*wang cheng*) as prescribed in the *Zhouli Kaogongji*, a planning and construction text based on Confucian principles. Maps of Dadu, the ‘Great Capital’ of the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), reveal a close adherence to the *Zhouli* prescription of a ‘nine-*li* square, three gates on the sides, divided by a grid of nine paths horizontally and laterally with Imperial Ancestral Temple to the east and Alters of Soil and Grain to the west, an outer court to the south and marketplaces to the north’.⁷ In such a plan the ideal of *lizhi* – the use of ritual action to rule a country – established the sanctity of imperial rule, with the north-south axis design representing the authority of the state. In this sense, Beijing

contained key elements of what Victor Sit terms ‘the ideal Chinese City as reflecting the traditional world view of Confucianism’ in its:

1. site (a central location relative to subjects and natural environs)
2. orientation (facing south, the direction of potency)
3. layout (square and orderly, conforming with the orderliness of nature)
4. central location of palace or administration (symbolising centralisation of power and the mandate from Heaven to rule)
5. ceremonial building of the Ancestral Hall and Altar of Grains and Soils (reflecting the lineage of the sovereign to the sage kings)
6. the wall (symbolising the sovereign’s reign on earth)
7. location of the market to the north (representing the lesser significance of trade and merchant classes in an agrarian economy).⁸

The traditional Chinese urban form, concludes Sit, was a utilitarian setting in which society functioned while also providing a symbolic function for the state to inform and guide human behaviour. In this sense, he argues, Beijing’s traditional role as the national centre of communication and control is mirrored in its recent development as a global city at the centre of finance and corporate decisions, providing communication and financial controls over material production and consumption rather than engaging in productive activities.⁹

Other urban theorists writing in the late twentieth century locate Beijing’s historical continuity in the symbolism of Tiananmen Square. In ‘Beijing: The Expression of a National Political Ideology’, Zhu Zixuan and Reginald Yin-Wang Kwok sanction contemporary Beijing urban planning, particularly in relation to the city centre:

Positioned at the centre of Beijing’s traditional north-

*south axis and the new east-west axis, Tiananmen Square is the heart of the capital. Surrounded by carefully selected and designed structures, the square has taken on immense political and ideological meaning, symbolizing not only the authority but the historical continuity of the state, with the imperial dynasty replaced by the socialist republic. As Beijing moves toward the twenty-first century, Tiananmen Square is truly at the nation's centre, in both symbolic and utilitarian terms.*¹⁰ [fig. 1]

Tsinghua University architectural historian Wu Huanjia goes even further, expansively endorsing Beijing's development by celebrating its historical continuity in creating urban forms that signal regime change. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) emperors, on the other hand, come in for criticism for abdicating their stewardship of Beijing as rulers by leaving it largely unchanged.¹¹ 'According to [Wu Huanjia's] logic', writes Daniel Abramson in his critique of Anne-Marie Broudehoux's *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing*, 'it is precisely the current destruction and remaking of Beijing that affirms most strongly its permanence as the seat of China's national government'.¹²

In order to affirm its legitimacy, the Communist Party transformed Beijing into a beacon of socialism via symbolism associated, in particular, with the sacred space of Tiananmen Square. Art historian Wu Hung opens *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* by implying that the choices of this regime signalled the city's utter decimation: 'As soon as Beijing was made the capital of the People's Republic of China this ancient city reached a fatal moment in its survival'.¹³ Wu Hung's analysis begs the question of what immanence of the city will fail to survive, and invites comparison with the opening line of a book that locates the urban in the intangible. Italo Calvino begins *Invisible Cities* with 'Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expe-

ditions, but ... only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing'. The Khan discerned this timeless pattern even in that 'desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our sceptre, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing'.¹⁴ These fictional metaphysical musings between the emperor and his envoy become weighty when considering the present fate of the ancient capital of Beijing, one of the Khan's domains when it was named Dadu and proclaimed capital of the Yuan Dynasty in 1271. Whether something inherent to the city will survive radical alterations to its governing polity and urban fabric remains an open question. The imminent sociability that is the city may govern it after all.

