

Urbanism as a State Project: Lessons from Beijing's Green Belts

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Introduction

As of 2011, national statistics in China were suggesting that the share of China's urban population had exceeded the 50 per cent threshold for the first time in its history. This is taken as an endorsement of China's entering an 'urban age', though such claims in official urban discourses have been criticised in recent literature (see for example, Brenner and Schmid 2014; see also Shin 2018). Higher urbanisation rates are supported not only by the natural growth of urban population but also by the conversion of rural villagers into urban citizens. The latter process further entails land grabbing, which converts existing agricultural farmlands into urban construction lands to accommodate the provision of new real estate properties (e.g. new

apartments, offices), infrastructure (e.g. motorways and high-speed rail) and production facilities (e.g. industrial parks). What do all these mean for villagers who lose access to their farmlands?

We often hear the frustrations of villagers whose lands are violently taken away against their will with no or poor compensations (e.g. Hoffman 2014; Johnson 2013; Pomfret 2013). Sargeson (2013) argues that violence is an integral element of China's urbanisation project, authorising urban development. In this chapter, we show that such use of state violence goes hand in hand with another dimension of state action, that is co-optation of villagers (cf. Gramsci 1971) by the imposition of what Henri Lefebvre (2003) refers to as 'official urbanism'. Drawing on Lefebvre's critiques of urbanism, this chapter aims to reflect upon the use of official urbanism to advance China's 'urban age', and addresses two analytical objectives by dissecting green belt policy in Beijing. First, we demonstrate China's urbanism as an institution and an ideology is a state project: it is integrated with both economic and political practices, and plays a critical role in sustaining the state strategy of land-based accumulation. Second, we also illustrate that official urbanism, as an ideology, has been successfully instilled into the national ethos, imposing it upon the population (especially villagers) as a new and desirable way of life, which in turn supports the state's project of urbanism. We conclude that urbanism is one and the same expression of politics of urban space, with the Party-state's ideological, economic and political ambitions put at the centre. For this reason, any meaningful approach to critiquing existing sets of urban knowledge and practice that produces urban inequalities and injustice in contemporary China should start from negation of the 'official urbanism'.

Empirically, this chapter focuses on the making and commercialisation of Beijing's green belts; it investigates the ideological, political, and economic mechanisms for erecting the green belts project on the one hand, and, on the other, uncovers the discursive moment when this project was successfully

instilled into the ethos of the population as the *only* desirable way of life in urban change. This story hence shows vividly the juncture where two aspects of the ‘official urbanism’ – institution and ideology – were dialectically articulated with each other.

Urbanism and the State

For Louis Wirth (1938), the city not only refers to larger dwelling places and workshops, but also marks ‘the initiating and controlling centre of economic, political, and cultural life’ in the era of industrialisation when the role of the city looms large. One methodological implication of these socio-economic changes is that the urban-industrial mode of living rose to such a significant status that it could be juxtaposed with the rural-folk society as two ideal types of communities (ibid. 3). Drawing on this recognition, Wirth then defines urbanism as a way of living (in an industrial society) and calls for the attentions of the American sociologists to the urban mode of human association. He rightly asserts that urbanism should not be confused with the city or industrialism: as the new mode of life, urbanism is neither limited by ‘the arbitrary boundary line’ of the city (ibid. 4) nor solely conditioned or determined by modern capitalism and industrialism (ibid. 7). In efforts ‘to discover the forms of social action and organisation’ (ibid. 9), Wirth identifies three fundamental attributes of urbanism to direct sociological studies of the city: population size, population density in a settlement, and the heterogeneity of urban dwellers. Yet, there is a marked lack of attention to the politico-economic relations and processes underlying the production of urbanism.

In *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre (2003: 6) argues that urbanism has often been understood as ‘a social practice that is fundamentally scientific and technical’, while in reality it ‘exists as a policy (having institutional and ideological components)’. For Lefebvre, urbanism is indeed ‘a form of class urbanism’ (ibid. 157), and ‘[i]t is only from an ideological and institutional point of view...that urbanism reveals to critical analysis the illusions that it

harbours and that foster its implementation' (ibid. 164). Indeed, urbanism is a superstructure of the society (ibid. 163), one that is ontologically connected with both the logic of capital and the rationale of the state. While Lefebvre's discussions of urbanism are rooted in his critique of capitalist societies, it has much to enlighten researchers on urban China where the emphasis on urbanisation has been stressed heavily by the state.

