

# **Who Makes the City? Beijing's Urban Villages as Sites of Ideological Contestation**

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## **Abstract:**

Inside Beijing are hundreds of urban villages. Originally farming villages, now engulfed by urban expansion, they persist due to China's segregated urban-rural property system. Inhabitants are often still classed as 'peasants', despite being inside the city. Since most have had their agricultural land requisitioned for urban construction, they instead build multiple extensions to their houses to rent to rural migrants seeking cheap accommodation. In some cases, village populations have increased ten-fold as migrants have flooded in, causing cramped conditions and overloading village infrastructure. Urban villages have in recent years emerged as key sites of ideological and political contestation. For local officials and planners envisioning gleaming world cities brimming with advanced technology and highly skilled workers, these are dirty and backward 'urban cancers', enclaves of the 'low-end population', and obstacles to their visions of the city as embodiment of global modernity. An opposing set of scholars and policymakers view these villages as essential to city life, channels for low-cost labour to service urban elites, and gateways to modernity for those formerly excluded. Within the urban villages, groups of migrant-activists defy the statist vision of the city. Through cultural performances and visual representations, they struggle to promote an urban modernity in which they are included as active participants. This paper explores how Beijing's urban villages constitute a key site of ideological contestation over what the city should be, and whom urban life is for.

**Keywords:** China, urban villages, urbanism, migrant workers

In November 2017 a devastating fire in an apartment block in Daxing district of Beijing – the location of many urban villages which house the city’s migrant population – claimed 19 lives. The response by the Beijing government was an immediate round of urban village demolitions and the eviction of thousands of migrant workers on the grounds of “safety” (Rivers and Wang 2017). This “clean-up” (*qingli*) constituted part of a long-planned strategy to rid Beijing of large numbers of migrant workers, referred to as the “low-end population” (*diduan renkou*) in municipal planning documents. It was met with public outcry, evident in posts on social media including a widely circulated open letter to the central government, signed by over a hundred signatories, condemning the evictions as unjust and unconstitutional (Weiquan Wang 2017).

English language scholarship on China’s urban villages is broadly critical of local government urban village demolitions (e.g. Song et al. 2008; Liu et al. 2010; Wu et al. 2013; Zhan 2018). Scholars highlight the many beneficial roles that urban villages play in the life of the city, particularly in supplying much needed affordable housing, so fulfilling the requirement for low-cost labour. Yet an unresolved question overhangs this scholarship which has not been adequately addressed: if these villages play an essential role for the city, why is the local government continuing to demolish them, and with such ferocity? Are local officials simply irrational, or not listening? Or is there something more complicated going on? This serves as a starting point for our paper. What is marginalized in these discussions, we argue, is an account of how urban villages are nodal points for a broader ideological contestation taking place in China – spot lit by the recent events in Beijing – concerning the nature of urbanization, whom the city is for, and how it is produced. We seek to make explicit these contestations by investigating three distinct ideological frameworks on the basis of which Beijing’s urban space is being struggled over and remade.

First, we examine the rationale of ‘official state urbanism’ in Beijing. As Lefebvre describes it, urbanism – expressed both institutionally and ideologically – is “an activity that claims to control the process of urbanization and urban practice and subject it to its order” (2003: 151). Behind the urbanism of the state and its technocrats, argues Lefebvre, lies a capitalist class strategy to transform social space from a habitat – a site for living and production activities – into a commodified object oriented towards the formation of surplus value. Thus, what was once the “spontaneous city” (Lefebvre 2003: 160) is subjected to intervention, control, force and constraint – legitimised by the promise of modernity, globality and futurity. The form that official state urbanism takes in Beijing, as articulated across statements within a variety of state or state-affiliated documents, entails the transformation of the city into a strategic site of global capital accumulation (Shin and Zhao, 2018). This is premised upon a particular vision of urban modernity that denigrates urban villages and downplays the role of cheap labour.

We then examine two ideological positions which, in different but overlapping ways, seek to counter the vision of official state urbanism. Both challenge the state’s claim to monopolise the production of urban space, instead valorising the role of urban villages and foregrounding the importance of cheap labour. The first, articulated discursively in various Chinese academic and policy publications, conceives of urban villages as free market havens. This discourse advocates for an urban development arising from the spontaneous entrepreneurialism of peasants (*nongmin*) in the city – both urban villagers and rural migrants. This is premised upon a universalist economic rationality which celebrates the activities of individuals acting in accordance with market demand free from state interference.