Many know the details and aftermath of the Party's decision not to adopt Liang Sicheng's and Chen Zhanxiang's 1950's plan to locate the administrative centre to the west of the Old City. The story of how Liang wept at the destruction of the ancient city walls in 1952 (eventually replaced by the Second Ringroad) has entered the realm of urban lore. But fifty years later, when journalist and urban historian Wang Jun revisited the debate in his best-selling book *Chengji (City Records, its title also translated as An Evolutionary History of Beijing City)*, Mao Zedong's missed opportunity particularly resonated with Chinese citizens suffering from pollution, congestion, and needless loss of cultural heritage.¹⁵ Wu Hung insists that the consequences of Mao's decision cannot be exaggerated: 'all the subsequent destruction and construction of Beijing were fundamentally determined at this moment In short, Beijing's fate was sealed by locating the government in the old city'.¹⁶ The 'concentric circles with one centre' pattern of development has resulted



Fig. 1: The Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square remain the ideological and physical center of the municipality today.

in endless downtown traffic jams in an area comprising twelve per cent of the city but carrying a fourth of the total traffic flow to the four hundred government organs and institutions crowded within it. Meanwhile, the incessant 'ringing' of Beijing continues, with a Sixth Ringroad (20 km from the city centre) completed in 2005 and a Seventh Ringroad extending beyond the city limits in the works.

By the twenty-first century outrage at the opportunistic redevelopment of Beijing and other Chinese cities was ubiquitous.¹⁷ A 2004 report published by China Development Press lambasted China's grossly underdeveloped urban planning theory, skills, law and practice, and went so far as to quote Tianjin writer Feng Jikai's fierce deprecation of officials for destroying the nation's cultural heritage:

Whethersuperficiallypursuinginstantmodernization, frenetically accumulating political accomplishments, or purely fixated on economic gain, city administrators have wantonly handed over piece after piece of urban real estate to developers. The vast majority of these officials have absolutely no knowledge of the cultural heritage of these cities, and no desire to learn about it. So in a mere decade the unique features, historical ethos, and cultural attractions of many cities have been utterly destroyed. The cultural losses are enormous! How many cities in the world preserve their ancient features as a source of pride? We, on the other hand, show off the appalling 'marvel' of 'changing the map every three months'! It is no exaggeration to state that every single minute a significant portion of our historical cultural heritage is destroyed by an excavator. Yet the distinctiveness of each city is only formed after hundreds and thousands of years of accumulated human creativity.¹⁸

Civic activism among artists, intellectuals, journalists, and other citizens in Beijing gained an audience, and in May of 2006 the Chinese Minister of Culture, Sun Jiazheng, became the first high-level minister to

publicly apologise for the government's destruction of traditional Beijing as part of its relentless push to modernise. He confessed that the government had broken its own rules in allowing redevelopment of the country's cultural heritage, saying 'some cities have unilaterally gone all out to get a new look and have not done enough to protect old buildings ... There are things that I should have done and did not do, meetings I should have attended and did not attend'.¹⁹ *Urban China* editor Jiang Jun credits civic activism and consciousness-raising efforts such as *City Records*, for its impact on the attitudes of government officials: 'many officials confessed to Wang Jun that they were highly ashamed of their neglect of preservation'.²⁰

The 'model for good government' ideal looms large as municipal officials are subject to intensifying public scrutiny. Deep cultural values around 'face' and the responsibility of upright officials to the people have coalesced into plans to curb further destruction of the 'milieu of government'. The history and symptoms engendering the Beijing 2020 diagrams suggest that the political expediency of 'sustainability' places it into direct conflict with its alleged goals. As the formation of civil society becomes a real possibility in urban China, officials increasingly insist upon maintaining the spatial centrality of the seat of government vis-à-vis its municipal environs, symbolising the centralisation of power and the mandate from Heaven to rule. Sustainable development is further undermined by the general hostility of neo-liberal development strategies to metropolitan and regional level planning place. The 2020 Plans for Beijing Municipality, transparently displayed (in part) in the Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall, speak less to a moral rectification of the planning process than to the immanence of destabilising factors.

