Space as Method:
Field Sites and Encounters in Beijing's Green Belts

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Abstract

Great urban transformations are diffusing across the Global South, removing the original landscape of urban margins to make of them a new urban frontier. These processes raise questions of both validity and legitimacy for ethnographic practice, requiring critical reflection on both spatiality and method in fieldwork at the urban margins. This article draws on fieldwork experience in Beijing's green belts, which could also be labeled the city's urban margin or frontier, to reflect on the space-time of encounter in the field. I aim to demonstrate how space foregrounds not only our bodily experiences but also ethnographic investigations of the daily life, and hence becomes a *method*. Beijing's green belts symbolise a historical-geographical conjuncture (a *moment*) emerging in its urban metamorphosis. Traditional endeavours (immanent in various spatial metaphors) to identify field sites as reified entities are invalidated over the course of the space-time encounter, requiring a relational spatial ontology to register such dynamics. The use in fieldwork of *DiDi Hitch*, a mobile app for taxi-hailing and hitchhiking, reveals the spatiotemporal construction of self-other relations needing recognition via the dialectics of the encounter. In this relational framework, an encounter is never *a priori* but a negotiation of a *here-and-now* between different trajectories and stories as individuals are thrown together in socially constructed space and time.

Keywords: urban ethnography, spatial ontology, spatial metaphors, the dialectics of the encounter, DiDi Hitch, Beijing

Introduction

I arrived in Beijing in March 2014 to do fieldwork on its green belts. I was excited when I thought I finally managed to penetrate the 'real world' where I could establish a new identity (as a researcher) to collect data. But upon my arrival, I was at once confused: where is the *field?* When setting up my initial fieldwork plan, I tried to follow the requirements of the Malinowskian tradition in doing (urban) ethnography. I expected field sites to be clearly bounded and fieldwork to take long enough to make local immersion possible. However, in Beijing, townships and villages at the urban margin were every so often being demolished, and green belts were all but imaginary, existing only in the municipal master plan. Spatial processes challenged ethnogarphic practice. Such challenges undermined the validity and legitimacy of my fieldwork plan, forcing reflection on both the spatiality of the field and the method of doing fieldwork at the urban margin.

This raises a two-fold question. First and foremost, it is an issue of identifying field sites at the urban margin where the process of urbanisation has destroyed earlier landscapes. Second, it also involves reflections on encountering local people when most of them have been relocated. Though place and voice have always been highlighted in doing ethnography (Appadurai 1988), these practices are nonetheless often limited by an absolutist spatial ontology in which space is set as *a priori*, empty and divisible (Smith and Katz 1993). This ontology has generated various spatial metaphors, yet none of them can help to register the spatiality of the field in the everyday life.

Drawing on observations and experiences in Beijing's green belts, I argue the importance of adopting a relational as opposed to an absolutist spatial ontology. Instead of taking field sites as reified entities with pre-given boundaries, we should define them as the *moments* that internalise different processes and relations (Harvey 1996). Field sites are meeting places between the local and global, between the past and present, and between the researcher and the researched (Massey 2005). No encounter is *a priori*, since we are all situated in a dynamic space-time and are affected by various processes and relations. To some extent, then, space becomes a method: it not only foregrounds our bodily experiences in, and faithful accounts of, the everyday life, but also mediates contingent encounters between individuals.

This article starts with reflections on two spatial metaphors in ethnographic practice and their limitations (Section 2). Then in Section 3, I will illustrate how the relational spatial ontology and the dialectics of the encounter can be deployed as an alternative approach. It is examined, empirically, with information collected from Beijing's green belts in Section 4 and 5. I first show the two field sites I select in Beijing, with attention to both their physical conditions as well as the politico-economic concerns and social processes they internalise (Section 4). Then the *DiDi Hitch*, a mobile app for taxi-hailing and hitchhiking in China, is used in Section 5 to further illustrate how and to what extent the dialectics of the encounter could be possible at the urban margin where space-time and everyday life are subject to transformation. Discussions draw on data collected from two spells of fieldworks in Beijing (March to December, 2014 and June to August, 2015), including field observations, interviews, memoirs, government documents and archives.

Spatial metaphors in ethnographic practices

Arjun Appadurai (1988) aptly put it that ethnographic practices are by nature circumstantial encounters and that "place" and "voice" can be used to summarise two key concerns of such encounters: the former refers to speaking from/of while the latter indicates speaking for/to. Nonetheless, in practice these concerns are often obscured by two familiar spatial metaphors. One is a naturalist metaphor with "a conquering gaze of nowhere," the other a relativist metaphor that insists on "infinitely mobile vision" and the claim to be able to "see from everywhere" (Haraway 1991, 188-89). This section aims to illustrate that the two spatial metaphors share, and are both trapped by, an absolutist spatial ontology that abolishes the agency of space, separates parts from wholes and reifies things from processes.