Second, migrant-activists who have formed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the urban villages put forward their claims to the *right to the city*. Through acts of performance and visual representation, they highlight their economic contributions, self-

identifying as the makers of the city itself, while also demanding their cultural inclusion in the aesthetic of the city. In so doing, they utilise the urban villages as spaces of subtle resistance to a statist ideology which denies their role in urban life and seeks to render them invisible.

Each of these ideological positions relies on a distinct set of claims concerning how cities are, or should be, produced – first, top-down by state planning, second, via market mechanisms, or third, through the social industriousness and cultural creativity of ordinary people. More than just presenting different points of view, these latter two positions adopt strategies of articulation which attempt to subvert the ideology of official state urbanism by undermining its central claims.

In researching this article, both authors separately carried out multiple fieldwork trips from 2011-2017. One author lived and worked at a university in Beijing from 2013 to 2016 where she gathered and analysed relevant policy documents, academic articles and newspaper reports. She made regular visits to an urban village in Daxing for observation and conducted several semi-structured interviews with scholars at various research institutions and with local state officials. The other author conducted participant observation and interviews with grassroots migrant worker NGOs in Beijing from 2011-2015, in the districts of Chaoyang and Haidian.

The paper is organized into five parts. In parts one and two, we discuss how our argument contributes to existing English language scholarship on Chinese urbanism, first, in relation to urban village demolitions, and second, concerning the relations between the state, the market, and society. Our analysis contributes to these latter debates by highlighting how the role of each in the making of the city continues to be contested inside China, both within and outside state institutions, through competing ideological visions of the city. In the next three sections, we examine the discourse of official state urbanism, and the two ideological

frameworks by which it is contested. We conclude by suggesting that an inchoate alliance may be emerging between the latter two positions which challenges the party-state's claim to monopolize the production of Beijing.

### **Chinese Urbanism and Village Demolitions**

Much of the scholarly literature on urban villages in English language journals draws attention to the positive contributions they make to Chinese cities, highlighting their role in providing low-cost housing for rural migrants (e.g. Song et al. 2008; Li 2008; Liu et al. 2010; Wu et al. 2013; Zhan 2018). Conceived as sites of transition, or “springboards” for both villagers and migrants to integrate into urban life (e.g. Liu et al 2010: 138, 140; Wu et al. 2013: 1926), the villages are depicted as spaces of grassroots entrepreneurial activity free from state intervention (e.g. Liu et al 2010: 139; Wu et al. 2013: 1925-6). Scholars point out that by reproducing the city's labour power and keeping down the migrant workers' cost of living, the urban villages help to attract investors (e.g. Wu et al. 2013: 1930) and act as "an indispensable component of Chinese capitalism and global capitalism" (Zhan 2018: 1538).

The assumption underlying this body of literature, whether explicitly or by implication, is that the demolitions are irrational and, if only local officials understood better the role urban villages play in the life of the city, the policies would change. The government is criticised, for example, for its “long-standing neglect” (Li 2008: 290; see also Steffen 2020, this issue) and “lack of enthusiasm” (Liu et al. 2010: 137) regarding the provision of adequate housing for rural migrants. Meanwhile the demolition policies appear “misguided” (Song et al. 2008: 313) and based on concerns about “social appropriateness” as opposed to “economic rationality” (Song et al. 2008: 327). Zhan (2018) goes further, pointing to a conflicted logic evident in the government's position. By demolishing the centrally located urban villages while allowing others to remain in the more distant outskirts, she argues, the local

government tacitly and strategically enables their persistence, contradicting its own official rhetoric.

Yet, as Wing-Shing Tang (2000: 352) observes, analyses of urban planning are too often reduced to limited institutional policy evaluations which are “diverted from the state and its reasonings”. Marginalized from these studies, argues Tang, is analysis of the ideological framing within which the state's policies are situated. This requires going beyond local institutional considerations to produce an account of the political rationale of the party-state and its broader ambitions with respect to national development (see, for example, Wong and Liu 2017; Shin and Zhao 2018). It is only by retrieving this broader ideological framework that the logic behind the state’s demolition policies can be fully comprehended.