Facing the onset of intensifying urbanisation during the early years of market reform, urbanism has been subject to scholarly attention among China researchers. Ma (2002) is among the first authors who adopted the concept of urbanism in setting research agendas for the study of China's urban transformation, referring to urbanism as "the *nature* of urban life and of cities as places that are seen as impregnated with geographic, social, economic, cultural, political, and ideological meanings" (ibid. 1556; original emphasis). He further develops his perspectives on urbanism in his subsequent work, in which he provides a summary review of historically identifiable forms of urbanism (Ma 2009). Here, instead of focusing on the connotation of urbanism as a way of life in the industrial age (cf. Wirth 1938), Ma broadens its scope to such an extent that China's 5,000-year history is divided into five periods and narrated using urbanism as an anchor. While Ma (2002: 1563) highlights the importance of investigating 'the central role that the Party-state has played in affecting the processes and outcomes of urbanization and urbanism', how the working of the Party-state and the particular configurations of the political economy of reformist China produces its own urbanism is left unanswered and remains as a challenge for other scholars to address.

A number of China scholars have paid attention to the need of understanding urbanism as an embodiment of the dynamics of the state, space and social fabrics. Cartier (2002), for instance, resorts to transnational urbanism to examine Shenzhen's attempt to transform into a world city by producing a new city centre realised through the state-dominated enterprise that makes

use of 'plans, ideologies and representations of domestic and transnational élites to establish legitimacy' (ibid. 1513). In Cartier's analysis, the spatial and politico-economic processes of producing urban landscapes are uncovered, which in turn enable her discussions on how 'trans-boundary and transnational spheres of economic activity and cultural forms' (ibid. 1518) are articulated to endorse the 'spiritual civilisation campaign' of the state in the urbanisation process.

Chen Yingfang (2008) and You-Tien Hsing (2010) also analyse the nature of urbanism in China's urban transformation, seeing it as a set of discourses that legitimise the state's conduct. For Chen (2008), the idea of 'new urbanism' is linked to the idea of modernisation in endorsing the state's consolidation of its 'opportunity space' for producing and exploiting the urban space, where the land businesses of the state are developed to an unprecedented scale. Hsing (2010: 54) makes a similar argument through the comparison between development zones in the 1990s (as a symptom of industrialism) and the 'new city' projects in the 2000s (which signal the rise of urbanism), concluding that the term 'urbanism seems to have provided a unifying ideology for the political elite'. With urbanism as a shared analytical concept, Cartier registers local politico-economic mechanisms in producing the urban space, while Chen and Hsing both show how urbanism has been deployed by the Party-state in China as a core ideology.

The recognition of urbanism as both an ideology and an institution has also been developed in recent discussions on eco-/green urbanism and speculative urbanism. Hoffman (2011) analyses the making of a 'model garden city' in Dalian and uncovers urban modelling – such as 'green urbanism' – as a governmental practice. This practice not only shapes and produces the urban space with ideas from elsewhere, through the mechanism of inter-referencing of policy discourses, but also remakes urban subjects through the combination of greening practices with "the fostering of civilised and quality citizens" (ibid. 67). Pow and Neo (2015: 132) draw on Hoffman's conclusion and explore the

case of Tianjin Eco-city to decipher the 'new forms of ecological urban imagineering and socio-ecological life-worlds'. They conclude that Tianjin Eco-city is at best an 'ecological imagineering of green urbanism' (ibid. 139), thus serving as a vivid case of the complex interactions between urban sustainability, urban entrepreneurialism and neoliberal urbanism. Also focusing on the Tianjin Eco-city, Caprotti (2014; Caprotti *et al.* 2015) investigates the concrete connections among environment discourses, the market logic, the social fabric of dispossession, and the rise of the new urban poor at the juncture of 'green capitalism.' By asking whom the suffix 'eco' is for, they uncover politico-economic mechanisms and social effects of the Chinese agenda of the 'ecological modernisation,' which only result in the booming of elite urbanism and 'the construction of eco-enclaves' (Caprotti *et al.* 2015: 509), consequentially sacrificing the ordinary citizens and their everyday life.

Elsewhere outside the scope of China urban studies, urbanism as both an institution and an ideology also underlies the work of Goldman (2011) who conceptualises 'speculative urbanism' in his study of peripheral urbanisation of Bangalore, India. Drawing on the epistemological critiques of urbanism, Goldman sees land speculation and dispossession of people at the urban periphery as the principal state business in Bangalore's making of the 'next world city' (ibid. 555). Such practices institutionalise the 'temporary state of exception' into the 'new forms of "speculative" government, economy, urbanism and citizenship' (ibid. 555), which defines what he labels 'speculative urbanism.' This discussion is noteworthy for its refusal of the use of urbanism only at its face value. Instead, urbanism is seen as the critical moment in the urban process, which is shaping, and being shaped by, socio-historical conditions and politico-economic mechanisms constituting urban changes. With this concern, Shin's (2012) work on China also recognises the preponderance of place-specific accumulation strategies of the Party-state through the examination of mega events as urban spectacles. These strategies

are deployed in a geographically uneven manner to shape the Chinese version of ‘speculative urbanism’ (Shin 2013; 2014).

