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Spatial Governance in Beijing: Informality, Illegality and the Displacement of the “Low-end Population”

Carwyn Morris* 

Abstract

Using ethnographic data gathered in Beijing during 2017 and 2018, this article examines numerous urban population displacement events using the concept of spatial governance in order to understand the spatialization of governance in urban China. A particular focus of this article are the Beijing-wide displacements of the so-called “low-end population” that followed a fire in Xinjian Village in 2017. The analysis in this article uses geographic understandings of spatial informality to interrogate how space is made informal and subsequently illegal as a means of population control. The article puts forward the idea that spatial governance is one of the key forms, if not the key form, of governance in urban China. It highlights changes in governance that have resulted in space becoming not just a site for control, but the medium for techniques of control over China’s urban population.

Keywords: migration; governance; space; displacement; spatial governance; low-end population

On 18 November 2017 a fire in Beijing’s Xinjian Village 新建村 (hereafter, Xinjian) killed 19 people. Of the dead, 17 were translocal migrants without local household registration (*hukou* 户口) status.¹ The following day, Party Secretary Cai Qi 蔡奇 announced that “every home and every village” would be searched for safety hazards.² On 20 November, the 40-day City-wide Safety and Hidden Dangers Major Investigation, Major Cleaning, and Major Rectification Campaign (*Quanshi anquan yinhuan da paicha da qingli da zhengzhi zhuanxiang xingdong* 全市安全隐患大排查大清理大整治专项行动, hereafter the

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1 “Beijing Daxing huozai yunanzhe mingdan gongbu jingfang xingju 18 ren” (List of victims of fire in Daxing, Beijing, announced, police detain 18), *Renmin ribao*, 20 November 2017; Pils 2020.

2 Luo 2017.

Hidden Dangers Campaign) began, leading to mass evictions throughout Beijing that targeted a group referred to as the “low-end population” (*diduan renkou* 低端人口).³ Like most of those who had died in the fire, of the tens of thousands of “low-end” people displaced,⁴ many were translocal migrants. News of these evictions was soon censored in the journalistic media, though, due to their scale, the evictions were obvious to anyone living in Beijing.

When the fire hit, I was ten months into my ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing, examining how migrants produced stillness in a city that seemed to want rid of them.⁵ From my position, in Beijing’s Tiantongyuan 天通苑 area, this was just one of many attempts by the local Beijing government to use demolition, construction, urban administration and a monopoly on power over the spatial environment to displace Beijing’s low-income translocal migrants. In the ten months leading up to the fire the majority of my interlocutors had been affected by at least one displacement event, including restaurateurs in central Beijing and food-stall operators in Tiantongyuan. Throughout my fieldwork, the practices used to displace remained similar, what changed was the spatiality and temporality of these practices. These practices had been spatially and temporally localized, one street would suffer while the neighbouring street remained untouched; during the Xinjian incident, however, it felt like the entire city suffered at once.

Throughout this article, I build on my ethnographic data to understand how space is not just a site of control, it is the medium of control – the central premise of the concept of “spatial governance.” In this article, socio-spatial relations are considered multidimensional,⁶ but I focus on how state and non-state actors (re)define and (re)interpret space through legal regimes and how they alter space through spatial practice. In this context, spatial governance involves the reinterpretation of space through legal regimes and changes to space through spatial practices, including practices of construction, demolition and eviction. Throughout this analysis, I show how many urban residents are governed through their relationship to informal space.⁷ In doing this, I argue that spatial governance has coincided with a move away from governance of the body, such as the “custody and repatriation” (*shourong qiansong* 收容遣送)⁸ system or family planning policies (wherein one can “break a law simply by being born”⁹). The spatialization of governance has historical examples, including the work unit and residential estate (*xiaoqu* 小区) systems,¹⁰ as well as being part of more recent technologies of governance. More recent examples include

3 Li, Song and Zhang 2018; Rudolph 2017.

4 Estimated figures calculated by late-2017 grassroots eviction-mapping projects involved in contentious politics, as discussed in Morris (2022).

5 Morris 2021.

6 In this article, I am specifically concerned with places within multi-scalar territorial systems as discussed by Jessop, Brenner and Jones (2008).

7 Roy 2009c; Yiftachel 2009.

8 Hand 2006.

9 Yang 2021.

10 Bray 2005.

the “grid governance” (*wanggehua zhili* 网格化治理) system,¹¹ which Xuefei Ren considers a “territorial approach” to governance as it uses “a thick network of territorial institutions and authorities”¹² to practise “co-governance” (*gongzhi* 共治), with “multiple actors and social organizations work[ing] together to implement government programmes at the grassroots level.”¹³ But, while population governance within formal spaces such as *xiaoqu* has been a fixture of the literature on urban China, the relationship between formal and informal spaces is relatively underexamined.¹⁴ To help remedy such absences, this paper is concerned with the governance of informal spatial relations across Beijing (and its peri-urban periphery), so as to examine “the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized.”¹⁵