Since the 1990s, China's economic growth has been premised upon the production of large urban conglomerations geared towards capital accumulation and the attraction of foreign investment. Centralizing fiscal reforms in 1994 compelled local governments to rely on revenue extracted from their own localities, leading to their dependence on land leasing and tax on service industries, both of which require state control of land. This resulted in both inter-regional and central-local competition for revenue, leading to localised regimes of urban accumulation, termed variously as local state entrepreneurialism (e.g. Shin 2009; Wu 2018), local developmentalism (e.g. Su and Tao 2017), developmental urbanism (e.g. Wong and Liu 2017) or neoliberal urbanism (e.g. He and Wu 2009; Lin 2014; Lin and Zhang 2015). This is the broader political economic context within which the urban village demolitions are taking place. Thus, the political aspirations of the centre provide the institutional conditions for land-based accumulation regimes in the localities, and work in alliance with them (Su and Tao 2017). The violence and dispossession inherent to the urban village demolitions, meanwhile, is made possible by its political framing as constitutive of broader state modernization processes (e.g. Sargeson 2013). What this vision of urban modernity is,

however, as conceived by state authorities, requires examination. As we will show, it entails the production of a certain kind of city, in which low-cost labour is devalued and urban villages are deemed redundant.

### **Chinese Urbanism and the State-Market-Society Triad**

Scholars of Chinese urbanism continue to grapple with how to conceptualise the complex relations between the state, the market, and society (He and Lin 2015). First, the strong role of the state coupled with China's rapid urban growth has long posed an analytical problem due to the deeply-entrenched neoliberal assumption that the state and the market are inherently at odds. Much energy has been spent on fathoming this supposedly counterintuitive relationship (e.g. He and Wu 2009; Lin 2014; Lin and Zhang 2015). This has contributed to a still unresolved debate concerning the extent to which China is – or is not – neoliberal (e.g. Buckingham 2017; Wu 2018; Zhou et al. 2018). Several scholars have sought to resolve this problem by observing Brenner and Theodore's (2002: 352) call for site-specific studies of "actually existing neoliberalism" which are sensitive to the ways that policies and processes of radical marketization must, in practice, negotiate and adapt to the pre-existing political and institutional legacies, and social contradictions, they encounter in any locality (e.g. He and Wu 2009: 282-3; Wu 2010: 621; Lin and Zhang 2015: 2778). For us, the significance of these discussions is how they highlight the importance of analysing the particular contradictions and inconsistencies which disrupt and shape China's urban transformations. This includes paying attention to the contestations contained within the state apparatus itself, the social and political forces acting upon it, and the forms of alliance and opposition thereby produced (e.g. Jessop 2002).

Second, while the relationship between the state and market in China's urbanism is much debated, "the role of societal forces...remains as a significant yet often overlooked topic" (He and Lin 2015: 2760). We contribute to addressing this by examining strategies of

resistance by migrant labour NGOs established within these villages. Our paper thus engages the scholarly discussions on the ‘right to the city’ in China (e.g. Qian and He 2012; Shin 2013; Wong and Liu 2017). The ‘right to the city’ entails the demand to broaden participation in both the material and cultural production of urban space, as well as the determination of how capital surplus is produced and distributed, to include social actors, citizens and civil society organisations (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2008).

Some scholars criticise migrant labour NGOs for being more concerned with their own organizational survival than addressing workers’ needs. They may, for example, prioritise relations with the state over promoting worker solidarity (e.g. Franceschini 2014). Alternatively, they may impose middle class values and aspirations, seeking to co-opt migrants into neoliberal norms and practices rather than upholding the cultural importance of rural or workers’ lifestyles (e.g. Zhan 2019). We recognise that the political environment within which NGOs are situated constrains their possible strategies. First, overt resistance against the state is not possible, so NGOs must undertake more subtle and indirect forms of resistance (Jakimów 2017). These include cultural and artistic forms of activism, which while often dismissed as ‘trivial’, are important because they constitute one of few available avenues of expressing disagreement while avoiding direct confrontation with the state (Johnson and Fürst, forthcoming; Wang 2017). As our paper argues, art as resistance can constitute a strategy for claiming the right to the city by producing an aesthetic “counterspace” (Xiao and Qu 2020) which opposes the state’s urban vision. Second, operating in a political and discursive environment in which market values dominate restricts the viable ways that claims can be articulated and accepted by potential supporters. As such, the migrant-activists discussed here seek to ally against the state with liberal-minded, middle-class intellectuals and consumers (also see Sun 2014). Thus, they adopt strategies which



resonate with liberal ideals by foregrounding their role in fulfilling the city's requirements for low-cost labour. These discussions provide the theoretical framing for our analysis.