In this chapter, we highlight how urbanism works as a concrete mechanism through which the urban space is utilised by the state for its own goals – no matter how dynamic and transient these goals are – so as to sustain its legitimacy and to reproduce social/power relations. Put it in another way, we see urbanism as a permanence of the daily life under urbanisation where politico-economic concerns of the state are crystallised into a coherent ideology and embodied within the associated institutions. Through the examination of the rise of China’s official urbanism in the green belts project, we argue for greater responsibility of researchers to investigate these tangible institutions and ideologies rather than to adopt urbanism only as an empty signifier that obscures the nature, agency and rationale of the state.

Official urbanism as a state project

In his critiques of the potential urban strategies in the socialist countries, Lefebvre (2003: 147) presents an explicit definition of ‘official urbanism’. On the one hand, socialist urbanism is also a type of urbanism, and is hence ‘not very dissimilar from capitalist urbanism’ (ibid. 147) in terms of its nature as an institution and an ideology. On the other hand, because of an overwhelming emphasis on the ideology of industrial production, the socialist version of urbanism tends to exhibit such characters as ‘less emphasis on the centrality of exchange’, ‘greater access to the soil,’ attention to ‘an increase in the amount of green space’, and ‘the zero degree of urban reality’ (ibid. 147). His observation was made in 1970, when socialism as a state institution and a seat for geo-political power had not yet disintegrated, and when the Stalinist model of economic growth was still predominant in most socialist countries (including China). The ideology of industrial production and ‘the zero degree of urban reality’ rendered China’s urban space into the situation labelled by Ma (1976) ‘anti-urbanism’. This condition in turn laid a politico-economic

foundation for importing the idea of ‘green belt’ into Beijing out of its concern for green space (Zhao 2016), and, accordingly, shaping the ‘official urbanism’.

Simply put, the idea of green belt was imported to Beijing from Britain and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (hereafter USSR) in the 1950s, which was seen at that time as a promising ecological goal of its socialist transition (Beijing Archives 1958). Indeed, it arrived in Beijing at the height of a socialist-utopian campaign named the ‘Great Leap Forward’ (大跃进, *dayuejin*). This was a period when the Chinese people were mobilised by Mao Zedong to ‘surpass Great Britain and then catch up with the United States’ (超英赶美, *chaoying ganmei*). Among targets of this campaign, ‘gardening the earth’ (大地园林化, *dadi yuanlinhua*) was set as a socio-ecological goal (Chen 1996; CPC 1958). Six decades have passed since the green belt arrived in Beijing as an idea, and a sea change was witnessed with regard to China’s social and politico-economic conditions (Ma 2002; Wu 1997). Nevertheless, the green belt is still defining Beijing’s urban master plan right now, as it did in 1958 when the very first modern master plan of Beijing was drawn out (Yang 2009; Zhao 2016). Between the survival of the green belt in the master plan and the changing urban political economy lies the secret of the Party-state and the role of its official urbanism.

To understand changing rationales of the Party-state hidden behind the official urbanism, it becomes necessary not only to investigate the institutional dynamics but also to explore how far they are achieved spatially in the urbanisation process. The concrete mechanism through which the urban space is utilised by the state for its dynamic goals is the milieu in which we can recognise and define the official urbanism. In this section, we focus on three aspects of such mechanism that shapes Beijing’s green belt, namely, the ideological, the political and the economic.¹

Shifting ideological connotations

The articulation between Beijing's green belt and the official urbanism was established through the ideological connotations of the former. In the Maoist era, the official urbanism was set in tune with the ideology of industrial production. The imposition of green belt at that time was mainly serving the ambition of industrialisation-cum-modernisation by segregating industrial areas from residential ones on the one hand (BMCUP 1987: 199-200) and by 'gardening the earth' on the other (Chen 1996). In the 1958 Beijing Master Plan, the Beijing Municipal Government (hereafter BMG) claims (BMCUP 1987: 206-207) that:

In the last few years, the scale of redeveloping and expanding the city proper has been huge. The urban layout should not be too concentrated, and a dispersed and clustering model is to be applied from now on. There should be green spaces between clusters: 40% of the city proper and 60% of inner suburbs are to be greened. In the green spaces, we will have woods, fruit trees, flowers, lakes and crops.

This master plan was drafted with direct instructions from the USSR experts, who arrived at Beijing in April 1955, bringing the Soviet version of modernist planning principles together with them (BMCUP 1987: 32). In this plan, the form of the imagined green belt was largely following the modernist planning canon (such as zoning techniques and the landscape of the garden city), while its content was defined by the utopian vision of making China modern and compromised by the industrialisation of the city. Such a utopian experiment is transient and the content of the belt is accordingly transformed together with the political economy. But first of all, it is the ideological connotations of the green belt that change before anything else.

