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TODAY'S CHINA FROM WITHIN

A Chinese centre of the world? Jing Jin Ji and the remaking of Beijing

Patrick Le Galès

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The China of Xi Jing Ping is on course to become the first economic power of the world, overtaking the US around 2040 according to their own previsions. In parallel, Chinese leadership is massively investing in the upgrading and development of its army and fosters its political influence all over the globe, mostly through investments and political pressure. In many public occasions, Chinese leaders have expressed the view that the balance of power and influence was coming back to normal. The old state of China had been the most developed part of the world including many technical advances and sophisticated government more or less until the 12th century. The rise of Europe was explained by the success of the first capitalism of merchants, the cities, economic innovation and the slow making of the nation state. Seen from China, this cycle of extraordinary events, centuries of domination of Europe, then the US, is drawing to a close. Back to normal. China will become the centre of the world. The silk road initiative bears testimony of this attempt at global influence. In the eyes of Chinese leaders, therefore, the future capital or most prestigious city of the world should also be in China, hence the project of developing Jing-Jin-Ji, the urban region around Beijing as the most advanced urban region in the world that should attract flux of investments, visitors and radiate Chinese power.

Beijing has come a long way. During the Maoist period, Chinese leaders tried to limit urbanization and demographic growth and all the emphasis was on industrialization and the making of the socialist city. With the coming age of market reforms pioneered under Deng Xiaoping, liberalization reforms paved the way for the stunning acceleration of urbanization, including in Beijing. Chinese cities were very much planned but as elsewhere, planning was only part of the story and planning failures were numerous. In the last fifteen years, the Chinese government has implemented a voluntarist regional policy aiming both at rebalancing economic growth on the western side of the country (hence the massive investment in Chongqing now 30 M inhabitants or Chengdu, 15 M) but also to reinforce the world influence of the three leading urban regions : Beijing, Shanghai and the Yangtze Delta (towards 100 M?). On top of those, the national urban policy is planning 15 metropolis or 15 Million inhabitants. The paper deals with the attempt to build a Chinese capital of the world, the combination of different modes of what seems to be a good city in a systematic way and the contradictions that arise

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Beijing: cultural heritage and modernist urban development of the national capital

It should be remembered that Beijing, despite its formidable cultural heritage (it was founded about 3000 years ago), was not such a world hub. It has rather attracted a lot of criticism and bad publicity all over the world and in China, by contrast to Shanghai, in particular, but also Guangzhou or Hong Kong as the southern cities more or on less on the seaside.

Megaregions of China



The two River Delta Regions, together with the Bohai Bay Economic Zone, accounted for almost half of China's GDP in 2007, 77 percent of its exports, and almost all of the country's inbound FDI, despite hosting just 25 percent of its population.

The urban development of Beijing metro area has been in line with the urbanization of China. The metropolitan area comprised 1,6 M inhabitants in 1950, 8,7 M in 1978, now 21 million inhabitants, one of the mega city region of the world. By the early 1980's, the accelerated urbanization created a lot of political pressure because of the lack of housing and infrastructure, not to mention the lack of services [1].

The urban growth required the building of hundred thousands of new buildings often standardized in Beijing endless suburbs and the forced displacement of inhabitants leaving in traditional neighbourhoods provoking protests. That went together with massive infrastructure investment for instance six ring roads, energy supply or a brand new metro system. In the early 1990's, Beijing was still a cycling city with few cars, mostly the dark limousines of the officials. The growth has been stellar and planned in a classic interventionist way, expecting population increase, planning land use, building new neighbourhood and infrastructure. The urban spread was also massive and planning rules hardly managed to contain the growth. As Fulong Wu has demonstrated at length, competition, marketization, liberalization under state guidance became the norm for urban elites and fostered a staggering urban growth. They had incentives to invest in urban development to finance their investment.

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(2) The large scale destruction of traditional neighbourhoods (Hutongs) in Beijing, the displacement of population and the disappearance of some of its cultural heritage. The systematic destruction of Hutongs has provoked much protest in China and abroad but the modernization of Beijing has been merciless for most of them (more than the 1976 earthquake). The conservation plan for Beijing Hutongs only came of age in 2002, to preserve the small portion that had not been destroyed and to recreate “traditional “hutong for tourist, in a sort of Disneyland or Las Vegas model.

The massive urbanization led to several major negative consequences in Beijing that show the limits of planning even within an authoritarian regime and the failure to measure and take into account the full effect of the urbanization dynamics

(3) The disastrous ecological consequences. Beijing’s growth went together with economic development and the massive use of car. It was also a very industrial city. In terms of water, traffic jams, air pollution, Beijing symbolized some of the worse consequences of the mega urban region. Air pollution in particular reached dramatic levels. It became a public issue in winter 2011 that came back regularly. The most visible peak took place during the so-called “airpocalypse” crisis in January 2013. Thick polluting smog paralysed the capital for days, sometimes weeks, leading to massive outcry both inside China and outside. The Air quality Index reached skyline heights with dramatic consequences for health. Vast amounts of greenbelt were also destroyed on the way. Also, the North East of China has a long term deficit of water supply. Again, large-scale work including the diversion of rivers provided solutions to the water shortage, raising many questions for the future

Building the world urban capital in China

This global project of Chinese domination includes many dimensions including an urban one: to build, organize, develop the future capital of the world. Chinese leaders are keen to show the world the effectiveness of the Chinese mode of governance by contrast to Western democracies. The increased economic and political competition between China and the US in particular drives many projects in China. The making of an imperial capital that would be a model for the world is one of them. Historically, there is nothing new here, many capitals have been built and received great investment in order to reflect the power and glory of political leaders or state making elites. Authoritarian leaders have historically been particularly mobilized by capital making projects.

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the classic model circulation between world cities including western star architects involved in the making of iconic buildings. However, the scale of the investment and the speed of the implementation are mostly unique and we do not know much about the conflicts, the protest and the way they were solved.

Even more strikingly, the austere administrative city was transformed as Shanghai as the place of hyper modernist consumption and wild consumer capitalism. Beijing's exceptional economic development fostered the making of a middle class of furious consumers, eager to adopt high tech goods and fashionable accessories, shoes or apparels, creating a massive market for Chinese and world companies, nurturing the meteoric rise of super star firms such as Tencent and Alibaba, construction and energy firms, finances and insurance, Huawei or the semiconductor firm SMIC in Shenzhen.

The ambition for Beijing increased with the successes of China and the new perspectives. After the 2010, the ambition became to prepare the future urban centre of the world, possibly the world capital city of the future most powerful state. Housing crisis in Beijing (quantity of housing and price increase) were seen as limiting economic growth and damaging the quality of life. By creating new secondary centres and using full authority to relocate both non-core government services and the whole Beijing municipality, the government hope to limit the impact of housing prices increase and the shortage of housing. Rebalancing economic growth within the urban region but also against Shanghai and the Pearl Delta River was also an issue.



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minutes, or Beijing to the new airport in 20 minutes, new metro lines to the main centres, a myriad of new railways and light trains. Those investments were matched by investments in energy and water provision, new public services (universities, hospitals, schools).

The increased economic and political competition between China and the US in particular drives many projects in China. The making of an imperial capital that would be a model for the world is one of them

In the Chinese imagination of a world capital, attracting tourism and flux (conferences, visitors of different kinds) has been seen as a priority. The Olympic games were successful in

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