### **Beijing's Official State Urbanism**

Beijing's discourse of official state urbanism is produced in the policy documents and statements of the municipal government and its affiliated institutions. Constructing urban villages as socially disordered blights on the urban landscape, the discourse works to legitimise both village demolitions and migrant evictions by the local state. Scholars have noted before how migrants and their places of abode are constructed as problematic in state policy discourse, and how such negative portrayals are bound up with practices of disciplining and state surveillance, and used to justify demolitions and evictions (e.g. Zhang 2001; Siu 2007; Qian 2015). For example, migrants are routinely labelled as the 'outsider population' (*wailai renkou*), a term suggestive of untrustworthy intruders, or the 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*), implying instability and transience (e.g. Zhang 2001: 201-4). Official statements routinely depict urban villages as “dirty, chaotic, and backward” (Siu 2007: 335) and advocate the need to “to cut off the city's cancers” (*ibid.*), a medical analogy which represents urban villages as an invasive sickness, and the state as beneficent healer. Thus, a 2011 planning document of the Municipal Committee of City Governance and Appearance called for the “general eradication of urban villages and other dirty, chaotic and backward phenomena which impact on the lives of citizens” (BMCCGA and BMCDR 2011). A particularly acute strand of this discourse, which came to prominence with the drastic round of evictions from Daxing in November 2017, refers to migrants as the 'low-end population'— hence the need for the ensuing ‘clean-up campaign’, a term which depicts the urban village spaces, and the migrants living there, as unwanted filth – both morally and visually.

Given the potential financial value of the land on which they stand, it is perhaps unsurprising that Beijing's urban villages are deemed so undesirable by local authorities. Yet, the urban village demolitions cannot be understood only as locally-driven. They are further bound up with a broader national development strategy which seeks to transform certain major cities in China into 'world cities' (or 'global cities') (e.g. Timberlake et al. 2014; Gu et al. 2015). A municipal planning blueprint from 2008, for example, explicitly premised Beijing's urban-rural restructuring on "the goal of building an internationalised megacity" (BMC 2008). Beijing's world city aspirations were further consolidated at the meeting of the Beijing Municipal People's Congress in January 2010, constituting the highlight of Mayor Guo Jinlong's Government Work Report (Shi 2010). State-run media, meanwhile, assists with the ideological groundwork. An article by Beijing University Professor Lin Jian published in the *People's Daily* lauded Beijing's world city aspirations as part of the "Chinese dream" and argued that making good use of the city's land reserves, including by demolishing urban villages, was essential to building that dream (Lin 2013).

In seminal theoretical accounts, the world city constitutes a key structural component of the global economy, organized through a set of hierarchically structured largescale urban agglomerations constituting "major sites for the concentration and accumulation of international capital" (Friedmann 1986: 73). Yet, despite the world city's evident splendour, it is typically characterised by internal class polarization, requiring a 'lower-grade' population to perform the menial and labor-intensive tasks required by the high-income white collar workers (e.g. Friedmann and Wolff 1982; Sassen 2001). More recent studies of world cities in Asia, and China specifically, examine how the concept of the world city has transcended the realm of academia to become "an increasingly self-conscious goal" driven by government officials and local urban elites (see Timberlake et al. 2014, 164). Yet, while highlighting how world city building can be state-led and politically motivated, scholars continue to expect

social polarization as par for the course. Timberlake et al.'s study of global cities in China, for example, identifies urban villages specifically as manifestations of this phenomenon. What these scholars miss, however, is how theoretical expectations may conflict with the visions of local officials on the ground – hence the need to pay close attention to “actually existing” practices and ideologies (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

While the official usage of the term ‘low-end population’ had caused public outrage when it came to prominence in 2017, in fact the term had been flying under the radar in state discourse for at least a decade. It had appeared in the municipal planning document of 2005-2020 for Daxing district new town, which stated that “especially with regard to pushing forward the restructuring of ‘urban villages’, it is necessary to...reduce the spaces for the low-end outsider population to congregate” (BMPC 2007). This same paragraph of the document had begun by advocating: “through the construction of basic facilities, and optimizing the neighbourhood environment, it is necessary to induce high quality talent to move to Daxing new town”. This trope, ‘high quality talent’ (*gao suzhi rencai*), clearly posed in opposition to the ‘low-end population’, is central to understanding the Chinese state’s conception of the world city (see also Hayward 2020). Indeed, in 2010, when Liu Qi, Secretary of the Beijing Municipal Committee, wrote an op-ed in the *People’s Daily* promoting Beijing’s world city vision, he opened by describing the concept as “a city where world high-end corporate headquarters and high-end talent congregates” (Liu 2010). This discourse of ‘high-end talent’, meaning a competitive, educated workforce best equipped to serve the needs of global corporations, lies at the heart of official state urbanism (see also Ou 2020, this issue).

