Building City Walls: Reordering the Population through Beijing’s Upside-Down Villages

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Abstract
China’s development strategies have long been premised on an institutionalized urban-rural divide, on the basis of which the population is governed. This urban-rural divide is being reconfigured as China’s relationship to the global economy transforms. As China’s leaders seek to upgrade the economy from one focused on export production to one based on urban middle-class consumers, China’s population is being reorganized. China’s largest cities are pivotal to this strategy. Branded “world cities,” as they further integrate into the global economy, they are becoming exclusive zones, their populations carefully managed and selected. In Beijing, urban villages are key sites for enacting such strategies. Under a controversial program known as “sealed management,” inhabitants are subjected to various forms of surveillance and monitoring. This constitutes a dual strategy both to control local villager populations during land expropriations and to “upgrade” the migrant labor force in keeping with the government’s global city plans.

Keywords
Beijing, global cities, rural migrants, sealed management, urban villages

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Laosanyu is a small village in Xihongmen township of Daxing district, in the south of Beijing. It is an “urban village,” or a “village in the city” 城中村, one of hundreds located on the outskirts of Beijing in what is commonly termed the “urban-rural fringe zone” 城乡结合部. It has often been referred to in Chinese as an “upside-down village” 倒挂村 on account of its “inverted” 倒挂 population—the 660 local village residents were far outnumbered by the 6,000 renting tenants, mostly migrant workers from the countryside (Liu and Lü, 2010). In March 2010, a high wall was built surrounding Laosanyu, so that it resembled “a military base, or prison” (He, 2010). An iron gate was put across the main entrance, with a sentry post guarded twenty-four hours a day. All residents needed to obtain an entry permit to show to security guards at the gate on entering and exiting. This displayed their name, photo, gender, ethnicity, hometown, occupation, identity card number, and cell phone number. The village gate was closed every night and the village placed under curfew, banning entry or exit between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. Such measures were part of a pilot grassroots governance program known as “sealed village management” 村庄封闭式管理, which the municipal government was trialing in sixteen villages in the area. At a conference titled “Rolling Out the Sealed Village Management Model” held in Laosanyu by the Daxing Public Security Bureau branch office on April 25, 2010, local officials announced that sealed management would be extended to all ninety-two upside-down villages in Daxing by the end of the year (Zhang, 2010). In July, Liu Qi, secretary of the Beijing Municipal Committee, announced his approval of the program’s extension citywide (Dong, 2010). By 2012, official sources were reporting that all 668 urban villages in Beijing were implementing sealed management (Li and Guo, 2012).

Sealed management was met with widespread public criticism in Chinese media and on online forums and social networks (He, 2010). It was deemed a manifestation of the city’s discrimination against the countryside, particularly rural migrants (Tang et al., 2010). A post in October 2010 on Weibo, a popular online social networking platform, denounced it as “apartheid with Chinese characteristics.” Another online blogger compared it to the science-fiction film District 9, set in South Africa, in which a population of sick and malnourished aliens arriving in Johannesburg are ghettoized into a government compound and subjected to military surveillance and brutality (Nuo Song’s Blog, 2010). The Beijing government went on the defensive with a publicity campaign via state media outlets. Quotes from local officials downplayed accusations of prejudice as “misunderstandings.” On the contrary, they claimed, the program was a step toward inclusivity. In bringing order to these formerly chaotic spaces, sealed management “expressed the longing of rural residents for urban life” (Beijing News, 2010).
The claim that sealed management was not premised on the exclusion of rural people from the city is partially correct. This episode reflects broader issues of social transformation taking place within the Chinese state. As China’s leaders seek to transform the national economy from an export-led model fueled by low-cost rural labor to one based on urban middle-class consumers, the institutionalized urban-rural divide that has long determined the social structure of China is being reconfigured. Through multiple, localized state practices of boundary-making, Chinese society is being reordered based on new, more complex categories of division that may overlap with, but do not neatly reproduce, the urban-rural binary. These categories, often articulated in terms of “higher” versus “lower,” are designed to preserve the largest cities as zones of exclusion for the upper and middle classes and educated white-collar workers, removing or deterring those considered to be below a certain social threshold. Local governments are enacting such boundary-making practices in part through policies toward urban villages. This was demonstrated with drastic effect in November 2017 when, following the pretext of a lethal fire in Daxing, the municipal government launched a demolition and eviction campaign targeting urban villages, resulting in the sudden expulsion of thousands of migrants, designated the “low-end population” (Global Times, 2017; Pils, 2020: 270). In this article, I offer an interpretive policy analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 2013) to argue that sealed management should be understood in this context.