The naturalist metaphor is firmly inscribed in the Malinowskian tradition widely used in ethnographic practices in the 20th century (Clifford 1997; for more details see also Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fox 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). For James Clifford (1997, 20), a principal claim raised by Malinowski is that primitive villages are indeed "the locus of cultures" as well as the object of anthropological explorations (in terms of a *village-dwelling-field*). Although the village is later seen more like a container than an object of ethnographic practices, its naturalist setting is kept untouched as "a clearing whose deceptive transparency obscures the complex processes that go into constructing it" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 5). A

village epistemology is inscribed in this influential naturalist metaphor (Passaro 1997) and in turn it reveals two assumptions. One is that a field worker has to "work for a long time in an isolated area, with people who speak a non-European language, live in 'a community', preferably small, in authentic, 'local' dwellings" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13). The other lies in its isomorphic account of place and culture: space is divided into natural grids (labelled "places"), and these places are then used to demarcate cultural differences with few reflections (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 6-7).

The relativist metaphor reveals itself through James Clifford's endeavours to incorporate literary processes as a way of rebelling against the Malinowskian tradition. Clifford (1986, 6) redefines ethnographic writings as "made-up" fictions and declares "the partiality of cultural and historical truths". Since culture is no longer an internally coherent concept, the knowing observer as an unseen figure should, in Clifford's view, be abolished. The dominant metaphor in doing ethnography needs to be shifted away from the observing eye (visual) to expressive speech (discursive) (ibid., 12). Having undermined secure ground for cultural representations, Clifford (1997, 31) turns his gaze to the "moving ground," which marks "a serious dream of mapping without going off the earth". On top of this, he redefines field as a *habitus* for cosmopolitan visitors, which can be seized through *travel encounters*; as to fieldwork, it is recognised as nothing else but "a distinctive cluster of travel practices" that are conducted by cosmopolitan visitors (ibid., 64-71; emphases added). In the end, travelling becomes a new antidote for moving beyond the fixity of singular locations in doing ethnography.

In both the naturalist and relativist metaphors, we can see a shared view of the space: "empty, infinite, *a priori*, and divisible" (Smith and Katz 1993, 73-74). This shared view indicates, however, an absolutist spatial ontology in the ethnographic explorations that obscures power relations, dynamic identities, and socio-spatial processes. David Harvey (2009, 134) reminds us that this absolutist ontology is rooted in the theories of Newton and Descartes, where space is seen as "a preexisting, immovable, continuous, and unchanging framework," which is "empty of matter." Methodologically, the absolutist ontology induces an alienated form of reasoning. When it is upheld, "parts are separated from wholes and reified as things in themselves, causes [are] separated from effects, [and] subjects separated from objects" (Levins and Lewontin 1985, cited in Harvey 1996, 61).

Under this absolutist ontology, the naturalist metaphor is turned into a framework that is both *ahistorical* and *aspatial*. On the one hand, such a view refuses to register connections between the field site and world history, such as conquest and colonialism (Harvey 1996, 221-22). Rather, it consistently works to produce direct observations of local communities in an "ahistorical, *ethno*-graphic, and comparative" way (Vincent 1991, 55; original emphasis). On the other, the autonomy of local communities is assumed as self-evident (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 6-7) while the socio-spatial processes in the field are reduced to nothing but fixed and singular entities. Here, the isomorphic account of place and culture pays no attention to the cultural plurality and differences inherent in localities, and eventually makes ethnographic practices irrelevant to the dynamics of both space and culture.

The relativist metaphor, though it purports to see everywhere through travel encounters, leads only to the multiplication of absolute spaces since "the subject moves but space stands still, fixed, unproduced" (Smith and Katz 1993, 76-77). Thus travelling deteriorates into a complete relativism to "provide the missing foundation for everything else in the social flux" (ibid.). Haraway (1991, 191) comments that the strategy of such a relativist framework is to claim to be everywhere equally while to be nowhere in reality. Consequently, essentialist identities are not reflected upon but only further consolidated in *travel practices*: only those who can travel and shift locations are able to name places, to identify subjects, to "allocate" power and finally to narrate encounters. Their bodies are pre-given ontological entities that are outside, yet dominating, "the power geometry of time-space compression" (cf. Massey 1994, 148-50). Indeed, the effects of this setting can be oppressive and even (once again) colonial (Staeheli and Lawson 1994, 97-98).