Thus, in Beijing, the municipal government’s structural imperative to pursue land revenue, and the national government’s aspirations with respect to China’s economy and international status, unite behind a world city project of a particular kind. Reflecting the

central government's desire to raise China above its former status as 'workshop of the world' – this involves the downscaling of unskilled, low-cost labour-intensive manufacturing and the development of technology-intensive, white collar service industries staffed by a growing population of urban middle-class professionals with the spending power to fuel domestic consumption. In contrast to more conventional conceptions of the world city, this constitutes a political and spatial strategy of class restructuring which deems low-cost workers socially undesirable, visually unpalatable, and economically superfluous.<sup>1</sup> Plans to rid the city of low skilled migrant labour by eradicating their places of abode, and the discourse which condemns urban villages as unsightly, unclean and uncivilized, must be understood within the context of this particular political project – a class strategy which hinges both on the state's ambitions with respect to global capital, and its ideological conception of modernity.

### **Urban Villages as Free Market Havens**

Alongside the official state discourse of urban villages as spaces of degeneracy exists a competing ideological vision. In its presentation of an alternative, market-led urbanization, it attempts to subvert the discourse of state urbanism and challenge the party-state's official claim to monopolize the production of urban space. This discourse is located primarily in Chinese scholarly and policy-relevant journals and posts in online forums, and is produced by liberal-minded or left-leaning academics. Most of these scholars are in leading Chinese universities, some are in institutions outside mainland China, and some are located in government research institutions, demonstrating that the state itself is not monolithic.

This discourse is centred on a concept of economic rationality based on the laws of market freedom and supply and demand (e.g. Lu 2017a; 2017b). The urban villagers are viewed as the subjects of urbanization (e.g. Zeng 2013) and low-cost migrant labour, far from signifying lowliness and shame, is the very thing which articulates the city to the global capitalist system (e.g. Zhan and Tong, 2017). The necessity of cheap migrant labour is

deemed both “scientific” (*kexue*) – implying universal – and consistent with global development trends, challenging the state’s insistence on Chinese characteristics (e.g. Lu 2017a; 2017b). This works in alliance with a liberal concept of equal rights reflected both morally, and legally (e.g. Zhang 2016, 2017; Weiquan Wang 2017). Through these tropes, the villages are valorised as spaces of free and spontaneous market activity, the village landlords as canny entrepreneurs, and the migrants as thrifty and industrious. State demolition policies, in contrast, are portrayed as irrational, brutal and criminal – challenging the intellectual, moral and legal legitimacy of local government actions.

A significant moment in this discourse occurred in October 2012 at a conference on urban-rural planning in Yunnan, organized by the China Urban Planning Association and the Kunming People’s Government (Zeng 2013). The purpose of the conference, as set out by the chair, Zeng Xianchuan, head of the Guangdong Urban Rural Planning and Design Institute and chair of the Guangdong City Planning Association, was to draw policymakers’ attention to the relationship between rural migrants and urban villages – usually treated as separate phenomena but, as he pointed out, in fact inextricably linked. In his introduction, Zeng called for recognition of how urban villages “play a very important role in maintaining the rapid Chinese-style development of urbanization” (Zeng 2013, 82). In conference proceedings, a summary of which was published in the journal *City Planning Review*, participants – including city planners and academics – discussed how government policies could better incorporate urban villages, and the rural migrants living there, into local planning policies. In one notable example, Wang Shifu, head of urban planning at the South China University of Technology School of Architecture, argued for recognition of the role rural migrants play in providing low-cost labour which enabled cities to be competitive. Despite common depictions of peasants as unproductive, what had emerged in the urban villages, Wang observed, was a form of self-organized “blood-ties urbanization” (*xueyuan chengshihua*)

which, with its strong sense of community based on village familial relations, was notable for its dynamism and difficult to replicate in standard commercial housing (Zeng 2013: 84).