Sustainable Beijing 2020

Since the opening of the Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall in 2004, Beijing Municipality has showcased the key features of its 2020 master plan to the general

public, a major policy shift from previous plans which were shrouded in secrecy. [fig. 2] The 2020 master plan prominently adopts the 'sustainable city' ideal which permeates global urban planning and practice. Planning, in general, and the natural/scientific basis of the sustainable urban development ideal, in particular, may be socially legitimised on the basis of expert knowledge and rational explanation, but it makes permanent recourse to abstract metaphors. Peter Brand explains the effectiveness of metaphors in planning: 'in contrast to rational analysis ... metaphors are not analytical in the sense of disaggregating problems and uncovering causal relations; rather, they condense meaning and symbolize aspirations'.²¹ The steady abstraction of the idea of sustainability since the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report supports the idea that 'sustainability' evokes rather than denotes. Whereas the earliest uses of the term referred to the objective condition of natural resources systems, sustainable urban development became increasingly associated with a social subjectivity concerning the quality of life, interdependency, welfare, inclusion and cohesion. An expanded definition of the term, which synthesises its connotations by 2000, reads 'development that does not require resources beyond its environmental capacity, is equitable, promotes social justice, and is created through inclusive decision-making procedures'.²² As such, argues Brand, the sustainable city becomes 'a virtual metaphor for reanimating earlier social aspirations' in the new context of postmodern individuality and privatisation, while also 'insistently profiling the future in counterpoint to the mesmerising uncertainties of an ever-changing present'.²³

In post-revolutionary China, pressure from dystopian sentiments over the rising Gini coefficient and the loss of socialist egalitarianism yielded proposals for a 'New Socialist Countryside' in 2005, equitable labour laws in 2006, and rural health care initiatives legislated during the 17th Party Congress in 2007. In a country where the urban-rural dichotomy remains

systematically intact, despite its radical urbanisation from 18% in 1978 to 43% in 2005,²⁴ the metaphors animating rural and urban development connote differently. Programs such as the 'New Socialist Countryside', which are clearly 'virtual metaphors for earlier social aspirations' under Maoism, mark urgent attempts by the government to sustain the present (i.e., maintain social stability) rather than to 'profile the future'. The metaphors used for urban development, on the other hand, serve to pacify fears among urban elite about contamination, overcrowding and environmental degradation by 'insistently profiling the future in counterpoint'. Diagrams such as the 2020 Plans for Beijing Municipality are rich sources for diagnosing the planning rhetoric of 'sustaining the environment' and 'reclaiming social justice', timely figures for rational governance of the immanent ecological destruction and social chaos wrought by radical and uneven urban development.

Shi Xiaodong, a planner with the Beijing Municipal Institute of City Planning and Design, recently introduced four of these plans to an academic audience in the United States as follows:

Beijing's fast growth during the last two decades has been accompanied by a broad set of issues such as sprawling and congested metropolitan areas, limited space resources, degrading environments, and skyrocketing housing prices. In facing these issues, decision-makers began to realize that pursuing economic growth in a single dimension would not be sustainable. Recent efforts have manifested Beijing's determination in developing the city in a more sustainable way. The most important recent planning efforts carried out by city planners include:

Beijing 2006-2015 'Rail Transit Plan' for Compact City

Beijing 2005-2020 'Underground Space Plan' for Alternative Space

Beijing 2006-2020 'Undevelopable Area Plan' for Ecological Responsibility

*Beijing 2006-2010 'Low-income Housing Plan' for Affordability and Livability.*²⁵

Entitled 'Scientific Growth for Chinese Cities: Experiences from Beijing', Shi Xiaodong's presentation detailed plans to actualise the metaphors of sustainable development by creating a 'compact city' with 'alternative space' which is 'ecologically responsible' and 'livable'. These metaphors, adopted in a literal sense, enliven plans to reduce objectively defined problems of overcrowding, environmental degradation, and social inequity. Each of these plans materialised from dozens of municipality mappings synthesising extensive scientific analysis.

The Beijing 2006-2020 'Restricted Development Area Plan' for Ecological Responsibility, for example, incorporates boundary maps, topographical maps, construction land distribution maps, and vital landmark distribution maps into its analysis. Unique within China, this plan is intended to lead the way for other Chinese cities to preserve green space and water resources, reduce the greenbelt heat island, and stem urban sprawl. The composite map of the 16,410 square kilometre municipality depicts three categories: 'land which cannot be developed' (32.2%, primarily a forest reserve in the northeast); land subject to 'controlled construction' (64.6% providing pipeline protection, greenbelt protection, earthquake risk management, flood regulation, surface water protection, contaminant treatment protection), and land 'suitable for construction' (3.2%, primarily the historic city and the eleven new towns surrounding it concentrically).