Haraway (1991, 190-95) judges that "the Western eye has fundamentally been a wandering eye." For her, the embodiment of reflexivity is now eliminated by spatial metaphors which have combined absolutist locations and reified bodies. These warnings are highly relevant here. Although differences of style can be seen between Clifford's cosmopolitan visitors and Malinowskian field workers, they occupy similar standpoints as "the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference" (ibid., 192-93). Here, spatial issues in ethnographic practices are not explicitly depicted but implicitly fetishised. A new account of the everyday life is needed, as Haraway urges, to focus on partial perspectives, limited locations and situated knowledges. In the next section, I will illustrate

how, and how far, these endeavours can and should be located in a relational spatial ontology and practised through the dialectics of the encounter.

The dialectics of the encounter

Space and time are historical and geographical realities in living fabrics, as Harvey (1996, 46-53) aptly reminds us, and they are actively constructed and defined by underlying social and political processes and relations (see also Massey 2005). To understand these processes and relations better, we need a proper, relational, account of the space first – and vice versa. The spatial metaphors introduced earlier could do little for this concern. Instead, here I will show that the ontological foundation of ethnographic practices should be changed from reified entities to "the dialectics between flows and things" (cf. Harvey 1996, 81). With this in mind, I will first illustrate the ways in which field sites can be defined as "moments" and then rooted in the everyday life through the dialectic between flows and things. In addition, the self-other relations should also be defined as spatiotemporal constructions, for they emerge only when people are thrown together. The two aspects mark the dialectics of the encounter.

Drawing on intellectual resources from Leibniz and Whitehead on relational thinking, Harvey (1996) drops the popular appeal to ontological security (such as reductionism) and embraces processes and relations as the new ontological principle for dialectics. In Harvey's dialectical framework, the term *moment* starts to occupy a significant role: it denotes not only the objects that we encounter in the everyday life, but also how these objects are maintained and integrated into the dynamic ensemble of processes (ibid., 50-55). For instance, such things as cities, landscapes, architectures and even social institutions are *moments* insofar as we admit they are outcomes (reifications) of different processes and relations (ibid., 78-81).

This approach is applicable to re-conceptualising field sites and fieldwork. For, field sites are by no means stable entities with given and fixed boundaries; on the contrary, they are historical-geographical conjunctures shaped in different ways by time-space colonisation (Lefebvre 1976) and compression (Harvey 1989). Individuals and their lives are implicated in these conjunctures in diverse ways (Gregory 1994, 414). The *moment* of a field site is here immanent in the global nexus. Hence, a global sense of place is needed, as Doreen Massey (1994, 2005) has long urged, where "place" is first and foremost a *meeting* place and the local

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and the global are dialectically articulated. To properly depict this *moment* of the field site, we should attend to social and politico-economic processes and nodes on the one hand and "tangible forms of material practices through which human societies perpetuate themselves" (Harvey 1996, 231) on the other (such as discourses, memories, imaginations, power relations and institutions).

This relational spatial ontology also offers a new perspective from which we can identify our simultaneous coexistence in the field in contrast to the absolutist account. Researchers are situated in a dynamic space-time and the various processes that it internalises once we enter the field. Our encounter with the researched is indeed a *throwntogetherness* (Massey 2005), containing the dialectics between space and place. Here, we can see not only "a history and geography of *thens and theres*" (space), but also "negotiating a *here-and-now*" (the event of place) (ibid., 140, my emphases). The situation of being thrown together, in the field, should hence be defined as an ever-shifting constellation of different trajectories and stories to tell, whose inevitable contingency cannot be fully captured but only revealed in particular moments (ibid., 151-54). Andy Merrifield (2012, 2013) also provides insightful comments on this issue. Drawing on Althusser's late works, he redefines the encounter as "a tale of how people come together as human beings, of why collectivities are formed and how solidarity takes hold and takes shape, and also how intersectional politics shapes up *urbanly*" (Merrifield 2013, 33). With this reconceptualisation he goes on to argue that the encounter defines the urban and vice versa (Merrifield 2012). Besides its rewarding use in discussing our political situation (such as the Occupy Movement), another, I would say, equally critical direction is to recognise the methodological significance of this concept for doing urban ethonography.