The article builds on and contributes to three emerging bodies of scholarship. First, the small but growing body of work on Beijing’s sealed management policies (Zhao, 2013; Zhang and Guo, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Second, the recent and emerging scholarship examining state strategies of population control within China’s first-tier cities. Within this literature, a number of scholars examine the household registration system, or hukou system, as a form of administrative control (Johnson, 2017; Guo and Liang, 2017; Zhang, 2018; Liu and Shi, 2020). Others examine nonadministrative means of population control, including the removal of labor-intensive industries from cities (Zhang, 2018), restrictions to schooling for migrant children (Friedman, 2018), and the aforementioned eviction campaign in Beijing (Friedman, 2017; Pils, 2020). Third, while there is a substantial body of scholarship on Chinese urban governance and population control which draws on Foucault’s concept of governmentality (e.g., Tomba, 2014; Yan, 2003; Zhang, 2001; Zhang, 2018), this article instead deploys a cultural political economy (CPE) analytical framework. CPE is compatible with, and influenced by, Foucauldian governmentality, particularly with respect to how the governing of populations operates through discursive means. Nevertheless, CPE’s primary orientation is Marxist, and its central concerns are why certain
state projects and strategies come to be dominant (or hegemonic), the social structures they uphold, and whose interests they serve (Sum, 2018: 46). CPE is still relatively unusual in studies of Chinese policy making, despite its evident applicability (Mulvad, 2015; Su, Bramwell, and Whalley, 2018; Sum and Jessop, 2013).

CPE analyzes the dialectical relationship between both “semiotic” and “nonsemiotic” aspects of political economy (Fairclough, 2013: 231–32). Semiotic refers to the intersubjective production of meaning, usually in discursive form, but it can also include other cultural forms, such as visual images. Nonsemiotic refers to institutional and material formations (Jessop, 2004). CPE is particularly apt for analyzing Chinese policy making because of the compatibility of its conception of the state with the “fragmented authoritarianism” model that has long been influential in China studies. This views the state as an aggregate of competing bureaucracies rather than as a unified subject (Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992). Similarly, CPE understands the state as an ensemble of institutions that enact overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, “state projects.” A state project constitutes a political framework for action, reflecting a particular government rationality that aims to guide and coordinate individual actors and organs toward a coherent goal, while ensuring institutional and societal cohesion (Jessop, 2016: 85). CPE explains why a particular state project emerges, or becomes dominant, at a particular historical conjuncture by analyzing its alignment with particular socioeconomic power structures and sets of interests, and the ways in which it addresses crises that threaten or impact on these. State projects are never fully stable or entirely hegemonic but are subject to ongoing political struggles and must be continually reinforced and reproduced (Jessop, 2004; Sum, 2018).

State projects can take various forms, including waging war, enacting religious authority, or welfare provision, each entailing different forms of societal organization and state strategies. State projects centered on development, as in this article, rest on state strategies of capital accumulation (Jessop, 2016: 42–44). Thus, conceptually, we can understand a state project as an overarching political framework, and a state accumulation strategy as an economic policy guided by that framework (Mulvad, 2015: 207). State projects occur at various geographical scales, as demonstrated by Andreas Mulvad’s (2015) study of different projects and accumulation strategies in Guangdong and Chongqing—the former market-driven, the latter state-led.

Institutionally and materially, state projects and their related strategies are structurally inscribed and strategically selected (Sum, 2018: 48–49). That is, their possibilities for achieving dominance are shaped by existing asymmetric socioeconomic orders favoring certain agents, identities, sets of interests, and institutional formations over others. These socioeconomic orders may be
constituted by a variety of dynamics, including those of gender, race, or class. Discursively, state projects are embedded within a “web of interlocution” (Sum and Jessop, 2015: 136)—a network of “public narratives” (Somers, 1994: 618–19) and linguistic tropes connected to cultural, political, and economic institutions. These are expressed in statements by, for example, policymakers, public intellectuals, and the media. This “web” constructs and organizes these socioeconomic orders, thus shaping the possibilities for state strategies and their material manifestations. This constitutes the material-discursive dialectic that forms the basis for CPE analyses.

Here, the socioeconomic order under discussion is constituted by a particular configuration of class power, reinforced through the production of hierarchically ordered categories of identity—urban versus rural and “high-end” versus “low-end.” As I will show, these are materially reflected in spatial transformations taking place in Beijing. A substantial literature examines urban transformations in China using the analytical framework of “neoliberal urbanism” (He and Wu, 2009; Lin, 2014; Lin and Zhang, 2015). Neoliberalism is a contested term, however. Here, I adopt the perspective of David Harvey, for whom neoliberalism is a process geared toward the consolidation and assertion of capitalist class dominance (Harvey, 2005, 2013). From this perspective, China’s neoliberal urbanism involves the remaking of urban space to facilitate both domestic and global capital accumulation oriented toward the enrichment and empowerment of an emerging capitalist class. In Beijing, this involves an alliance between local governments as de facto landlords and those connected to real estate capital who wield particular political influence (Friedman, 2017).