I explore spatial governance by analysing displacement events taking place in Beijing during 2017, including the Hole in the Wall (*kaiqiang dadong* 开墙打洞) Campaign (hereafter the KQDD Campaign), evictions in Tiantongyuan, and the post-Xinjian fire displacements. In examining these events, I make clear that while space is the medium of control – often through making previously informal sites illegal – it is predominantly “low-end” migrants that are affected by this governance. Through this analysis, I examine how control over bodies is exercised through the medium of space, a form of governance that I argue has become more prevalent during the Xi Jinping 习近平 administration. I tie this approach to national and local policy goals, notably the National New-type Urbanization Plan (NUP, 2014–2020) and the Beijing City Urban Master Plan (BUMP, 2016–2035).¹⁶ Overall, I demonstrate that through spatial governance specific populations (in this case, migrants) can be governed in ways that affect and yet are not directed at the body; an important change in the logics of governance in China and a move away from biopolitical systems centred primarily on the body and its history, such as the *suzhi* (素质, loosely translated as “quality”) and *hukou* systems, to systems that consider the mutually constitutive relationship between body and space.¹⁷

The research for this article took place in 2017 and 2018, where I conducted multi-sited ethnographic research across Beijing and within digital spaces such as Weixin/WeChat (微信).¹⁸ My fieldwork had three key sites, Tiantongyuan, the *hutong* (alleyways) of Dongcheng 东城 district and the Weixin instant-messaging groups of projects gathering data on evictions.¹⁹ Such data-gathering projects emerged in the wake of the Xinjian fire and my participation within them

11 Tang 2020; Ren 2020.

12 Ren 2020, 425.

13 Tang 2020, 44.

14 Huang and Yi 2015; Wu, Zhang and Webster 2013.

15 Roy 2009c, 80.

16 SCPRC 2014; BMCUP 2017.

17 Yan 2003; Zhang 2018.

18 Morris, 2022.

19 I state the names of important sites (Tiantongyuan, Dongcheng, Xinjian, Pi Village) but to protect identities I omit full geographic locations or give pseudonyms to smaller sites (e.g. Liangshan Road) and my interlocutors (e.g. Liu Laolao and Yase).

took me across Beijing, including trips to Xinjian, Pi Village 皮村 and Huilongguan 回龙观. The main field site for this project was the densely populated Tiantongyuan area of Beijing, on Beijing's peri-urban periphery. North of Beijing's Fifth Ring Road, Tiantongyuan extends to the northern end of Beijing Metro Line 5, encompassing four metro stations, and it has been officially described as a commuter city or "sleeping city" (*shuicheng* 睡城).²⁰ Travelling around Tiantongyuan problematized this description, and I saw formal spaces, such as *xiaoqu* and shopping malls, intermeshed with informal sites, such as dormitory apartments (*gongyu* 公寓) and night markets, creating a vibrant and complex locality.

In the remainder of this article, I first develop a conceptual framework building on the Chinese governmentality literature and literature from outside of China on spatial governmentality. Following this, I tie geographic understandings of informality to events within contemporary China, highlighting how spaces, not bodies, are made illegal. In the empirical section, I use data from numerous displacement events across Beijing in 2017 and 2018, focusing on the displacements of restaurateurs, vendors and food workers, to build the case for the practice of spatial governance. The displacements analysed in this article were all linked by one theme: informal space becoming illegal. I conclude the ethnographic portion of the paper with discussion of a visit to Gu'an 固安 in Hebei, which several interlocutors moved to or visited due to displacement effects. Through discussion of Gu'an, I explore how spatial governance contributes to the achieving of urban planning and national policy goals. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of the primacy of formal space in a city built on informal spatial relations.

Governing Spatially

The use of space as a medium of control by the Chinese state is not a new phenomenon,²¹ nor is it a phenomenon limited to China,²² but it is a form of governance suited to the governmental challenges the Chinese state currently faces. To start, demographic changes in China have altered the relationship between territory and population. Population was once used to produce state territory,²³ but, with territorial sovereignty now widely asserted, the new challenge is cultivating an obedient population and maintaining stability.²⁴ As biopolitical technologies that aim to maintain stability – including those coming under the rubrics of family planning, sexual health and mental health – have become a

20 "Beijing xia juexin shutong huilongguan tiantongyuan 'tongdian' jin bai ge xiangmu youwangg jie 'ducheng' 'shuicheng' zhi kun" (Beijing resolves to clear "pain points" in Tiantongyuan and Huilongguan, nearly one hundred projects are expected to solve the problem of the "jammed city" and "sleeping city"), *Gov.cn*, 16 August 2018. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-08/16/content_5314473.htm.

21 Bray 2005.

22 Rose-Redwood and Tantner 2012.

23 Zhu and Blachford 2016.

24 Finley 2019.

part of urban life without being wholly accepted by urban populations, new technologies of population governance have become necessary.²⁵ Additionally, while human rights conventions have found greater acceptance within China, rights to the spaces that humans inhabit have struggled to emerge: this makes space more manageable than the human body in contemporary China.²⁶ This is particularly true in a period of continuous connectivity where images and accounts of abuses of the body can spread rapidly online, deterring public displays of bodily violence by the state, unless they can be justified biopolitically.²⁷ In this context, governance through space becomes an efficient mode of governance over a population increasingly concerned with individual bodily security and health.²⁸

To understand how space has become a key medium of control in urban China, and building on the (spatial) governmentality literature, I adopt the concept of “spatial governance.” Governmentality draws attention to the “techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour.”²⁹ Governmentality is concerned with “the ‘how’ of governing – how we govern, how we are governed – and the relationship between the state, the government of others, and the government of ourselves.”³⁰ While the governmentality literature has generally been concerned with governance in democracies, China’s legacy of Maoism results in a “resilient style of thought” that “continues to inform the so-called guerrilla-style public policy of government [that] manifests in certain ways of doing ... [and] that transcends political boundaries.”³¹ The result has been the persistence of attitudes that emphasize “the government of conduct.”³² From this foundation, scholarship on spatial governance focuses on the techniques of population “control through the management of space”³³ to target “population[s] rather than particular individuals.”³⁴