In the post-Mao era, the previous focus on industrial production in China's official urbanism gave way to such issues as social order, hygiene and internationalisation. In 1980, the Central Secretariat of the Communist Party of China (hereafter CPC) issued an 'important instruction' to the BMG, which highlights that 'Beijing is the political centre of our country, and it is also the centre for international contacts... Economic development policies should also be changed according to the nature of the capital, and heavy industries should cease to be developed' (BMCUP 1987: 75). In the 1982 Master Plan, it was further stated that Beijing was to be the 'political and cultural centre of our country' (BMCUP 1987: 78). Ten years later, this was revised again to refer to Beijing as the 'modern and international city' (BMCUP 1992; Zhang 2001: 274-275). Hence, the Maoist (industrial) imagination of 'being modern' was transformed into the yearning to be 'international', and this in turn restructures both the official urbanism and the role of the green belts in line with the new urban development direction.

One of the key methods to put the yearning of internationalisation into practice was to host such mega events as Olympic Games. Jia Qinglin, the then Party Secretary of Beijing, claimed in an official meeting that bidding for the 2008 Olympic Games was not only 'a historical opportunity to accelerate Beijing's development in the new century and to move Beijing forward to a modern and international metropolis', but also 'a perfect approach to show our achievements in the city's modernisation process and to augment its international reputation' (Beijing Youth Daily 2000). The role of green belts loomed large here. In Beijing's first bid for the Olympic Games in 1993, its level of pollution had dissatisfied inspectors from the IOC, indeed partly explaining that failure (China Internet Information Centre 2001).² As the BMG noticed the importance of the environmental issue in international assessments, represented by IOC's preferences and inscribed in the 1996 edition of The Olympic Charter (IOC 1996), every effort was at once made in Beijing to meet the expectations – for example, it promised in 2001 that a

green belt of more than 100 million square metres would soon surround Beijing (BOCOG 2001).

The BMG stressed the role of ecology and environment to such an extent that ‘Green Olympics’ was ranked the most important initiative (Green Olympics, Sci-Tech Olympics, and Humanistic Olympics) in their bidding for the 2008 Olympic Games (Xinhua News Agency 2001). And through this initiative, green belts were brought to the fore once again in reshaping this city. The concern of green and the appeal to modern-international were juxtaposed here, revealing the new focus of official urbanism and setting up a substantial and legitimised pretext for completely different political and economic ambitions of the state.

Political mobilisation through institutional restructuring

On 29 September 1999, five months after submitting its formal application report to the IOC, the BMG held an Office Meeting for Mayor and Deputy Mayors and decided to establish a new agent entitled the ‘Beijing Leading Group for Constructing the Green Belt Area’ (北京市绿化隔离地区建设领导小组, *Beijingshi lvhua geli diqu jianshe lingdao xiaozu*; hereafter BLGCGB) (BMG 1999). This leading group was designated as the municipal agent taking charge of all issues related to the green belts project. On 2 March 2000, the BLGCGB held its first formal meeting, headed by the then Mayor Liu Qi (BMG 2000a), to establish its General Headquarters (总指挥部, *zong zhihuibu*). This meeting also witnessed the setting up of a goal by Mayor Liu to finish the greening of 60 square kilometres within the next three years, considerably quicker than ten years previously planned. Here, ‘a fierce battle [was] needed immediately’, in the next nine months, ‘to meet the annual goal of greening 20 square kilometres’ (ibid.). Furthermore, since it was a huge challenge, Mayor Liu continued, ‘our cadres are encouraged to break through traditional

doctrines and regulations and figure out special measures for this special task; and with these measures new institutions can also be erected' (ibid.).

Dozens of documents were released by the BMG in the next couple of years to institutionalise and systematise their ambitions oriented around the green belts. The very first document as such was a scalar one to get rid of the central government's ban on occupying arable land for urban constructions. In May 2000, the Ministry of Land and Resources of China established a 'Coordination Liaison Group for Constructing Beijing's Green Belt' and issued a document entitled 'Instructions on the implementation of Beijing's green belt project' (Chai 2002: 6). Its special institutional arrangement was to lift the central ban on the BMG by setting up two exceptions. First, the use of arable land in the green belt for planting trees could be registered as an internal adjustment to the agricultural structure, hence was exempted and permitted. Second, occupying arable land to construct resettlement housing for local villagers could also be allowed, insofar as the original settlement was to be demolished and greened (ibid. 6-7). Such exceptions were formalised in a local ordinance issued by the BMG (2001a), adopted as a new institutional foundation for directing the state actions to lead the green belts project.

After the exceptional revision of the state's land policies in the green belt area, the BMG set up a new and distinct governing mode for the green belt area. The two principles underlying this mode were called 'special issues, special treatments' (特事特办, *teshi teban*) and the 'all-in-one service package' (一条龙服务, *yitiaolong fuwu*) (BMG 2000b; BLGCGB 2000a, 2000b). Because 'it was challenging to achieve the goal of greening 60 square kilometres in only three years' (BMG 2000a), as the BMG claimed, the previous urban plan was to be adjusted properly to fully respect opinions in the localities so as to accelerate the greening process (BMG 2000b). On top of this, the related land, housing, and administration policies were all subject to revision to clear the way for the green belts project. Since the Olympic bidding rendered the green belts project politically urgent, green light had shone everywhere in the

bureaucracy to further accelerate related practices in the exceptional space thus created (BLGCCGB 2000a, 2000b; BMG 2001b). For instance, some of the compulsory documents in the approval process were exempted (e.g. feasibility study reports for construction projects) (ibid.) to simplify the procedure and improve efficiency. The political manoeuvres as such, however, did not induce the expected outcome of a green landscape of the city – which only appeared on paper (Yang and Zhou 2007). Such an unexpected result cannot be understood if the state's land businesses were not included in our discussion of the green belts.