In the relational framework, encountering and communicating are on the one hand rooted in socially constructed space and time and, on the other, conditioned by historical-geographical contingencies – and this defines the dialectics of the encounter. No encounter is *a priori*, since all individuals, including researchers and the researched are situated in the dynamic space-time, affected by various processes and relations, and engaged with dialogues already under way[1]. It is for this reason that we should adopt the relational spatial ontology, practise the dialectics of encounter and construct an alternative approach to place and voice. Only in

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[1] In his discussion on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical landscape, Folch-Serra (1990) makes an excellent summary on Bakhtin's dialogism and how it can be applied in research in Human Geography; also see Holquist (1985).

this way can we get rid of the essentialist notions of culture and identity, reverse the politics of otherness and recapture situated knowledges. The next section illustrates the practice of such a relational-spatial framework in Beijing's green belts.

Grounding metaphors in Beijing's green belts

The idea of a "green belt" was imported to Beijing in the 1950s from Britain and the former USSR. At the time, it was seen as a promising ecological goal of the city's socialist transition (Beijing Archives 1958). To advance this aim, the city planned two green belts in succession between its urban core area and suburban/rural areas, the first in 1958 and the second in 2003. The green belt was not in fact an existing open space preserved from any development as in the US and the UK, but land already built on by rural communities for centuries. Furthermore, in such a lived space, the socialist visions of urban landscape have for a long time been subordinated in the urban process to the logic of capital accumulation. In the course of developing the land businesses of the state, hundreds of villages in the designated green belts were demolished and hundreds of thousands of residents relocated (BMBLR 2011, BAUPD 2013, CDG 2010). Increasingly, as original villages changed from the lived space to vacant sites, green belts have become hardly more than a figment of the imagination in the city's master plan, marking a hollow representation of the urban margin.

Sunhe and Dahongmen were the two sites that I chose to observe when I was still preparing for fieldwork; yet neither of them was, nor could ever be, ready to be "observed." Sunhe is a township at the north-east corner of Beijing's city proper. This township covered a surface area of 34.54 square kilometres, administered 14 villages and five communities, and was populated by more than 150,000 people (STG 2015)[2]. Given its geographical scale, I could not expect to immerse myself fully in the entire territory during my stay: it would be hard, if not impossible, even to traverse the township on foot. However, it soon became apparent after my first visit that this apprehension was to be replaced by another concern, since the

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[2] The same document (STG 2015) states that there are 30,500 people who have local *hukou*, while more than 120,000 people are migrant workers who have no local *hukou* and the majority of whom had already left this area when demolition work was initiated in 2009. *Hukou* is a record in the government's household registration system, which is "one of the most important mechanisms determining entitlement to public welfare, urban services and, more broadly, full citizenship" in China (Chan and Buckingham 2008, 587). The system has been favouring urban and local citizens disproportionately than rural residents and migrants since 1950s.

greater part of Sunhe Township had already been transformed in a way that I had not anticipated:

> Arriving at the centre of the township, I got off the bus and then went across the road. All I could see was grassland filled with endless weeds, which covered an area of more than two square kilometres. The collapsed buildings were interspersed everywhere among these crowded weeds, with collapsed walls and ruined house foundations still standing in their original places. Two narrow paths twisted and turned into the grassland, but no clues to where they might end. Looking to the north, I saw a newly built light railway, and to the south, a group of buildings accommodating relocated villagers in Sunhe. (Field note on 23 December 2014; see Figure 1 below)

Figure 1 The landscape of Sunhe Township
Source: Photo by author, 23 December 2014

Dahongmen and Guoyuan are two adjacent villages (sometimes labeled together as the Dahongmen region), several kilometres south to the city centre. This region used to be called "Zhejiang Village" in tribute to their long history of accommodating migrants from Zhejiang

Province in Southern China. These migrants managed to develop large-scale and international garment business locally, attracting much academic attention at the turn of this century. Their stories not only nurtured the first set of ethnographies on urban transformation in China (Ma and Xiang 1998; Xiang 2000; Zhang 2001) but also continued to define the local landscape to the present day. After some early pioneering adventures, garment businesses have dominated local economic activity and spatial representations. It is mainly for this reason that this region is now witnessing the continued presence of more than 300,000 people, either on visiting or staying longer (Han and Peng 2015). Ironically, Dahongmen is also included in Beijing's designated green belt, though in fact similarly laid waste:

> (Around the market area) A devastated village could be seen once I got off the taxi. The place was full of half-collapsed buildings, and it was quite easy to notice some bungalows that were not damaged that much. I wandered inside these ruins and saw a courtyard with its door open. I went in, hoping to meet the owner, but no one was there. The net curtains on its windows were intact, and the service numbers for its TV license and coal deliveries were still clear on the wall. But nobody lived there. (Field note on 31 July 2015; see Figure 2 below)