Spatial governance helps make sense of a governmental regime wherein demolition, privatization and reconstruction are central to local governance.³⁵ Spatial governance includes passive and active modes of control, with spatial systems creating self-disciplining subjects. In this way, mundane spatial technologies, including gates and gatekeeping, become means by which a specific social order is maintained.³⁶ One critique of spatial governance has been the reliance on “the docile subject-citizens assumed in much Foucaultian analysis.”³⁷ But in certain contexts power over space is so great that violent and active forms of spatial

25 Fong 2016; Foucault 1979; Elden 2013.

26 Lora-Wainwright 2017; Hufbauer, Schott and Elliott 1990.

27 Roberts 2018; Han 2018.

28 Wallace 2014; Sun 2015.

29 Foucault 1997, 82.

30 Bray and Jeffreys 2016, 1.

31 Dutton and Hindess 2016, 25.

32 Bray and Jeffreys 2016, 4.

33 Merry 2001, 16.

34 *Ibid.*, 23; Robins 2002; Roy 2009a.

35 He and Wu 2009; Wu, Xu and Yeh 2006.

36 Bray 2008; Caldeira 2000.

37 Robins 2002, 681.

governance may be deployed, including over non-docile subjects. For instance, in Israeli-controlled Palestine, this is achieved by making the city “not just the site, but [the] medium of warfare.”³⁸ Thus space is not just a site for control, it is the medium of techniques of control that may be passive or active.

A key distinction between spatial governance and other forms of social control commonly discussed by scholars of China is that under spatial governance the population is affected not through violence towards citizens’ bodies but through violence towards the space these bodies inhabit. This violence can be justified through many discursive agendas, including security, safety, danger, economic growth and national pride.³⁹ So, while “the Chinese state increasingly divested itself of the spaces it had once totally colonized” to grow a socialist market economy,⁴⁰ it has continued to control space itself. Such control, enshrined in law through regular legal reforms, enables land to be provisionally marketized to stimulate economic growth, albeit with ultimate control remaining in the hands of state actors.

This results in spatial governance becoming a “frugal” form of governance. Frugal in that one action – the building of a wall, the demolition of a building or the re-zoning of a plot of land – affects not just one person but everyone who uses the space in some way. Furthermore, once the intervention is complete its effects persist over time while the governmental intervention itself becomes less visible. But spatial governance also has drawbacks: the capacity to demolish and construct requires a considerable investment in time and resources across sectors; the violence of demolition and displacement is highly visible at the moment of intervention, potentially leading to political contestation; it is difficult to reverse a spatial change; and the negative effects of a decision may not be known for years. Finally, spatial governance can be practised in ways that benefit some people – for instance, those with full legal entitlement to urban space – and not others. In some cases, those remaining in an area after spatial governance has been enacted may benefit – materially or immaterially – from interventions, disincentivizing solidarity with those affected.⁴¹

Governing through Spatial Informality

Spatial governance does not just mean the use of power to reconfigure space, it equally involves the use of technologies of governance to justify the reconfiguration of space over multiple locales and scales. One such technology is the classification of spaces, spatial practices and structures as legal or illegal, and the use of informality to enable the illegal or unclassified to occur in productive ways. Current debates regard informality as an inherent product of capitalism, one that is not separate from the formal areas of the economy but is linked with

38 Weizman 2012, 185.

39 Rabinow and Rose 2006; Shin and Li 2013.

40 Dutton and Hindess 2016, 17.

41 Shin and Li 2013.

them.⁴² As people, capital and material goods regularly move between formal and informal circuits of the economy, these circuits constitute “an interrelated, dynamic, complex whole.”⁴³ Informal and formal statuses – including tax, spatial and individual statuses – are produced for the benefit of those implementing them through “a corpus of regulations, court rulings, enforcement practices, and efforts to skirt regulations.”⁴⁴ Within a variegated capitalist system,⁴⁵ informal structures co-produce economic formations, informal relations support formal relations, and the informal can be exploited through “formalization.” Informality is thus “embedded in circuits of capital, coproducing economic formations.”⁴⁶ Informality is often a state practice rather than “a subaltern revolution from below”⁴⁷ – this is not to deny agency from below but to acknowledge that informality works around regulations and decisions made by state actors. Therefore, states can “actively utilize informality as an instrument of both accumulation and authority,”⁴⁸ while grassroots actors can push back against state regimes they disagree with through informal practices, from food markets to the trade in “cut-out” music cassettes and CDs.⁴⁹

Conceptualizations of informality from outside of a formal–informal binary have been deployed to analyse informal economic relations in street vending and waste management in China.⁵⁰ But informality as “a mode of production of space defined by the territorial logic of deregulation”⁵¹ and the ways in which informal spatial relations are used in population governance have been on the periphery of existing analyses.⁵² To understand spatial governance it is important to consider how informality is produced spatially across China, as, while informal statuses emerge in relation to state policy, they are not necessarily static or uniform across jurisdictions. Prior to being labelled “illegal,” informal sites (such as slums) exist on a spectrum of legality, neither legal and approved nor illegal and demolished; they are “grey space.”⁵³ Grey space denotes a suspension between the legal and the illegal, a realm of the informal and illicit.⁵⁴ Actions, spaces and relations suspended within “greyness” may be pulled towards legality or illegality, although if informality is productive informal relations are more likely to persist. Therefore, informal statuses are flexible, and while they operate in relation to top-down rules they are practised by local actors with their own sets of interests. Through informal spatial relations a variety of actors

42 Sanyal 2014.

43 Samson 2015, 816.

44 Schindler 2017, 250.

45 Zhang and Peck 2016.

46 Inverardi-Ferri 2018, 233.

47 Roy 2009c, 84.

48 *Ibid.*, 81.