The diagram, while rhetorically and visually persuasive, masks three pervasive threats to municipal (and by extension, national) governance in relation to its urbanisation process. The first, as detailed below, are critiques proffered by planning

experts on precisely the same grounds that the plan is being promoted: namely, its cost to 'livability', a 'compact city', and 'ecological responsibility'. The second is the charge, largely levied against the government by the populace, particularly by domestic elites, that the plan continues to sacrifice cultural heritage and the natural environment to short-term political gains and profiteering. The third, and perhaps the most vital not only to the stability of the city but of the nation, is the rising social unrest due to farmland being confiscated by the government and the resulting unemployment among the former agricultural population. This plan ostensibly protects agricultural lands from further unjust development, yet it aims to cleanse the first-tier city of its undesirable elements, such as disenfranchised migrant workers, and paves the way for a two-tiered city system to form which, in large part, replaces the urban-rural *hukou*, or 'household registration' system that previously spatially divided the urban and rural populations. The plan thus evokes the historical spectre of China's 'marauding masses', incited to rebellion by cataclysmic natural disasters and disenfranchisement. The 'spectre' of 'peasant rebellions' rampaging the cities manifested prior to the 2008 Chinese New Year when power outages due to historic blizzards stranded 5.8 million migrants at transportation stations, with some erupting in violent clashes with authorities. Premier Wen Jiabao appeared in person at the Guangzhou Railway Station to appease the masses, where one angry online commentator summed up the tensions: 'What caused 600,000 people to be stranded at the train station? It's not the heavy snow for days, nor is it the delayed or cancelled bus service. The problem is our old, two-tiered urban-rural divide'.²⁶

The mapping of controlled construction in Beijing Municipality, although presented as scientifically rational, displays subtle differences from assumptions prevailing in many countries, namely, that it is the 'failure of effective governance within cities that explains the poor environmental performance



Fig. 2: The Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall opened in 2004 to showcase key features of the Beijing Municipality 2020 Master Plan to the public. Source: BBC

of so many cities rather than an inherent characteristic of cities in general'²⁷ Instead, we encounter a rare case where the 'opposing force fields' of this plan were explicitly identified on one of Shi's slides of the plan, labelled 'a competition between the urban and the ecological environment'. Beijing 2020 conceives of the city, by definition, as an immanent threat to the environment. The anti-urban bias of the Maoist regime is well established, and a legacy of antagonistic understandings of the city, which many officials conceive of as receptacles for capital accumulation and *potemkinism*, lingers in the mind of its planners.²⁸ Shi's presentation of Beijing 2020 to a U.S. audience emphasised its environmental awareness, explicitly avoiding discussion of the massive redevelopment of the urban core for the 2008 Olympics and the construction of eleven new towns to house some 5.7 million people relocated from the city proper, which aims to limit its population to 18 million. The 2007 ratification of the plan for the eleven new towns, posted on the municipal website, similarly sugar-coats its appeal to a domestic audience, highlighting the symmetry, harmony, and beauty of eleven 'bright pearls' that 'ring' the urban core like a 'jade necklace'.²⁹ Such euphemisms immediately evoke traditional symbols of good governance and harmonious urban aesthetics, glossing over the radical reconfiguration of China's traditionally sustainable, walking-scale milieus and lifestyles.

Again, when presenting the Beijing 2006-2015 'Rail Transit Plan' for Compact City, Shi focused on increasing reliance on public transportation rather than the fact that these railways connect eleven new towns to the city centre. Most planning experts on Asian megacities such as Beijing recommend against the reinforcement of urban decentralising processes through planned satellite developments. Rather, planned urban extensions along public transport-based axes, such as those in Singapore, are considered more successful in limiting urban sprawl across the whole metropolitan region.³⁰ As a

case in point, in 2005 the Beijing Municipal Commission for Urban Planning (BMCUP), recognising the need to fine-tune its 2020 plan to account for variables such as economic and population growth and market forces, commissioned a team of U.S. experts to provide an assessment of alternative development futures. The scenarios generated by the task force predicted that the greatest environmental and lifestyle benefits would result from high density and contiguous urban development in the existing urban area rather than building new satellite towns at the far fringe, and from developing sub-regional job-housing balance along transportation corridors to encourage efficient commuting, improve employee productivity, and alleviate the current severe traffic congestion.³¹