Figure 2 Cats in a demolished building in Dahongmen Village

Source: Photo by author, 12 December 2014

It did not take me long to recognise that what had happened in Sunhe and Dahongmen were by no means *local* events but had been replicated in many other sites in Beijing's green belts. They were encompassed by, and contributing to, the great urban transformation of the city and everywhere in the country. In an interview with a local official, I asked what was going on in the designated green belt. He replied absently: "the land is almost vacant now. Those who would like to rent could do so as they wish. But for the present, most land plots are empty. The municipal government pays us for those plots a good annual rate for them" (Interview on 29 December 2014). This piece of information echoes the politico-economic mechanism of the green belts revealed in an earlier interview with the same official:

> "The territory of this community is inside the second green belt, but we have no policy or incentive to implement it yet… It [the demolition you observed] was proposed in 2009, after the global financial crisis. The municipal government at the time was determined to boost investments through urbanisation. Our community and some others nearby were demolished to vacate land for real estate development" (Interview on 21 November 2014; see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3 An area in the second green belt that is waiting for "development"

Source: Photo by author, 29 December 2014

Those words suggest that a new perspective is required to investigate Beijing's green belts, for they seem very different from what is laid down in the city's master plan. The two belts mark a *moment* that internalises politico-economic concerns and social processes. For example, it is linked to the global financial crisis in 2007-08 and the four-trillion-Chinese-Yuan (£416.13 billion[3]) rescue package proposed by China's central government in the aftermath: most of the budget was invested in land exploitation projects (The Economist 2008; Zhao 2016). This moment also internalises the process of urban expansion in China, which is crucial to producing new urban space for the local state's projects of accumulation and territorialisation (Hsing 2010; Lin and Ho 2005; Shin 2014). When the historical dimension is borne in mind, then the green belts also clearly signal both the country's socialist past (Chen 1996) and its current ambition to be modern (BMCUP 2013, Brumann 2006, Zhang 2006). This is what Appadurai (1991, 209) might call "the genealogies of the present."

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[3] The calculation for GBP in this article is based on the currency rate at 1 January 2016 (9.6123 CNY per 1 GBP). Source: Exchange Rates UK. URL: http://www.exchangerates.org.uk/GBP-CNY-exchange-rate-history.html. Last accessed: 23 September 2016

The moment of green belts in Beijing, together with all the processes it internalises, is the phenomenon that I am concerned about but cannot approach in devastated villages filled with weeds and ruins. Nor can I recognise this moment by relying on the city's master plan, since the latter is only another process internalised at some time in the past, which remains on paper. As Lefebvre (1991, 38-39) aptly puts it, the spatial representation in the master plan yields a particular constellation of power and knowledge through the eyes of planners conceiving of lived space as a system of verbal signs. What is upheld in the master plan is a hegemonic and absolutist code of space; this code in fact adopts the spatial ontology that underlies the Malinowskian tradition and that pushes Clifford's travel metaphors down into relativism. As an alternative, we should admit that the green belts symbolise the historical-geographical conjuncture emerging in Beijing's urban process. It is the disappearance of local communities and the imaginary of the green belts that convey the space-time of the city's spatial transition. Here, *nowhere* defines *somewhere* at the urban margin (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Landscape of the designated second green belt

Source: Photo by author, 24 December 2014

Such reflections not only confirm the need to change the spatial ontology from the absolutist genre to a relational one, but also poses further challenges to ethnographic practices. Both everyday life and its lived space are now subject to be transformed, if not totally displaced, by the production of new urban space for state-led land businesses. It becomes increasingly difficult to set up encounters with local people who may have been displaced as an effect of the state's action. This disappearance of local communities requires new methods to engage with the field, to locate my bodily experiences and to recapture situated knowledges. More importantly, the imaginary of green belts also indicates that my investigations should not be bound to the physical boundaries of designated areas on the urban master plan. A more critical approach would be to follow the processes through which these areas and boundaries are drawn out in everyday life, which might introduce alternative ways to achieve *throwntogetherness* between the researcher and the researched. Drawing on the above reflections, I want now to show my efforts in the field to explore the spatiotemporal intermediates that might throw the researcher and the researched together. In the next section, I will narrate my experience of hitchhiking through Didi, a mobile app, which embodies the most critical and rewarding juncture I encountered in the fieldwork.