49 Li 2020.

50 Inverardi-Ferri 2018; Xue and Huang 2015.

51 Roy 2009b, 8.

52 Schoon and Altrock 2014.

53 Yiftachel 2009.

54 Gregson and Crag 2017.

can navigate and negotiate their presence within urban China, leading to technically illegal conduct being allowed in plain sight when multiple parties benefit and profit from informal relations.⁵⁵ This makes illegality a selective classification, a situation particularly obvious on China's peri-urban periphery.⁵⁶ It is here that technically illegally constructions are particularly obvious, with many used as affordable residential and business space by China's migrant populations, artists and local entrepreneurs.⁵⁷

When considered through the prism of spatial governance, informality means that local power brokers can allow technically illegal conduct to continue if it is beneficial to their interests (for instance, by enabling the maintenance of order, generating profit or contributing to the fulfilment of policy directives). If the behaviour stops being beneficial, informal spatial relations may become illegal spatial relations, with illegality rendering space and the bodies using it incompatible. In these situations, rather than making bodies illegal, legal bodies are driven from illegal spaces. In some instances this is done through the destruction of spatial structures, both in terms of the demolition of space and the destruction of human relations that make up place. Space may also be controlled continuously, including through urban administrators (*chengguan* 城管) and gatekeeping.⁵⁸ *Chengguan* interact with space users, relating to them (sometimes violently) that their conduct is incompatible with a given space; this centres the relationship between conduct and space while decentering the relationship between conduct and bodily status or bodily status and space. Here, bodies are not directly disciplined, rather, material objects may be confiscated, and bodies driven away, including through the securitization of space and the denial of bodily access to space. These forms of spatial governance result in citizens being displaced due to their relationship with space, and by controlling space the scope of possibility for conduct is constrained. The body is not technically illegal, but by removing spaces where the body can act the body has little choice to but change its conduct, or to leave the space.

Producing Illegal Space in Beijing

Illegality was a key word in Beijing's 2017 Work Report, a document in which the Beijing government said it would "fulfil the capital's strategic positioning and build a world-class metropolis" while addressing "big-city syndromes."⁵⁹ This would be achieved by adopting "comprehensive measures to strengthen population control," through "firmly curb[ing] illegal structures and demolish [ing] over 40 million square meters of such structures."⁶⁰ To demolish 40 million

55 Ong 2018b; Fu 2017.

56 Hsing 2010; Tang and Chung 2002.

57 Bray 2005; Leung 1994; Wong, Li and Song 2006; Song, Zenou and Ding 2008.

58 Ong 2018a.

59 PGBM 2017.

60 Central Beijing's Dongcheng District is 41.86 million square metres with an official population of 919,000.

square metres, Beijing would “crack down on illegal activities such as cutting an opening in a wall to do business, vending on streets and sidewalks, and unlicensed business operations.”⁶¹ These reports produced the imaginary of Beijing as a city of illegality, danger and threat, connecting Beijing’s woes to various “illegal” spatial practices, practices that had been part of Beijing’s informal economy for years.

To produce a landscape of governable illegality, Beijing’s local governments made use of regulations such as the “Provisions on Prohibiting Illegal Construction.” Here, illegal structures are those which

have not obtained a construction project planning permit, temporary construction project planning permit, or construction that has not been performed in accordance with the content of the permit, and urban temporary construction projects that have not been demolished within the time limit.⁶²

Urban management officials of local governments should “stop, investigate and deal with illegal structures,” while “urban grid management information systems, satellite remote sensing monitoring, e-government network, urban basic geographic information systems and other technical means and information resources” can also be used to find illegal structures.⁶³ If correct documents are not obtained compulsory demolition can occur within 30 days of the illegal structure being recognized as such by state agents, with five days’ notice given prior to demolition.

In central Beijing, where fieldwork was conducted in 2017 and 2018, illegality was produced through the KQDD Campaign. Started in late 2016, the KQDD Campaign aimed to deal with “unregulated cut walls and holes.”⁶⁴ “Cut walls” are those where a door has been cut into the wall to create new, street-facing sites for residential and commercial activities. In signage, the local government notified residents that “illegal structures” would be dealt with according to the law:

Illegal wall cuts, businesses that occupy alleyways, unlicensed business activity; unauthorized subletting, rented basements, group rentals; ... and illegal billboards and advertising [will all be dealt with to] fulfil an improvement of the environment of the district, making it clean and tidy, desirable and orderly, with smooth transportation and a safe area for work.