University of North Carolina task force member Yan Song correctly anticipated, however, that BMCUP would not heed recommendations to restrict Beijing's current 'pancake' development pattern of ring roads. The main reason Beijing continues its concentric development, she says, are that it is politically risky to raise car or fuel taxes or restrict car ownership, as decade-old policies encouraging the growth of road construction and the automobile industry continue to prioritise the car above public transit: 'This is how local officials get promoted to higher ranks; it's not a conspiracy theory; it's reality'.³² Rather than promoting social and ecological sustainability, the residents of the new towns, some of which already serve as bedroom communities for the lower income populations, will continue their long commutes into the city centre or provide cheap labour for the multinational corporations building manufacturing plants in the neighbouring areas, while car ownership among the elites will rise. Rather than creating a polynucleated urban form, as intended, the commuting distances and lower quality of life in the new towns will likely create two-tiered urban environments, intensifying pressure on the urban core. Further, studies indicate that in many 'megacity' regions the most likely

result of new 'growth poles', planned to relieve the population pressures on the central city, is sprawl on a gigantic scale, resulting from the longer-term mobility patterns between and around the new and existing centres. The planned depopulation of the historic core and the expansion of the outer city to absorb migrants from rural areas and the inner city radically reconfigures social forms of social and spatial organisation that are already sustainable.

Such calculations do not concern most Chinese planners. In the words of Yang Xifeng, Vice Director of Lingang New City Administrative Committee located in Shanghai Municipality 75 km from the city centre, 'if we build it, they will come'.³³ Lingang, one of four hundred new Chinese cities planned to support populations of 500,000-800,000 by 2020, is primarily a capital accumulation fix that serves as an industrial basis to support the currently unemployed rural population. These cities are nonetheless enthusiastically promoted as 'education cities', 'tourism resorts', or 'artist towns' to attract FDI. For all the rhetoric of education, tourism and culture, most urban experts remain sceptical. For example, when a group visited Lingang New City prior to its 'official opening' a Fudan University doctoral student exclaimed in disbelief, 'educated people won't relocate to such a remote area – they'll run right back to Beijing or Shanghai – we don't work as hard as we do only to end up in a cultural backwater!' Yang Xifeng conceded that most residents will be rural workers employed by the local industries, along with resort owners and a smaller number of transient young engineers and managers 'willing to sacrifice a few years to contribute to nation-building'.³⁴

The Beijing 2006-2010 'Low-Income Housing Plan' for Affordability and Livability conveniently enables the municipality to apply sustainability rhetoric to its ongoing relocation of residents to the new towns and periphery. A distribution map must qualify the label it applies to 'guaranteed housing'

by acknowledging it is 'mixed to a certain degree to boost social equity and inclusion', as this housing is located exclusively in the far fringes and new towns. Far from embodying the sustainability ideals of social justice, this plan reinforces the idea of a second-class citizenry that will remain disconnected from the cultural vitality of the urban core. The urban elite will inevitably migrate back into the major cultural centres, creating a multi-tiered socio-economic regional development directly based upon proximity from the core. Given such dynamics, unless draconian restrictions on urban migration are reinstated, the unidirectional 'drift' of the 'floating population' to first-tier cities is likely to continue unabated.

Finally, the Beijing 2005-2020 'Underground Space Plan' for Resource-saving and the Beijing 2006-2015 'Rail Transit Plan' for a Compact City reveal the extent to which the metaphor 'compact city' can be both literally applied and loosely interpreted. Peter Brand is again instructive in his apt characterisation of the inherent appeal of the term:

The compact city is an even more powerful metaphor [than the sustainable city], more resonant and connected to today's consumer culture. It is, after all, a contemporary of the compact disc – it feeds off the latter's connotations of leading edge technology, the latest in lifestyle, and push-button efficiency. The compact city puts itself in tacit opposition to the tawdriness of sprawl (of cities, or cathode tubes, or overweight bodies and ill-focused lives).³⁵

The Beijing plans for a compact city diagram the effects of scarcity and inefficiency. Its corresponding schematic diagrams evoke the provocative hyperdensity imagined by the 2005 'Beijing Boom Towers' model proposed by the Dutch concern Dynamic City Foundation. One of the most aggressive underground space plans in the world, it maximises development use rights in the urban core by allotting 430 million square metres in the shallow layer (up to 10 metres underground) and