The encountering moments: thrown together via *DiDi Hitch*

DiDi (or *DiDi Chuxing*, 滴滴出行) is a mobile app for taxi-hailing and hitchhiking. According to the app developer, it is "the world's largest one-stop, on-demand transportation platform," with more than 14 million registered drivers in China's 400 cities, and serving around 300 million passengers in the first quarter of 2016 (DiDi Chuxing 2016a). This app dominates the taxi-hailing and private car-hailing market in China, with a market share of 99% and 87% respectively. It completed 1.43 billion rides in 2015 alone (Alba 2016a), while after six years' operation, its main competitor Uber scored only two billion rides in the same year (Alba 2016b). As one of the biggest icons of the so-called "sharing economy", DiDi was valued at $36 billion in mid-2016, attracting over $3 billion in investment globally in 2015 and another $7.3 billion in the first half of 2016 (China News Service 2016). Its investors include global corporations such as Apple.[5] In addition, Didi finally beat Uber and took over the latter's

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[5] Apple became a strategic investor in DiDi after investing $1 billion in May 2016. It now "joins Tencent, Alibaba and other key supporters to help further [develop] DiDi's mission of building a data-driven rideshare platform to serve hundreds of millions of Chinese drivers and passengers" (DiDi-Chuxing 2016b).

Chinese business, on 1 August 2016, by strategically waging price wars through huge subsidies (Abkowitz and Carew 2016).

I took dozens of DiDi rides while revisiting the field in the summer of 2015 to supplement my original fieldwork in 2014. I was worried about the possible gap between my fieldwork plan (in the Malinowskian tradition) and space-time in reality. Unable to secure travel grants for a second visit, I had to do my best to control the budget. DiDi competition with Uber made fares incredibly low, especially after DiDi announced a subsidy package of one billion Yuan in May 2015 to let "everybody enjoy private car-hailing for free" (Chen 2015). They introduced an even cheaper hitchhiking service in June, the same month I arrived in Beijing. *DiDi Hitch* mobilised millions of private car owners to share their cars with other passengers going to similar destinations. Such pecuniary benefits were too hard for an impecunious field researcher to ignore: spending only 33 Yuan (£3.43) for my first DiDi Hitch journey of 25 kilometres, I became a loyal customer.[6]

That journey took me from to Sunhe with my two suitcases and a backpack. It was a sunny afternoon, 38°C and no wind. I decided to try DiDi Hitch, still dubious whether it could work at all. It did not take long, however, before a private car owner offered me a lift. He was in his early thirties and was driving a commercial vehicle. En route the driver told me that he lived in the community I wanted to visit – the resettlement community built for Sunhe residents. As for the *DiDi Hitch* business, he continued, it would "compensate for the petrol" when he commuted. *Commuting* was the keyword that made me alert. I had completed quite a few observations and interviews in that resettlement community (as an alternative to the demolished ones) when I visited Beijing in 2014. However, most of the interviewees were in their middle or old age, people who did not work in the daytime. This had created a clear age bias in my "data" collection. On this trip, I realised that DiDi could be an appropriate spatiotemporal intermediary for doing fieldwork in the green belts, which would foreground some encounters that could not otherwise have been achieved – with commuters, for example.

At once I put this idea into practice. I made myself a DiDi customer whenever necessary *and* possible. After introducing my identity as a researcher in urban studies focusing on the issue of the green belts, I invited the drivers to share with me what they had experienced and what

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[6] While only 33 Yuan was paid by the customer, the driver's remuneration can be double the amount (or even triple) due to subsidies from DiDi.

they felt contemplating the transition of their homeland. They all had a similar background: born locally in a nearby village, they commuted to work every day and used *DiDi Hitch* for both pocket money and leisure. But their individual experiences of green belts were quite different given their different positions and perspectives. One man told me that the people in his village received much lower compensations during their relocation than other communities in Sunhe, because they were too docile to unite and negotiate (Interview with Didi driver on 13 July 2015). This argument was soon confirmed by circumstantial evidence collected from another DiDi driver. He was from the neighbouring village and told me that to begin with he had refused to be relocated and a team of rogues had been hired to pester his family every day. One night he called three dozen of his friends and relatives and beat the team up – this action not only enabled him end the harassment but also led to the final agreement in which he got more than four million Yuan as the compensation fee for being relocated (Interview with Didi driver on 22 July 2015).[7]

In journeys made possible by DiDi, I also managed, but by chance, to encounter individuals from the other side of the repertoire of eviction. One afternoon, I met the young nephew of the former head of the second village mentioned above. He shared with me his own experience in the eviction process (fighting against villagers and exchanging injuries) because of contradictory compensation measures. He also informed me that his uncle had been punished as well. Together with dozens of other local officials, he had been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for corrupt conduct in the process of demolition and relocation after repeated complaints by the villagers (Interview with Didi driver on 17 July 2015). The story from another driver then echoed these stories of corruption. His friend, a police officer in the township near Sunhe, hired a group of migrant workers and organised a demolition team for the township government, from which he earned more than two million Yuan in less than two years (Interview with Didi driver on 16 July 2015). Such topics are all labelled sensitive in China, and inquiries via formal channels with state officials are nearly impossible (Solinger 2006). However, the *DiDi Hitch*, as an informal spatiotemporal intermediary, provides an opportunity for the construction of an alternative *here-and-now* on a contingent basis.