The signage stated that such structures and spatial practices brought “immense safety concerns” and encroached on the “legitimate rights and interests of the residents,” while illegal construction was impacting the “entire alleyways landscape.” These signs produced a new *hutong* imaginary, with *hutong* now spaces of illegality and danger.

The effect of the KQDD Campaign was the displacement of space users, and the majority of those I met who were displaced were migrants. Displacement is often associated with demolition, but during the KQDD Campaign rapid acts

61 PGBM 2017.

62 PGBM 2011.

63 Ibid.

64 Fieldwork observation.

of construction alongside minor acts of demolition were used to displace. Construction teams would arrive in a *hutong*, often preceded by piles of bricks. Upon arrival, sites with “cut open” walls would have their external signage removed, while allegedly illegal doors and windows would be bricked up. Businesses were not forced to close, but under these spatial conditions, with doors and windows bricked up, closure was one of the few options. For many businesses, entry now required passing through communal courtyards and entering through working kitchens. For any business that relied on being seen from the street and organic footfall the KQDD Campaign was devastating.

In June 2017, when I went to see the effects of the KQDD Campaign on a business in which I was conducting fieldwork, I was surprised to see that a “cut” door remained, the only one on the *hutong*. My interlocutor said that the campaign was using decades-old street plans and that their door was on those plans. Even then, crews tried to brick it up, a large argument ensued, the door stayed, and the business continued to operate; one of the few on the *hutong* that was still in business. But this business, supporting the working lives of up to 15 migrants depending on season, would soon shut. With displacement through construction a failure the owner was threatened with the revocation of their business’s licences, forcing it into illegality. After this informal threat the business closed, and by August 2017 all but two of the employees had left Beijing. Not long after the restaurant closed the “legal” cut door was bricked up.

In the 2018 Work Report, it was noted that “8,622 spaces were rectified under KQDD.”⁶⁵ Neither the Work Report nor the signs explaining the KQDD Campaign billed it as a campaign against businesses or migrants. Yet this campaign, targeting “illegal activities” and “structures,” seemed to predominantly affect businesses owned and staffed by migrants. The KQDD Campaign shows how the informal can rapidly become the illegal. Informally, with the law openly ignored year after year, neoliberal urbanism that supported translocal migration and local economies prospered. But over a few weeks entire landscapes changed, with businesses vanishing in a matter of days and new flows of human mobility following.⁶⁶ Under such a regime, business licences matter little if the very space under one’s feet, or the means to access one’s building, is deemed illegal.

Governing the “Low-end Population”

The aftermath of the Xinjian fire was further evidence that spatial governance was happening city-wide, and on 20 November overt spatial governance impacted Beijing’s peri-urban periphery with the commencement of the 40-day Hidden Dangers Campaign. The day following the Xinjian fire, the local government of Xihongmen 西红门 pasted notices on village walls informing residents of a decision to intensify “efforts for the detection and removal of safety

65 PGBM 2018.

66 Morris 2021.

hazards.”⁶⁷ To do this, governance would target self-constructed rooms, rented *gongyu* and yards for eviction or demolition. “Tenants, landlords, factories, markets, warehouses, recycling yards, parking lots and farmers” were told that all personnel and material goods needed “to be removed within three days,” that “illegal or unauthorised structures discovered [would] be demolished” and that “mid- to high-intensity policing” would be used to clear the area from 22 November.⁶⁸ Safety, danger and illegality coalesced in the built environment of Xinjian, enabling rapid mass displacement and demolition. In the middle of a late-November night, with cold creeping in, families young and old were evicted from their homes due to the spatial statuses of their residences. This move, officially nothing to do with the *hukou* or income statuses of those being displaced, left countless migrants homeless. The horror of these night-time evictions led to widespread anger on social media, including low-level political contestation.

While the violence took place, eviction notices and media snippets attempted to reinforce the idea that the campaign protected, rather than harmed, citizens. In Huilongguan, eviction notices signed and stamped 23 November stated that

The “11.18” accident [that is, the Xinjian fire] sounded alarm bells for us. To learn lessons from this accident, to prevent and contain various safety hazards and improve the living environment of residents [this] community is now notifying all renters that by 20 November 2017, in order to resolutely contain safety incidents, for your own life and for the safety of the property, they must have completely vacated. We solemnly request that you vacate this building that has hidden dangers, so as to not affect your residence or your life.⁶⁹

Dangers were spatial; it was the structure at fault, not the people. The eviction notices argued that these actions were saving lives by tackling unsafe space, not harming lives by turning off heating and evicting residents into freezing streets.⁷⁰ News reporting and eviction notices produced an imaginary of a dangerous, illegal periphery that enabled suffering, not flourishing. This was not governance of migrants, the notices suggested, but of the dangerous spaces used by migrants.

On 28 November, I spoke to former residents of one fully vacated *gongyu* in Huilongguan.⁷¹ Notification of eviction had been given on 23 November, after which the *gongyu* management had rapidly evicted all residents, giving them less than ten days to vacate. Their employer had moved them to a *xiaoqu*, but with four to five people sharing one room in a more condensed space such a move constituted a degradation in their living circumstances and a potentially more dangerous living environment. Similar events happened across the city. The *gongyu* of my interlocutor Yuanyang 鸳鸯 had its utilities turned off on 20 November and an eviction notice was served on 26 November. Some residents

67 “Migrant worker families face eviction after 19 die in Beijing fire,” *China Labour Bulletin*, 23 November 2017, <http://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-worker-families-face-eviction-after-19-die-beijing-fire>.