Concurrent with Wang's observation, in the *Journal of Tsinghua University*, Zhan Yang and Tong Xiaoxi (2017) explicitly challenge unilinear development models which conceive of urban villages as vestiges of backwardness awaiting erasure by oncoming urbanity. They point instead to a peasant-led "spontaneous urbanization" (*zifa chengshihua*) taking place within the confines of urban villages. In these enclosed spaces, shielded from both big capital and the state, rental and service markets flourish. Through these processes, they argue, the villages have been transformed from sites of agricultural production into sites of both urban consumption and the reproduction of the city's cheap labour force, facilitating China's integration into the global capitalist system.

According to Lu Ming, an economist at Shanghai Jiaotong University whose writings are shared widely on blogsites and social media, state tampering with scientific laws of population growth by restricting low-cost labour "can impact the development of the urban economy" (2017a), while attempts to impose a manmade "bearing capacity" (maximum population) for cities "have no theoretical basis" (Lu 2017b). On the contrary, he argues, there is no such thing as a city which is "too big". Lu cites Zipf's law of city populations – a strange but empirically substantiated law whereby a country's largest city has a population twice as large as its second largest city, three times as large as its third largest city, and so on. Interfering with this natural law by restricting low-cost labour raises the cost of services for the "high end" population, among other things, likely impacting their productivity and impairing the city's appeal to the brightest and best. Moreover, attempts to adjust the population "quality structure" by imposing administrative forms of discrimination "violate the fairness of the market, violate socialist core values, and violate the universal laws of world urban development" (Lu 2017b).

Zhang Yinghong, a researcher at the Beijing Rural Economy Research Centre, a research institute within the Ministry of Agriculture, concurs that the restriction of low-cost migrant labour entering the city is “unscientific” (*bu kexue*): “One high-end member of the population requires ten or more low-end workers to provide services...to deliver takeaways, to do the cleaning, how can people operate without these?”<sup>2</sup> Arguing from a moral and legal perspective, Zhang is, he says, the first person to propose the concept of “local government criminality”, referring to how the human rights and property rights of citizens – the urban villagers – are systematically “trampled on” by demolitions which often by-pass required legal processes. While the central government cracks down on corruption, he points out, the perpetrators of these particular crimes go unpunished. All levels of government should, he argues, take measures to counter the corrosive influence of interest groups – the collusion between local governments and developers (Zhang 2017) – which results in this “organized criminal behaviour” which ultimately threatens the state’s legitimacy (Zhang 2016).

This language of rights, legality, and government brutality – this time towards the migrants – is echoed in the open letter to the central government which appeared following the massive “clean-up” campaign in Daxing (Weiquan Wang 2017). Referred to as a “horrific event” the campaign is denounced as an “illegal” and “unconstitutional” act which “seriously tramples on human rights”. In a direct subversion of the state discourse aimed at migrants, its manner of implementation is depicted as “rough” and “low-end”, unacceptable in any civilised society. The letter then undermines state attempts to discursively separate migrants – the “outsider population” (the term *wailai renkou* is always positioned in inverted commas to refuse its validity) – into a less worthy and deserving social category. The signatories call for recognition of the “sacrifice and dedication” to Beijing’s development made by people across all of China, not just the local Beijing urbanites. Beijing has a duty, the signatories claim, to treat these people with gratitude, particularly the lower strata – not pay them back with

“arrogance, discrimination and humiliation”. Finally, in a discursive move calculated to redraw boundaries of national identity, challenging the Chinese-ness of unscrupulous local officials and placing *them* as outsiders, the letter states “to treat one’s own compatriots this way is worse than discrimination from foreigners”.

### **Urban Villages as Sites of Resistance**

Here we discuss the work of two NGOs: NGO A, based in an urban village on the outskirts of Chaoyang district set up by a group of migrant workers in 2002; and NGO B, which at the time of the fieldwork was located in a demolished urban village in Haidian district set up in 2003 by a married couple of migrant workers. While it is the case that different NGOs adopt varying strategies, two characteristics are relevant for our discussion here. First, these urban village-based NGOs deliberately formulate their claims to resonate with the discourse outlined above, valorising free markets. As such, they highlight the migrants’ role as essential contributors to the city through their material and economic contributions, often unwittingly supporting the neoliberal view of economic productivity as a justification for the migrant workers’ right to the city (the so-called ‘neoliberal citizen-subject’ discourse) (Ong 1999). Second, they further transcend this discourse by staking their claim to the ‘right to the city’ based on their social and cultural contributions to urban life. Through cultural activities and visual representations within the villages themselves, they produce a “counterspace” (Xiao and Qu 2020) which poses an aesthetic challenge to the pristine image of the city envisioned by state urbanism from which they, and their places of abode, have been scrubbed. In so doing, they transform urban villages into political sites for the articulation of their claims.