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[7] For more information on eviction practices and families resisting evictions in China, see Shao (2013) and Shin (2013).

Figure 5: A courtyard after eviction in Sunhe

Source: Photo by author, 16 July 2015

Not all the stories that I collected on *DiDi Hitch* journeys were focusing on compensation, corruption and violence. Some drivers preferred to share with me their emotions and fears for the future, such as an encounter in Dahongmen in an evening thundershower:

> After finishing several interviews in the resettlement community, I planned to go back for dinner. But the thundershower suddenly arrived. I estimated the distance between where I was and the bus stop near the community – it was so long that I could only arrive as a drowned rat. Then I appealed to DiDi once again, as usual not in vain. A resident, of about my age, arrived soon with his Honda CR-V. We talked a lot on the way to my residence. "I am a 'halfie'," he told me, "because my mother maintains her rural *hukou*[8] while my father has an urban one." "That is a quite good combination!" I laughed and teased him. "Sure," he replied, "I am now glad that I failed the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*) because those who got a place in college have changed their *hukou* to an urban one. This change made them lose their

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[8] For an explanation of the *hukou* system, please see note 2. While this system has been favouring urban citizens disproportionately for a long time, here we can see things are changing, at least in the case of Dahongmen.

rights to claim proper compensations after demolition." "But we should see both sides of the coin," he continued, "they have their skills after graduation, but we don't. We can live conveniently right now with several million at hand, but what about ten years from now? Most villagers are short-sighted." Then he asked me, reverting to the topic of my identity (which we had been talking about before touching on his *hukou* status): "what is your goal in doing fieldwork? Is it for a paper?" "Yes, it is for my thesis." "But a paper for what?" The question stumped me, until (even after) I was getting off the car: a paper for what? (Field note on 7 August 2015)

I was, and continue to be, unware of whether (or to what extent) the *paper* can contribute something to achieve social justice. The only certainty at that moment was that the driver and his SUV (sports-utility-vehicle) had rescued me, a field researcher, from becoming a drowned rat. This was a moment when he and I were *thrown together*, as Massey (2005) aptly puts it. The pre-condition of this encountering moment was the sudden coming of a thundershower, discouraging me from using public transport and allowing him to kill time. The encountering moment was intermediated by DiDi – physically made possible as a by-product of the process of establishing the green belts – the vehicle purchased with the massive compensation fee received for relocation. With these conditions and actions, a *here-and-now* was negotiated between us, just there, just then.

The spatiotemporality of *DiDi Hitch* is worth further consideration to examine the dialectics of the encounter in a concrete, empirical context. These moments of encounter via DiDi are, in the first place, confined by social processes and material practices. For instance, the municipal government, together with townships and village collectives, now practises a new governmental technique of spatial re-ordering through the green belts to facilitate their ambitions of accumulation and territorialisation (Zhao 2015). They pay impressively high compensation to residents with rural *hukou* (though this requires negotiation and struggle to ensure their delivery) to expropriate land. They give much less to those with urban *hukou* living in the same community who have no entitlement to the collectively owned land[9]. This exposes a reversal of identity politics at China's urban margin, enabling the driver whom I met in Dahongmen, and many of his contemporaries with rural *houkou* to buy big houses and

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[9] The land ownership structure in China is quite unique. According to *Land Administration Law of the People's Republic of China* (NPC 2004), "land in the urban areas of cities is owned by the State" while "land in rural and suburban areas is owned by peasant collectives, except for those portions of land which belong to the State as provided for by law" (Article 8). Also see a comprehensive analysis in Ho (2001).

luxury vehicles as part of a compensation and relocation measure (see Figure 6 below). Within this broader context, an app requiring IDs and bank cards ensured a level of initial trust for both drivers and myself to start a conversation during the DiDi journey. *Money* thus plays an epistemological role in these DiDi encounters. It reconciles both individual spatiotemporalities in the lifeworld and the "abstract 'rationalised' spatiotemporalities attributed to modernity and capitalism" (Harvey 1996, 233-34). This mechanism further consolidates *DiDi Hitch* as a new spatiotemporal intermediary for encountering in Beijing's green belts.