68 Ibid.

69 Fieldwork observation.

70 “Tamen bushi diduan laodongli, tamen shi ren” (They are not “low-end labour power,” they are people), *Ngocn.net*, 23 November 2017.

71 Where the eviction notice in note 69 was found.

attempted to stay (the *gongyu* manager secretly turned the electricity on in the middle of the night to heat residents' water), but by 30 November the majority had left, including Yuanyang. Fearing her home would be destroyed by the time she returned from work she moved to a more central high-rise building, but this was a “split-room” apartment, one large room turned into many small ones; she paid double the rent, had one-third of the space and no longer had private kitchen and bathroom facilities. Her eviction had forced her towards informal living conditions in a formal building, replacing one spatial danger with another.

In Tiantongyuan's Liangshan Road 梁山路, another interlocutor, Liu Laolao 刘姥姥, was struggling to continue her *liangpi* (凉皮) street-side food-vending business. Liu Laolao had been under pressure since mid-2017, when nearby businesses were displaced through the demolition of illegal structures. The demolished structures housed over 50 businesses, some with business licenses, on land belonging to a state-owned enterprise. The majority of the displaced businesses were a part of the Liangshan Road foodscape, housing over 25 food businesses. The August evictions led to regular *chengguan* activity, and those not displaced by demolition were soon forced to leave through policing. Liu turned to insurgent food vending to stay active, but the post-fire evictions were accompanied by an increased intensity of *chengguan* activity.⁷² After fighting for months to stay in her position on Liangshan Road she finally relented to local governmental pressure, but rather than leaving Beijing she moved a few kilometres north, renting a small booth in a formal building in a different administrative zone. Her position in a formal building meant she had new levels of protection. While her booth would never gain a business license – something the landlord and estate agent mentioned during negotiations – she was more secure than those using informal spaces, because unlike the buildings of Xinjian or Liangshan Road this structure could not be suddenly demolished. Alongside this, Liu attempted to be formal in other ways. While she lacked a business license, an “Animal Inspection and Quarantine Form” (*Dongwu jianyi hege zhengming* 动物检疫合格证明) was displayed on the wall of her booth, proof that her produce was legal. Liu's incremental steps towards formality (or a more formal informality) enabled her to continue living and working in Beijing, and her actions were guided by the logic that, in Beijing's regime of spatial governance, only formal space is sacred, as a business license does not protect a building from demolition.

Local Implementation of the National New-type Urbanization Plan

While numerous licensed businesses using illegal structures on Liangshan Road were displaced, unlicensed businesses informally using formal structures remained. This included Yase's 亚瑟 *xiaomian* (小面) restaurant, situated in

72 Morris 2021.

the commercial space of a large *xiaoqu* residential building. While a single-storey “illegal structure” could be easily demolished due to its spatial status, Yase could not be displaced so easily. Yase’s fears regarding his informal spatial positionality were realized when, days after the Xinjian fire, he was accosted by local police demanding he close his business. With his informal business informally labelled illegal by local police, Yase said he was considering leaving Beijing for Gu’an, a town in Hebei. He had heard that one could get a business license in ten days, and with his business woes related to informality Gu’an seemed attractive.

After reading the NUP, the BUMP and local planning documents in Hebei, this move began to make sense, both through the rationale of a spatially precarious restaurant owner and the multi-scalar state. While the NUP has been discussed in depth,⁷³ this document has key features that help explain increases in spatial governance. First, the document is the first national-level urban policy, itself a signal of the role that urban planning and space now plays in everyday governance. Secondly, while “urban,” the document has a profound impact on both urban and rural areas, because it calls for controlling and reducing the population of China’s megacities, such as Beijing. Third, this should all occur alongside a continued growth in China’s urban population, including through changing *hukou* regulations that make moving to smaller urban areas easier.⁷⁴ Finally, while megacities should be reduced, “megaregions” may grow, with a larger scale regionalization of the country around core cities planned. One such megaregion, the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei (Jing–Jin–Ji 京津冀) megaregion, was brought up in both NUP and BUMP. In the Jing–Jin–Ji model, Beijing is central to governance and administration while being home to functions associated with “a world-class metropolis,”⁷⁵ Tianjin is a key industrial and trading hub, and non-capital functions (*fei shoudu gongneng* 非首都功能) will move to Hebei. Alongside Jing–Jin–Ji, the Xiong’an New Area 雄安新区 project came into being: a new technological and science centre in the Jing–Jin–Ji megaregion.⁷⁶ Gu’an, a part of Langfang City 廊坊市, sits between Beijing and Xiong’an, lying close to the new Beijing Daxing International Airport (*Beijing daxing guoji jichang* 北京大兴国际机场). Gu’an’s Urban Masterplan projected the population to reach 520,000 by 2020 and 1,370,000 by 2030, with urban land increasing from 57 to 145 square kilometres.⁷⁷ Similarly, Langfang’s projected figures for 2020 and 2030 were, respectively, a rise in the total population to 5,700,000 and 7,850,000, an increase in the urban population by 62 per cent and 77 per cent, and an increase in total urban *hukou* holders to

73 Taylor 2015; Ahlers 2015; Chen et al. 2018.

74 Zhang 2018; Liu and Shi 2020.

75 PGBM 2017.

76 Massey 1991.

77 “Gu’an xian” (Gu’an county), *Lf.gov.cn*, http://www.lf.gov.cn/Category_208/Index.aspx; “Gu’an xian zongti guihua (2030)” (Gu’an urban masterplan 2030), *Zhihu zhuanlan*, 20 February 2017, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/25320457>.