First, NGOs produce a variety of cultural and artistic projects in direct defiance of the state’s insistence that urban villages and their inhabitants are blemishes on the city landscape.



NGO A is particularly well-known for art-focused forms of activism, which include theatrical plays, music, paintings, photography, film-making and a museum. These challenge the state's spatial and visual marginalisation of migrants from the city, and strive to re-position migrants and their visual accoutrements as central to the city's development. For instance, in 2009, a music album and an accompanying theatrical play were released by NGO A to mark the occasion of the Beijing Olympics. This landmark occasion had been harnessed by the state as a high-profile branding strategy to promote Beijing's image as a 'world city' on the global stage, under the slogan 'One World, One Dream'. In contrast, NGO A's album and play, both named 'Our World, Our Dream' sought to challenge and undermine the image of unity and inclusiveness depicted by the state, drawing attention to the elitism of the state's vision. The album's cover depicts the spectators entering the iconic Bird's Nest stadium, with the workers pictured as separated from the crowds, held out of view, only observing the games from the page corner. The album's song lyrics clearly demand that migrant workers be recognised as the real heroes of the Olympics; those whose lives are devoted to the city's development but who are nevertheless excluded from the fruits of the games. As one of the musicians, a second-generation migrant worker-activist, noted in an interview: 'the Olympic Games slogan is 'One World, One Dream', but our slogan is 'Our World, Our Dream', because the migrant workers and the elites live in two different worlds!'<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the NGO's artistic outputs seek to re-articulate migrant workers' physical labour, and all the material manifestations that come with it, as a fundamental contribution to the city-making process. However, they also transcend the focus on mere economic contribution, by emphasising the importance of their aesthetic contribution to city-making through visual representations of their physical labour. For instance, in their museum, they positioned the tricycle recycling cart – conventionally conceived as a symbol of visual discord emerging from urban villages carrying piles of garbage – as a centrepiece in the final

exhibition room. Thus, items conventionally perceived as everyday lowly artefacts are reframed as aesthetic manifestations of workers' culture and through them, NGO A insists, migrants contribute to the city's labour, history and culture. An oppositional image of the city is presented in which the migrant worker is present, seen and valued. Second, the NGOs critique the lack of humanistic and social consideration behind the world city project, revealing how the production of Beijing as world city rests upon instrumental treatment of migrant workers. For example, NGO A's artistic projects point to the hypocrisy of the state re-development policies which continuously demolish migrant-occupied urban villages while relying on their labour to physically remake the city. In its theatrical performance 'City Life', first performed in 2010, and the above-mentioned play 'Our World, Our Dream', the NGO highlights the displacement of human lives brought about by the combined forces of global capital and city planning which collude in the redevelopment of urban villages.

Demolish and Rebuild, Demolish and Rebuild

[Now] the 'ruling' people's houses were torn down

'These houses are too backward, we should build a White House here instead' they said

Grand and imposing with the goddess of freedom by their side

Demolish and Rebuild, Demolish and Rebuild ... (City Life 2010)

In this passage, the NGO mocks the government's urban village redevelopment policies which rely on migrant workers' muscles only to eventually dispose of these same workers, uprooting them as undeserving non-urban subjects. The references to "the White House" and the "goddess of freedom" evoke the US as a symbol of global capitalism undergirded by a hypocritical ideology of individual freedom which in fact denies the rights of ordinary people. It is with global capital, the migrant-activists claim, not Chinese workers, that the Chinese state has erroneously allied

itself. Meanwhile, the rightful ‘ruling people’, the workers, are denied their rights both to participate in the distribution of the city’s surplus, and to the production of urban space, glaringly signified by the destruction of their housing.