Land businesses: The economics of the green belts

It has been widely recognised that the state's monopolisation of urban land and the commercialisation of houses were put at the top of its agenda since the 1990s (Hsing 2010; Lin 2009; Wu 1995, 1997), and the local state has become *de facto* landlords (Shin 2009b). In practice, however, specific land institutions were not established at once. It was only in 1998, after the second revision of the Land Management Act (NPC 1998), when the state underlined its ethos of the use of land resources, which reads: 'we should insist on the simultaneous exploitation and saving of land resources, with saving coming first' (State Council 2000). With the State Council's encouragement, the BMG set up a 'land reservation system' on 31 January 2002 to consolidate its monopolistic power in the booming land market (BMG 2002a). However, the green belts were excluded from the newly established land reservation system, and thus from the land market. This exclusion should be interpreted through a scalar perspective on the change of land leasing methods at the time in China.

In the 1990s, land leasing in comprehensive development projects was found to be dominated by closed-door negotiation (协议出让, *xieyi churang*) rather than auction (拍卖, *paimai*) (Wu 1995, 1997; Fang and Zhang 2003). Many

researchers in China urban studies at the time tended to see such phenomena as a symptom of China's immature land market and to call for more marketisation measures (Ho and Lin 2003; Zhou 2004; Zhu 2000). Nevertheless, the key issue in this regard would not be the maturity of the land market, but territorial-scalar politics and its effects on the everyday practices of state agents. It is gradually made clear that the closed-door negotiation was a rational choice for the local state agents, which enabled them to maintain autonomy in urban space production and also to obtain monetary revenues and hidden benefits for themselves (instead of sharing them with the central government) (Wu 1997: 660; Wu *et al.* 2007: 6-8). In the light of the revision of the Land Administration Law in 1998, the State Council issued a series of land regulations in order to change its weak position in the process of land commodification. Two consequent ordinances were released by the Ministry of Land and Resources (hereafter MLR) in 2002 (No. 11) and 2004 (No.71). In particular, the State Council aimed at introducing a quota system for land use conversion so that the amount of newly made urban construction land was to be regulated by the central state (Xu and Yeh 2009). The decision was so significant in affecting the land and housing market that the media at the time labelled it China's new 'land revolution' (Hsing 2010: 48; MLR 2002, 2004).

The responses from local governments were anything but obedience to the centre. In Beijing, for example, the BMG issued a local regulation soon after the No.11 Ordinance, listing four *kouzi* (口子; i.e., loopholes for evading central orders) (BMG 2002b). This measure allowed four types of projects to evade the central state regulations: they were projects in green belts, in small towns, for redeveloping old and dilapidated areas, and for developing high-tech industries. In the end, as Hsing (2010: 52-53) describes, most urban projects can be categorised as part of these *kouzi* if they obtain an endorsement from municipal or district officials. From June to October 2002, the BMG leased out nearly 90 million square metres of land through closed-door negotiations

in just four months, all legitimised under the above four exceptions, while the total area of all land plots leased out in Beijing from 1992 to 2002 had been only 98.11 million square metres (Yu 2004). In the 2003 inspection of the national land market, the MLR noticed that 98 per cent of the land plots in Beijing were still leased by closed-door negotiations, of which 50 per cent turned out to be illegal (ibid.). In the designated green belt area, in particular, the area of construction land increased by 8.3 million square metres between 2000 (69.5 million square metres) and 2005 (77.8 million square metres) (BAUPD 2013). The role of green belts was hence looming large in legitimising and promoting the (local) state's land businesses.

More than this, the green belts were also deployed in consolidating the BMG and its affiliated companies' 'small treasury' as well as the business opportunities of related localities (villages or townships). On 6 August 2002, the General Headquarters of the BLGCCGB declared that remaining construction land plots in the first green belt were all allocated to the 'Green Belt Infrastructure Development and Construction Company', an enterprise founded by the BMG in 2000 (BLGCCGB 2002). While the advertised goal was to enable this company to provide adequate urban infrastructure for the green belt area – an aim mostly unfulfilled (BAUPD 2013) – its real concern was with the rising land interests: 243.22 hectares of construction land plots, all with a huge potential value, were occupied overnight by this BMG-owned company (BLGCCGB 2002). On the other hand, to motivate the participation of villages and townships in producing the green space, the BMG allowed these localities to run the so-called 'green-based industries' on 3-5 per cent of its total green area. In total, 41 projects were approved in the green belts between 2000 and 2012, of which 23 were for games and sports (by and large, golf courses) (see Figure 3-1), five for leisure and vacation (resorts), six for ecological tourism, and seven for business apartments (BAUPD 2013). Under such a green mask, the number of golf courses in Beijing after 2004 increased from 20 to 70 (Du 2011), even though 2004 was also the year when the State

Council (2004) halted the construction of new golf courses all over the country.