5,080,000 and 6,070,000.⁷⁸ This illustrates the official plan for the Jing–Jin–Ji megaregion to grow while the population megacity of Beijing stabilizes, projected to remain at 23 million until 2035. To aid this process, high-speed rail links were being built between Beijing Daxing Airport and Xiong’an, via Gu’an. Short bus rides across the porous Beijing border meant Gu’an’s residents would be able to support Beijing while residing outside of municipality limits, fulfilling the goals of the NUP and BUMP.

A few days after the police visited Yase we travelled together to Gu’an. Upon arrival, and following Baidu Maps (*Baidu ditu* 百度地图) to a cluster of restaurants, we randomly choose a restaurant for breakfast and chatted with the owner:

Yase: How is business here by the way?

Restaurateur: I wouldn’t know, I only moved here a week ago.

Yase: Oh, what happened?

Restaurateur: I was in Daxing, near where the fire was. I was told I would have to close my restaurant during the 40-day fire inspection period. I couldn’t do that, who knows what would happen after 40-days. So, I decided to move here.

Yase: Oh, do you have a license yet?

Restaurateur: It’s processing at the moment.

The next restaurant we visited was also owned by casualties of demolitions and evictions in Beijing, this time evicted in mid-2017 from Huilongguan. Gu’an – 40 kilometres from Xinjian – had become a space for the evicted. This made sense: Gu’an was close to Beijing; the local government (or so it was rumoured) offered business licenses; and Gu’an and Jing–Jin–Ji were touted by the media, estate agents and everyone we met as having a bright future. Hearing all of this I began to wonder, was China’s urban dream the Gu’an dream?⁷⁹

To assess the plausibility of the Gu’an dream we visited an estate agent, hoping to see business properties. We were immediately shown two maps that showed us little of the existing Gu’an, rather, they showed Gu’an’s planned future. We were supposed to understand this potential and build our futures around the city’s, including the development of high-speed rail, the expansion of the Beijing Metro and the new airport. Eventually Gu’an would prosper, it was suggested, why not get in now? After the sales pitch we were shown the reality, and taken to two potential sites, both were under construction and one lacked road connections or completed walls. Yase wanted reality, not eventuality, and he thanked the estate agent and left.⁸⁰ For another interlocutor from Tiantongyuan, restaurateur Shi’en 施恩, evicted from Liangshan Road in September 2017, Gu’an offered a viable alternative. By the end of 2017 Shi’en had opened a

78 “Langfang shi chengshi zongti guihua (2016–2030) nian” (Langfang City Master Plan, 2016–2030, announcement), *Lf.gov.cn*, 18 January 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200216182638/http://www.lf.gov.cn/Item/65371.aspx>.

79 Taylor 2015.

80 Simone 2018.

new restaurant in Gu'an and had a business license. For him, Gu'an was delivering on its promises, and he provided low-cost food to others who had left Beijing.

Yase persisted in Beijing, and, after a few weeks, police threats proved empty. The safety of a formal building resulted in this business becoming one of the last surviving elements of the Liangshan Road foodscape. The crackdown on informality resulted in Yase and other businesses using the *xiaoqu*'s commercial space having their signage and aesthetics changed for unity and the veneer of formality. But in August 2018, less than a year after installation, the signage of all food businesses was dismantled and confiscated by police officers and a small team of construction workers. This was not a surprise raid, Yase was informed days earlier by *xiaoqu* management and asked to close. If he agreed, Yase was told, his business could continue. Yase was being made an aesthetic criminal,⁸¹ he felt his business was targeted due to proximity to the Beijing Metro, and rather than forcing Yase out – “that would be more trouble than it is worth,” he told me – Yase and his peers became suspended in the “greyness” between formality and illegality.⁸²

Formality was off limits, but Yase could continue informally due to the business's spatiality; it was just formal enough. In a spatially formalizing Beijing, where financially accessible “illegal structures” are demolished in ways that displace people and enable the further extraction of rent from space, only businesses that can afford to use the limited number of formal spaces persist. In the long term, this makes Beijing a less accessible and more expensive city, degrading the right to the city, reaping rewards for landlords and fulfilling the population goals of the NUP.

Conclusion

For spatial governance to work, not only should the body not feel directly attacked but alternative spaces for the body to relocate should exist, spaces where one can do better, perhaps even flourish. Gu'an was not somewhere Yase could imagine himself flourishing, but Shi'en saw potential for his business to flourish. Yase would eventually close his business due to licensing difficulties, instead applying for the civil service. This resulted in several family members who had been working in his restaurant leaving Beijing. With Shi'en having moved to Gu'an and Liu Laolao taking steps to become more formal, it seems that categorizing residential and commercial spaces as illegal resulted in space users, many of them migrants, moving away from Beijing, finding formal spaces at higher rents and with different tax relations or leaving the food industry for wage labour. Spatial governance formalized Beijing by degrees and reduced Beijing's population in almost all the cases, though not without violence and suffering for my interlocutors, their families and their staff.