630 million square meters in the middle layer (10-30 metres underground), largely clustered around traffic hubs and subway transfer stations. In a classic case of interests driving planning, these use rights are primarily granted to the private developers underwriting Beijing's massive public transportation system to serve the new towns. When pressed, Mr. Shi allowed that one-third of the construction costs of the Number 4 Subway Line, for example, is being underwritten by the Hong Kong Metro Corporation, which gains land use and operating rights from the deal. The municipal investment in the underground space plan is further rationalised by a chart correlating rising GDP levels to the ability to fund sustainable development. This space will 'expand the frontiers' of the city through 'saving land resources, facilitating public transportation, providing underground parking, expanding storage space, reducing pollution, saving energy, protecting open space, protecting cultural heritage'. What this rhetoric masks is the plan's compensation for municipal development of space-wasting American-style new urbanism and planning gated communities on agricultural land in the periphery. Such practices result in far less compact urban form than would high density and contiguous development in the existing urban area.

Diagnosing Beijing 2008

Prevailing theories of globalisation portray cities as spaces of cultural homogenisation where place and community are disappearing. Yet cities are characterised not so much by homogeneity as unevenness, in places which anchor concrete social, political, and spatial projects. Because the dynamics governing China's urban transformation are embedded in neo-liberal global processes that extend beyond local interests or systems, but have been induced by the devolution of power to the localities, a series of contradictions have ensued. Since the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, sustainable development worldwide has been undermined by a shift in the focus of spatial planning away from regional

equality to the 'city in itself'. In 1983 China initiated a structural change in administration to 'cities leading counties' (*shi dai xian*) intended to launch the economic dismantling of the urban-rural dichotomy. By transferring the subordinate counties of prefectures to the leadership of cities, 'the leading role of the city was explicitly established to usher in an epoch of city-led regional development for the first time in Chinese history'.³⁶

Yet contradictions in neo-liberal capitalism have resulted in competition between cities and the second-tier county seats and towns located within the huge municipal regions under their jurisdictions. With intense global competition for export-oriented development, neo-liberal policymakers argue against disturbing the market determination of the relationship between location and economic activity: 'planning should facilitate national economic growth and gains in inter-personal equity rather than being concerned with misguided attempts to achieve convergence of regional incomes and service provision'.³⁷ Cities, seen as 'engines of growth', were to add value to rural products, yet the new regionalism that emerged as cities and regions prioritised their investments according to global trade blocs such as ASEAN or NAFTA has driven cities and their regions into competition against each other in increasingly liberalised markets. Although the Party continues to present Chinese market reforms as gradualism, or 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the notion that its current problems are merely transitional side effects on the road to an eventual unproblematic state of development must be largely discounted.³⁸ It is possible, and some think probable, that the central government will lose control over its decentralised agents who become 'predatory' instead of developmentalist, creating a crisis of legitimacy for the state.³⁹

In a persuasive argument against gradualism, Daniel Abramson shows that despite the fact that current planning practices have not been very

cognisant of community and property in their adoption of market-based strategies, these concerns have pushed Chinese planning to evolve dialectically. 'Each act of conflict-resolution depends on the immediate application of a set of existing principles – the outcome of which may require a questioning of those principles as well as a redefinition of the developmental goal'.⁴⁰ In the process, Abramson says, the nature of government itself may be redefined, including, for example, the role of political parties. In what amounts to a 'meta-mapping' of China's city plans, he draws a schematic of changing PRC urban planning practices in which he explicitly identifies current challenges to governance. In his diagram, Abramson juxtaposes the regime's 'unintended outcome' of 'popular resistance to urban expansion and redevelopment' against the 'intended outcome' of 'sustainable growth'. Immanent effects, or what we have described as 'lines of force', emerge from governmental processes of building community, clarifying property rights, and protecting the environment through stronger regulation. Abramson predicts that the next generation of planning modes to emerge from the synthesis of this current dialectic is community enablement, incentivisation, and advocacy. By this he means the evolution of planning toward the representation of public community interests in determining the form of cities, where the disposition of property is its ultimate subject. China's future planning may retain its current form of governmental regulations on property development or it may develop *incentives* for it; it may continue to promote governmental or non-governmental design or it may *advocate* for it by enabling community formation. What Abramson imagines in his diagram approaches the immanent form of the city-state, where authority grows out of the populace.