Figure 3-1 A golf course in the planned second green belt

Source: Photograph by Yimin Zhao, 19 October 2014.

With the above discussions, it becomes clear that Beijing's green belts, an imported component of its modernist layout, was made into a powerful tool to contribute to the local state's land-based accumulation in the last two decades. This change was possible because the ideological connotation of the green belts was rewritten by the changing needs of the Party-state to make Beijing a 'modern and international' city. The ideological transformation was then practised to prepare for bidding for 2008 Olympic Games, enabling both the institutional restructuring and political mobilisation at the city level. The designation of exceptions and the change of institutions, in turn, laid the political foundation for the booming land businesses of the state in the green

belts. However, even under this political setting, it is still not clear why the large number of villagers, who were subject to relocation when the land projects were unfolding, were compelled to accept the state actions. To understand this puzzle, it is necessary to see how and how far this set of institutions as a whole was turned into an effective ideology and preconditioned the success of the state-led and land-based accumulation.

From the official urbanisms to the *only way of life*

As indicated at the outset of this chapter, politico-economic mechanisms underlie the formation and sustenance of official urbanism. For Lefebvre (2003), existing urban vocabularies that used to shape our conventional understanding of urbanism were compiled in the industrial age, while the urban problematic has already surpassed the industrial counterpart and become the predominant one. Hence, 'urbanism only serves to more cruelly illuminate the blind [between the industrial and the urban]', where 'the urban is veiled; it flees thought, which blinds itself, and becomes fixated only on a clarity that is in retreat from the actual' (ibid. 40-41). The gap between the institutional and ideological construct represented by official urbanism on the one hand and the politico-economic reality on the other is especially significant in China, where official urbanism shapes the urban mode of living into only one direction: urbanisation means modernisation (Li 2013). The Party-state aims to restructure the landscape of the peripheries in a completely urban way; for this aim, the lifestyle of local villagers needs to be remade in order to conform to the restructured landscape and urban imaginaries. This is the process in which the above set of institutions in the green belts are wrapped into an ideology and successfully instilled into the ethos of the population as the only desirable way of life in the urban age.

In the project agenda of Beijing's green belts, released on 20 March 2000, the BMG (2000a) claimed that speeding up the construction of the green belt area is significant for rectifying the social disorder, facilitating the urbanisation

process, and accelerating the sustainable development of the ecology, the economy and the society as a whole. In this pattern of social improvement, it continued, ‘the rural mode of production and lifestyle should be urbanised, which is critical for the improvement of their life quality’ (BMG 2000b). In this way, the green belts project was interpreted, ideologically, as an upgrade of the way of peasants’ life. This marks the juncture where the two aspects of ‘official urbanism’ – institutions and ideology – were dialectically articulated. Concrete measures were immediately practised by the BMG to materialise such an ideology and hence to instill it as a belief of the peasants whose lives were to be fundamentally transformed thereafter. The measures could be summarised with two categories: relocation (安置, *anzhi*) and hukou upgrading (转居, *zhuanju*).

For the relocation of local villagers, various ‘new village’ projects were carried out with the endorsement of the BMG. Townships and village collectives were allowed to cooperate with the private property developers for property development and enjoy interest-free bank loans. In addition to building flats for the relocation of local villagers who were members of the village collectives, commodity housing units were also built in order to generate profits to finance the project costs and guarantee profits of developers. This was on condition that the total floor space of the commodity housing units was less than that of the relocation flats (BMG 2000b). According to a local official from BMCUP (interviewed on 1 August 2014), such procedures were defined as ‘upgrading to the storied buildings’ (上楼, *shanglou*), representing a physical transformation of a rural mode of living. On the other hand, the social welfares aspect was also attended to by the BMG, which was implemented through the process of ‘hukou upgrading’. The *hukou* system is indeed ‘one of the most important mechanisms determining entitlement to public welfare, urban services and, more broadly, full citizenship’ (Chan and Buckingham 2008: 587) in China. In light of the Stalinist/Maoist ideology of industrial production, the system has long favoured urban citizens since its

introduction in the late 1950s. Here, in the green belts project, the implicated local villagers were entitled to *urban hukou* status, thus becoming eligible to fully state-sponsored social welfare provision.