81 Ghertner 2015.

82 Xiang 2021; Fengjiang 2021.

Control through space rather than in space has, in this case, enabled Beijing to make use of a cheap labour force while making that same labour force temporary and displaceable through their reliance on the very spaces that make the city liveable. These are spaces where the entanglement of multiple interests exist, including local governments, the central state, landlords, property developers, tenants, neighbours and bosses, to name but a few. These entanglements result in a “grey-ness” that is variously mutually beneficial, exploitative and violent. In discussing this, I do not wish to deny the capacity for migrant contestation, but for every difficult continuation (Liu Laolao) there are numerous painful dislocations (Yase, Shi’en, Yuanyang).

These events cannot be framed in success or failure; Yuanyang left a *gongyu* for a split-room apartment that was closer to work although not necessarily safer; Yase stayed in Beijing by moving away from the food industry; Liu Laolao left Liangshan Road after a *chengguan* campaign and ended up in a more stable position elsewhere in Tiantongyuan. Spatial governance exists in a system of “complexed [*jiujie* 纠结] developments,” one in which “the state and social norms play central roles” and ongoing interventions are “entangled with each other, resulting in confusion and disorientation.”⁸³ In this article, developments were regularly “complexed,” and the interventions under examination affected socio-spatial relations in ways that benefited some citizens (local, university educated, property owning) and not others (migrant, low income). By making previously informal spatial relations illegal through adherence to previously ignored regulations, bodies are decentred yet governed, and they may be displaced at any moment.

This article’s empirical data also highlight how spatial governance fulfils macro-population goals, produces greater profit for formal landholders and entrenches the control that pre-existing landholders have over China’s political economy. The inability of my interlocutors to find formal spaces to conduct residential or professional life suggests fundamental spatial inequalities and imbalances exist in Beijing. Through this spatial stranglehold, small businesses must choose between exploitative rental agreements or face potential displacement. For many of my interlocutors, wage labour or leaving Beijing were the only options. The historic production of informality has helped the Beijing government achieve numerous goals, including redeveloping Beijing through the labour of those housed and fed on informal sites. During 2017 and 2018, the production of illegality “cleansed” the now redeveloped Beijing of these persons, aiding the production of a “world-class” city free of “non-capital functions.” These policies hint that life will be better for those who remain, while offering spatial solutions to the spatial governance issues that the affected, such as Shi’en, face. In this process, spatial governance provided those who are geographically and socially mobile in ways the state deems acceptable a temporary and comprehensible

83 Xiang 2021, 244.

right to the city that is spatially scarce, making *their* right to the megacity a more valuable resource.

These findings also support the idea that “local implementers generally appeared to have picked up Beijing’s new message”⁸⁴ regarding the NUP and that “local practices that will make or break the [NUP].”⁸⁵ Amid this, there is a suggestion that during the Xi Jinping era (2012–present) the locality–centre relationship seems to be functioning relatively harmoniously, even when local actors look out for their own interests. This marks a departure from the central–local tensions displayed during the Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 era (2003–2012). The above cases suggest that spatial governance can be used at multiple scales to implement national plans and that when local and central actors work together local agencies can find innovative ways to produce the results desired in national level plans. During this process “national and provincial policies [lend] legitimacy to the final implementation of contested measures,” such as demolition and displacement.⁸⁶ These displacements were a part of a variegated political project in which dispossession did not just result in direct capital accumulation, but also fulfilled key political goals by ensuring long term party-state stability by creating smaller, more homogenous population hubs across China that can be more easily governed while also reducing the chance of mass incidents spreading.⁸⁷

Finally, spatial governance and spatial categorization becoming fundamental to governance in China, as I have suggested here, has implications for how the Chinese subaltern can be thought of.⁸⁸ The Chinese subaltern, a group that was once managed through a process of governing, stigmatizing and excluding – e.g. by having their movement controlled via the *hukou* system, being deemed “low *suzhi*” and not “civilized” (*wenming* 文明) – is now governed in a new way, through governance of the spaces in which they (can) live and work.⁸⁹ Governance through *hukou*, *suzhi* and *wenming* statuses is being replaced with governance through spatial statuses, spatial imaginaries and spatial vocabularies. New policy regimes govern space users – formal, informal, illegal, digital, vertical, subterranean, etc. – in heterogenous ways across China, and the flexibility of spatial governance means that it can be implemented according to local conditions. I am not asking readers to move away from discussing individual status, but instead to pay attention to how the language and practices of urban governance are changing, even if the targets remain the same.

Biographical note

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84 Ahlers 2015, 128.

85 Bai, Shi and Liu 2014, 158.

86 Ahlers and Shen 2017, 17.

87 Wallace 2014.

88 Evans 2020; Sun 2014.

89 Yan 2003.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

摘要: 本文利用 2017 年和 2018 年期间在北京进行的人类志研究, 以及使用“空间治理”的理论框架, 来研究众多驱逐事件和理解中国城市治理的空间化。本文特别关注在新建村火灾后发生的全北京范围内的对所谓“低端人口”的驱逐事件。本文中的分析使用了对空间非正式性的地理学理解, 来审视空间的非正式化与非法化是如何作为人口控制的手段。文章提出了空间治理是中国城市治理的一个(即便不是最)关键形式的观点。文章强调, 治理的变化导致空间既成为一个用于控制的场所, 又成为控制中国城市人口的技术媒介。

关键词: 迁移; 治理; 空间; 驱逐; 空间治理; 低端人口

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