Figure 6: The resettlement community for Dahongmen residents with rural *hukou*

Source: Photo by author, 4 August 2015

Yet these moments of encounter are complex and dynamic. They cannot be recognised through what Haraway names the "god trick" with its view "from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (1991, 195) as employed in spatial metaphors. Indeed, encounters via the DiDi Hitch are daily and bodily meetings between the researcher (who is short on money and is looking for interviewees) and the researched (local villagers who want to earn pocket money when they commute or to kill time after dinner). Identities, bodies, and power relations are contingent on the process of negotiating a *here-and-now*, and this in turn sets limits to the

progress of a dialogue. If money is the measure of almost everything, it might be argued that the millionaire-drivers were more powerful than I was in the moment of encounter. After all, it was I who faced scorching sun and the sudden descent of a thunderstorm, before being "rescued" by these drivers. In each journey, both the researched and the researcher were curious about each other's stories-so-far and shared them with each other; conversations were by no means dominated by the researcher who was sometimes stumped. The nature of the power relations were further evidenced by the fact that nearly all of the drivers turned down a second interview the day after each journey. In this regard, I concur with the comment below, which to my mind precisely summarises the nature of *throwntogetherness* – and I imagine that the drivers whom I encountered might agree as well:

> I may be with you in this moment, but its appearance will look different from the unique places we both occupy in it. We are both together, somehow simultaneous, yet apart. (Holquist 1985, 225)

Concluding remarks

Max Weber (1949, 115) asserts that methodology only indicates a reflective understanding of the means of research, rather than "the precondition of fruitful intellectual work." For Weber, methodology is similar to a knowledge of anatomy – neither would guarantee correct walking. But here I want to join Burawoy (1998, 6) in opposing Weber's argument: a methodology refers not only to an "explicit consciousness," but also to its own substances. In this article a critical reflection on both the space-time of Beijing's green belts and then difficulties of doing fieldwork demonstrates that space now foregrounds both our bodily experiences and our ethnographic investigations of the world outside ourselves and hence itself becomes a *method*. Instead of seeing the field site as a stable entity with a clear boundary, I propose a relational spatial ontology that recognises the site as a historical-geographical conjuncture that internalises various social and politico-economic processes. Self-other relations in the field are spatiotemporal constructions as well, inherently contingent and emerging only when people are "thrown together" in socially constructed space and time. Both field sites and encounters should be (re)located spatially in the world – this is what Burawoy labels as "real repercussions" and what supplies substantial meanings for space in the reflections on ethnographic practices.

Beijing's green belts symbolise a historical-geographical conjuncture emerging in the city's urban process. The disappearance of local communities and the imagined existence of green belts convey the space-time of Beijing's spatial transition and define the dynamics of its urban margin. Green belts hence mark a *moment* that internalises multiple politico-economic concerns and social processes. Both the everyday life and the politico-economic mechanisms that I care about is immanent at this moment, and it cannot be fully approached only in devastated villages filled with endless weeds and ruins. In this moment, treating field sites as reified entities (such as the *village-dwelling-field*) is invalid, especially at urban margins where the lived has been removed and its representation is hollow. The methodological implication is clear: instead of appealing to various spatial metaphors, we should adopt a relational spatial ontology to depict our field sites as processes, examining the attributes of those processes and their diverse spatiotemporalities at the same time.

Spatial transitions at the urban margin raise further challenges (such as the relocation of residents) for ethnographic practices requiring a relational approach to be applied to bodies and encounters. The use of *DiDi Hitch* reveals how encounters take place in ways that are unexpected but crucial to explaining the dialectics of the encounter. On the one hand, we are situated in socially constructed space-time; it is the underlying social processes that determine both conditions and possibilities of encounters. On the other, these possibilities cannot be exhausted because of the partiality of our positions and knowledges. No encounter is *a priori*; it is better recognised as a negotiation of a *here-and-now* between different trajectories and stories. Such negotiations are empirical, concrete, and contingent on bodily experiences in the field. The role of space is significant for it preconditions the spatiotemporal intermediaries for negotiations and *throwntogetherness* between individuals.

Of the word and the world is bodily space-time, as Harvey (1996, 249) aptly comments, since the *withness* of the body and the experience of space and time are mutually constituted. We are all situated with our otherness when joining dialogues that are already under way. The positioning of self and the making of dialogues are bounded by simultaneous and irreducible differences between individuals. Such differences, nevertheless, are bridged by bodily space-times that are simultaneous yet discrete in the encountering moments. This marks a double re-appropriation of body and space, which lays a space-oriented methodological foundation for recent concerns on partial perspectives, limited locations and situated knowledges. Only

in this way can we properly register our simultaneous coexistence, examine our being together in radical contingencies, avoid the views from above or from everywhere, and "learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view" (Haraway 1991, 190).

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