In ‘Our World, Our Dream’, the NGO portrays the state's efforts to manufacture Beijing's image as a ‘world city’ as producing a dangerous utopia from which they have been cleansed:

What is wrong with putting up the stall [on Beijing’s streets]? We are just self-employed (*zizhu chuangye*) in answer to the call of our government. Do you think that only if there is no grain of dirt in the city, it means that the city is now modern and internationalised and only if the city follows global standards you can save face?’ (...) ‘Please, everybody, pay attention to the key word ‘clean up’ (*qingli*). Have a look at this word, how civilised it is, how humanistic it is...how sick (*e’xin*) it is!’ (Our World, Our Dream 2009)

Here, the word ‘sick’ (*e’xin*) defies the discursive strategy of official state urbanism which seeks to portray the state as beneficent healer, cutting out the city’s cancers. Instead, the state's ‘clean up’ policies are depicted as both pathological and morally void.

NGO B, in contrast, goes beyond cultural or discursive struggle with an act of material defiance against state attempts to reconstruct urban space. This is illustrated by the activists’ attempts to defend migrants’ urban village housing from demolition, constituting an explicit demand for their right to the city to be granted materially, as well as socially and aesthetically. The founders of NGO B originally set up their organisation to provide the village with a kindergarten for migrant children and a helpline for migrants living in the village and beyond. When the village was scheduled for demolition in 2012, they refused to leave their house, and defied the on-coming bulldozers. They recorded the fight with

developers and posted the video on Youku (a Chinese version of Youtube) and the NGO's own Sina blog website. The image of the last remaining urban village house surrounded by modern blocks of flats, with guarded fences, typical of the Beijing middle class, becomes a powerful visual symbol. It reflects the struggle of migrant workers against the dominance of the state, and the class divisions that typically frame the role of urban villages.

## **Conclusion**

The conflict over the production of cities in China is not simply an institutional one between different levels of government, nor is it an economic conflict between the combined forces of state-capital on the one side and the people on the other. It is a conflict over different ideological positions, and urban villages are key sites where this takes place. As the case of Beijing illustrates, where violent forms of redevelopment are bound up with the multi-layered state's production of a 'world city', economic "rationalities" are ideologically inflected, and can manifest in seemingly irrational decisions such as displacement of migrants, the key labour force providing essential services. In order to understand the role of urban villages beyond their economic or spatial role in the city, the ideological positions of those involved in this contestation should be closely scrutinised.

The contestation about how the city is produced involves who has a right to participate in its production, how labour is valued and how, and to whom, accumulated capital is distributed. It may be tempting to see this contestation in stark terms as a three-part struggle between the authoritarian state and its alliance with global capital, liberal middle-class consumers, and workers promoting a socialist consciousness. As we have shown, however, the contradictions involved are not so stark or simply distinguished, with claims strategically shaped by political context.

So far, the response of the state authorities to the attempts to challenge their monopolisation of China's urbanism is largely one of suppression, as the critical voices of

academics and activists, are marginalised. As part of the country-wide crackdown on migrant NGOs initiated in 2012, and the continuous redevelopment of the city's 'fringe zones', NGO A was threatened with closure and nearly forcefully removed from its premises in 2016. The village where it is based is likely to be soon demolished in line with wider plans for the redevelopment of Chaoyang district. The extent to which migrant-activists will be able to persevere in their contestation is therefore in doubt.

However, despite the forceful means by which the state's "official" vision is imposed, attention to the opposing perspectives highlights dissatisfaction within the polity and ongoing attempts to resist. Indeed, as we have shown, there may be an alliance emerging which acts as a political counterweight to official state urbanism, rooted in a shared conviction regarding the essential role of urban villages and the brutality, and irrationality, of the local state. The outrage at the mass evictions in 2017 suggests that critical voices across social and class boundaries are combining to exert pressure on the state. This is evident in the large numbers of middle-class students from Beijing's universities who went to the urban villages during the "clean-up" to join in solidarity with the migrants' protests (Morris 2018). It is also evident in the anger of middle-class consumers, expressed in the media and online, over the drop off in delivery services as the myriad of cheaply-paid motorbike delivery personnel were expelled from the city. And it is evident in the tremors felt across Beijing's E-commerce industry, which relies on the low-cost labour of thousands of migrants to provide its services (Watts 2018). How the forces behind official state urbanism will respond to this emerging oppositional alliance will have important implications for the spatial politics of Beijing over the coming years, and for the lives of those that live there.

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<sup>1</sup> When questioned on this issue, one high-level municipal planning official explained to me in exasperation: “Beijing just doesn’t need so much low-cost labour!” Informal conversation with author, Beijing, May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with author, Ministry of Agriculture Research Centre for the Rural Economy, Beijing, 17 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with author, Beijing, 13 April 2012.