Drawing on the above two categories of upgrading (the physical and the social welfares), the BMG continued to declare that “[we should] fully respect the role of peasants as the *subject* of the construction of the green belt area” (BMG 2000b). This is the moment when the BMG tried to persuade the implicated population to accept the green belts project as the only channel towards a new and desirable way of life, and hence to establish the consensus on all related politico-economic institutions hidden behind the project. The persuasion succeeded in a straightforward way since it matched quite well with the desire of villagers who were also eager to change their living environment and the lifestyle in the process of urbanisation. For, the area implicated by the green belts project was the same area where most of the migrant workers stayed when they arrived at the city. This demographic change in the local communities induced a specific socio-economic situation, in which:

The inflowing of so many migrant workers put great pressures on our infrastructure – environmental hygiene, electricity and water, and maintaining public order. It was common all over this area to find criminal activities spreading. Hence, we were feeling lucky that our old village got demolished quickly and our villagers relocated to storied buildings quite smoothly. Villages nearby, which are yet waiting for demolition, always tell us how envious they are.

(Interview with a village cadre, 11 December 2014)

The above quote shows how far the official discourses and ideology were accepted by the villagers, who felt the negative impacts in their daily lives but did not take the single step forward to ask why. Instead of discerning the origin of such effects in the misconduct of the state, they were rather

subordinating themselves to the official discourse. Since the built environment in reality was indeed dirty and messy, it was also their wish to transform it. But the only way they had worked out for doing this was the modernist spatial imagination of urban space that enables the state's land businesses to flourish in the green belt area. Both state agents and villagers advocated that 'urbanisation is the only way towards modernisation' (Li 2013) – and it marks the moment when the ideological consensus is erected and the 'official urbanism' consolidated. This situation echoes Shin's (2014) recognition of the widely shared belief that the 'city makes life happier', a slogan of Shanghai EXPO in 2010, which articulates techniques of the state and desires of villagers, and which turns out to be the ideological foundation for the state's land business.

Such a collusion between the state agents and the local villagers can be registered even more vividly via the responses of the latter in their everyday life. In a township called Sunhe located on the northeastern outskirts of Beijing's central districts, the green belts project became influential in the early 2000s when more trees were to be planted along the Airport Expressway in preparation for the 'Green Olympics'. One hundred and thirty-five households of villagers who lived along the expressway were relocated, with 490,000 Yuan or approximately £51,000 of compensation fees paid to each household.³ Relocated villagers told their stories quite happily because it was before housing prices in Beijing had begun to rocket upwards, and they could buy a resettlement flat with around 220,000 Yuan, less than a half of the compensation fees they received (Interview with villagers in Sunhe, 23 and 24 December 2014). In other interviews, villagers revealed that conditions of life after relocation were better than the previous ones because of associated exceptional and privileged treatments (see Figure 3-2):

The quality of my new flats is quite high. They are in a high-rise building, with more than ten stories, which even has lifts! This makes my life convenient because I

am not agile at all after a surgery several years ago. Though the interior design is not the style I prefer most (with three double bedrooms), I am still quite happy with these new flats.

(Interview with a villager in Sunhe, 23 December 2014)

All facilities we can expect [in the urban life] were installed, such as the running water, the electricity, the natural gas, and the heating equipment. They render the living here much more comfortable than our previous life in the old village. In addition, our *hukou* status is also changed into the urban category, which means we are now enjoying social welfares that are exclusively for the “urban citizens”. However, the “soft environment” in this community is still unsatisfactory – but the main reason is that the peasants have not been dropped their old habits yet. For example, quite a few of them eliminated the lawn in the public space to plant vegetables. I think five to ten years are needed before them changing habits.

(Interview with villagers in Sunhe, 21 July 2015)

In these acclamations of the new urban mode of living, the Party-state’s official urbanism was successfully instilled into the common sense of the population and this in turn legitimated the former’s political mobilisation for land businesses.



Figure 3-2 The street view of the resettlement community in Sunhe

Source: Photography by Yimin Zhao, 17 December 2014.

How much such seemingly enthusiastic responses from interviewed villagers were made with a clear understanding of their current and future circumstances is also yet to be verified. For instance, it is not clear if the level of villagers' participation in collective affairs in the coming years would decrease after land expropriation and relocation, following the patterns identified by Sally Sargeson (2016) in her study of five villages in Zhejiang. There is also the possibility that villagers' 'voluntary' move was associated with the implementation of successful preventive measures by the higher authorities using what Kevin O'Brien and Yanhua Deng (2017) refer to as 'psychological coercion' and "relationship repression". Also, the relocated villagers may incur a greater amount of expenditures while their actual income decreases, an experience of displaced farmers in Lynette Ong's (2014) study in Hefei. It is also not clear if the villagers knew how profitable the resulting land businesses by the local state turned out to be, and if the amount of distributed compensation, either in kind or in cash, was adequate. Other

anecdotal evidence produced elsewhere suggests that there is a huge gap between the amount of land revenues and what is given out as compensation to villagers. For instance, a survey by an organisation called LANDESA in 2011 reports that 43.1 per cent of the surveyed rural households experienced land-taking, that 'affected farmers received some compensation in 77.5% of all cases, were promised but did not receive compensation in 9.8% of cases, and were neither promised, nor received compensation in 12.7% of cases', and that those compensated farmers received 18,739 Yuan as an average amount of compensation, which was only 2.4 per cent of average sales price earned by local authorities (LANDESA 2012). It is possible that the villagers interviewed above would have also been treated in a similar way but without their knowing.