This form of authority is increasingly advocated by the cultural elite in China today. Civic activism is on the rise in a wide variety of forums. Socially committed filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke raise

awareness of the human and ecological costs of unsustainable development; journalists such as Wang Jun highlight the consequences of forging political symbolisms at the cost of the historical and aesthetic integrity of the city, and the avant-garde art community stimulates public debate over ethics. Huang Rui, co-organiser of the 2006 Dashanzi Arts Festival, 'Beijing and Its Background' (*Beijing Beijing*), conceived of the theme as a public forum for reflecting on the possibility of genuine civic culture in Beijing. In a recent interview Huang told me:

*Despite the fact that Beijing dates back to the Yuan Dynasty, it has always been governed by peasants, from the Mongolians to the Communists, who perceived a vibrant civic urban culture as a challenge to political authority. These days even government leaders realize they need to infuse culture back into the city's cells, given the destruction of the old urban fabric. But old habits die hard; despite their best intentions they habitually destroy the very sources of culture that they are now trying to nourish. The authorities need to stop thinking like peasants and start realizing that both the leadership and the populace would benefit from genuine urban culture, that it would actually enhance their political power. If Beijing cannot succeed in this, other Chinese cities are doomed as well.*⁴¹

Huang Rui's reflections suggest that government legitimacy should depend not only on the pursuit of policies that strive to realise collective aspirations, but also on the ability of the government work to reformulate its principles to resolve the contradictions that arise from these aspirations. The resistance of Beijing municipal planners to adopt sustainability plans which would alter the symmetry of Tiananmen Square in the municipality may have been culturally determined by the historical primacy of the State's spatial ideology, but a confluence of civic forces that may think otherwise is growing. Rather than mapping Beijing's future, a diagram-

matics of Beijing planning illuminates which form of spontaneity preoccupies the nation at this historical juncture, disclosing the imminence of ungovernable elements in the city. As stated earlier, whether something inherent to the city will survive radical alterations to its governing polity and urban fabric remains an open question. The imminent sociability that is the city may govern it after all.

Notes

1. Engin F. Isin et al, 'Governing Cities: Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Advanced Liberalism', *Urban Studies Working Paper* (Toronto: York University Urban Studies Programme, 1998), p. 3.
2. Ibid. p. 29.
3. Ibid. p. 6.
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 25. Presentation slides provided by Shi Xiaodong, 'Scientific Growth for Chinese Cities: Experiences from Beijing,' sponsored by the Centre for Urban Studies, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 25 January 2008.
 26. 'Sustainable Developing and Cities' in *Sustainability, the Environment and Urbanization*, edited by Cedric Pugh, (London: Earthscan, 1996), p. 50.
 27. Fulong Wu argues that the function of the city in China's postreform era has been transformed as the physical/built environment is increasingly used as a means to overcome the constraint of accumulation in state-led industrialisation: "the city is used as a fix to absorb capital." See 'Beyond Gradualism: China's Urban Revolution and Emerging Cities' in *China's Emerging Cities: The Making of New Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 9. Anne-Marie Broudehoux argues that Beijing planners inherited the Maoist legacy, influenced by the potemkinist mentality of Stalinist socialism. *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 30-32.
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 33. Yang Xifeng (Vice Director of the Shanghai Lingang New City Administrative Committee Land and Planning Department), interview with the author, Lingang, Shanghai, 5 November 2006.
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 36. Jieming Zhu, *The Transition of China's Urban Development: From Plan-Controlled to Market-Led* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1999), p. 30.
 37. Rod Burgess, 'The Compact City Debate: A Global Perspective' in *Compact Cities: Sustainable Urban Forms for Developing Countries*, edited by Mike Jenks and Rod Burgess (London: Spon Press, 2000), pp. 22-23.
 38. Prominent intellectual historian Wang Hui is especially critical of using the term 'transition' to characterise China's development: "'Transition' is the crucial unspoken premise of the contemporary discourse on

Chinese society – it presupposes a necessary connection between the process of current inequality and an ultimate ideal'. 'The 1989 Social Movement and the Historical Roots of China's Neoliberalism' in *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, edited by Theodore Huters (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 44.

39. Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 44.

40. Daniel Abramson, Figure 4.1 'Dialectical logic of changing urban planning practice in China' in 'The Dialectics of Urban Planning in China', p. 74.

41. Huang Rui (Beijing artist and activist), interview with the author, Shanghai, 11 November 2006.

Biography

Robin Visser, Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian Studies, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, teaches courses in modern Chinese literature, film, and urban studies. She has book chapters in English and Chinese. Her forthcoming book explores how the post-socialist transformation of Chinese cities shapes the cultural imagination as manifest in urban design, architecture, literature, film and art.