What is evident though is that urbanism as an institution and an ideology has gradually obscured the boundaries between the legitimacy of the state, the logic of capital accumulation, and the mode of life of ordinary people during the urbanisation process. The use of official urbanism turns out to be one of the mechanisms through which the urban strategies of the state are implemented yet at the same time concealed, co-opting villagers into endorsing the state project.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the use of green belts at the turn of the century by the Beijing Municipal Government to produce official urbanism that was utilised as a state project. We argue that ideological connotations of Beijing's green belts had shifted to juxtapose the concern for green space with the appeal to be modern-international. Drawing on the changing discourses, state institutions and policies were in turn rearranged to give priority to mobilising political resources for the successful bidding of the Olympic Games in the first instance; but it was also evident that the ideological and political manoeuvres were mostly directed to realising the economic ambitions of

various state agents, who were facilitating land businesses in the name of conserving green belts. In this way, the green belts that originally articulated the socialist-utopian vision of the urban ecology were rendered a handy tool for the state-led and land-based accumulation in China's 'urban age'. While the focus of China's official urbanism has fundamentally shifted from industrial production (in the 1950s) to land businesses (at present), the nature and the role of this official urbanism have not changed: such urbanism works as a state project in which political mobilisation and economic ambitions are practised and consolidated through the urbanist discourses. As pointed out by Lefebvre (2003: 140), 'as an ideology, urbanism dissimulates its strategies. The critique of urbanism is characterised by the need for a critique of urbanist ideologies and urbanist practices (as partial, that is, reductive, practices and class strategies)'.

Scholars often highlight land-based accumulation as the predominant character of China's urban political economy and of its (neoliberal) urbanism (see for example, Lin *et al.* 2015; Lin and Zhang 2015). This is also evident in the story of Beijing's green belts, but this chapter has gone further to ascertain that China's urbanism is more than land-based accumulation. For, urbanism as a concrete mechanism incorporates the whole process in which land businesses are initiated, endorsed, and facilitated in the ideological, social and political aspects. The economic interests (in maximising land revenues) mark the key concern of the Party-state and its official urbanism, but they are not a proper point of departure, nor the destination, of empirical explorations. The economic ambition can never be materialised in a political and social vacuum; instead, it has to go through the integration of ideological connotations, political mobilisation and territorial-scalar collusion/collision among various levels of governments. This politico-economic dynamic marks the concrete mechanism through which urbanism is shaped into, and deployed as, an institution and an ideology for the Party-state.

In addition, the nature of the official urbanism as both an institution and an ideology is indeed dialectical in the sense that, on the one hand, its ideological connotations constitute part of the set of state institutions, and, on the other, this set of institutions is then deployed as an ideology to reshape the belief of the people. The articulation between Beijing's green belts and the new urban political economy, for example, started from the moment when ideological connotations of these belts were rewritten in light of the Party-state's new needs. Here, political mobilisation took place in order to lay the foundation for generating and capturing land values in the green belts. At the same time, however, the success of the state manoeuvre was possible only when the affected villagers with entitlement to compensation were compelled to accept the official urbanism as the only promising way of their life and hence embraced the state conduct. This is how the official urbanism as an ideology works as constraints on protesters and as a facilitating mechanism to encourage consenting villagers in endorsing the state's ambitions. This recognition marks, for researchers in China urban studies, the potential added-value for the use of urbanism in understanding and analysing the great urban transformation of this country.

Notes

¹ There are two green belts in Beijing. The first one was included in the city's master plan in 1958, and the second one was proposed in 2003. While the first belt embodies the import of the green belt as an idea and showcases its persistence in the master plan, the second belt is merely an unsuccessful mimicry with a certain politico-economic concern of the municipal authority (Zhang 2007). This will be discussed later in this chapter.

² The air pollution issue was, of course, not the only factor that led Beijing's bid in 1993 to fail. A more critical factor was the issue of human rights, since it was just four years after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. Human rights disputes induced geo-political pressures and both of these affected the whole lobbying campaign (Luo and Huang 2013; Riding 1993; Shin 2009a; Tyler 1993).

³ The calculation for the GBP from the Chinese Yuan here is based on the currency rate on 1 January 2016 (9.6123 CNY per 1 GBP). Source: Exchange Rates UK. URL: <http://www.exchangerates.org.uk/GBP-CNY-exchange-rate-history.html>. Last accessed: 23 September 2016.

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