From a CPE perspective, the state is too complex and diverse to be a meaningful object for analysis. Instead, state formations constitute “polyvalent, polymorphous crystallizations of one or another dominant principle of societal organization that varies according to the most pressing issues in a conjuncture, general crystallizations defining long periods, and specific crystallizations emerging in particular situations” (Jessop, 2016: 44). While we cannot analyze the state itself, we must analyze the observable “state effects” of these temporarily selected, “crystallized” projects (Jessop, 2016: 44). For this article, I analyze one “specific crystallization,” the sealed management program, and its structured socioeconomic effects.

First, I am concerned with how the sealed management program came to be “strategically selected” by way of its structural relationship to two broader, distinct but overlapping, state projects. The first (state project 1) is a national-level project to transform China’s economy from an export-led growth model reliant on low-cost rural labor to one based on the high-tech service sector reliant on urban middle-class consumers. The second (state project 2) is a
municipal-level project to construct Beijing as a global city. Both of these state projects require the fundamental reworking of China’s urban-rural divide, which takes place via an array of boundary-making practices at different scales and multiple sites. Both projects were imbued with particular urgency following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC)—a profound global and national crisis of capital accumulation. Through its impact at the local level in Beijing, this provided the historical conjuncture at which the sealed management program came to be “strategically selected.”

Second, I assemble the “web of interlocution” within which sealed management is embedded. I do this through analysis of municipal planning documents, public security reports, official party publications, articles in state-run media, and reported statements by local village officials. These documents and statements have been chosen on the basis of their discursive, structural relationship to the sealed management program (whether or not they mention the program directly). Through analyzing their content, I seek to demonstrate how, in combination, they produced the program’s semiotic conditions of possibility. The sealed management program was “strategically selected” on the basis of, first, its integration into this semiotic “web” and, second, its reinforcement of a socioeconomic order compatible with the two aforementioned state projects. This worked via two socioeconomic effects: first, by control and surveillance of villager populations, and second, by filtering the access of migrants to the city.

To reiterate, CPE is a nonpositivist, interpretive methodology. There is no singular policy document or official statement (of which I am aware) that straightforwardly sets out the intended purpose of sealed management as directly and intentionally geared toward achieving these two effects. Nevertheless, by identifying and analyzing the broader semiotic and socioeconomic structures within which it was embedded, it is evident that the program was indeed oriented toward producing these effects; moreover, its implementation at this particular historical juncture should be understood on this basis.

The article has a tripartite structure. First, I set out how China’s state development projects have long been based on an urban-rural divide produced through both institutional and cultural means. I discuss how a new state development project has been emerging at the national level since the GFC, how Beijing’s global city project is integrated into this, and how urban villages have come to be conceived as a problem in relation to this municipal project. Second, I analyze the “web of interlocution” within which Beijing’s urban villages are situated, and how public discourses on sealed management are likewise integrated into this broader “web.” I demonstrate how these discourses reproduce, and reinforce, the socioeconomic structures and imperatives at the
heart of Beijing’s global city project. Finally, I examine the concrete practices of “village communitization management” 村庄社区化管理, a more politically acceptable term for sealed management, and show how the “effects” of the program align with broader municipal goals with respect to the management of Beijing’s population. I end with a brief conclusion.

**Changing State Projects**

*From Segregation to Migration*

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long deployed a variety of differentiating population-management strategies, organized primarily on the basis of urban-rural division, in order to facilitate social control and determine who gets what in the course of development (Shue, 2018). Under Mao Zedong, since the late 1950s, urban land was state-owned and rural land was owned collectively by large farms or communes. This facilitated the organization of labor in the countryside and the extraction of cheap grain to fuel industrialization in cities. The institution of the hukou system classified people as urban or rural and restricted mobility in order to prevent the mass migration of peasants into cities, prioritizing cities in the allocation of state resources (Cheng and Selden, 1994).

Market reforms were introduced from the late 1970s, and by the late 1990s a new state project of national development had evolved. This hinged on a dual accumulation strategy. First, manufacturing for export centered in Special Economic Zones in the southern and eastern coastal cities attracted large amounts of overseas investment (Harvey, 2005: 120–51). The hukou system was relaxed to allow migration from the countryside into cities on a vast scale, such that “from 1991 to 2013 there was a huge increase of 269 million in the urban workforce, 85 per cent of which was accounted for by rural immigration” (Lin, 2015: 38). Because of the hukou system, however, rural migrants were not allowed to settle permanently in cities, even as they acted as the bait for the vast inflows of international investment (Solinger, 1999b; Hayward, 2022).

Second, local regimes of land accumulation emerged following national fiscal reforms in 1994. These reforms recentralized tax revenue, compelling local governments to replace the shortfall by exploiting their remaining sources of funds, most importantly land leasing and taxes on services, both of which relied on providing land to local real estate developers (Su and Tao, 2017). The Maoist dual-track land system remained in place, and rural collective ownership had now been transferred to the villages. Vast amounts of collective agricultural land came to be expropriated by local governments,
reclassified as urban, and transferred to real estate developers in the interests of both revenue collection and wealth accumulation. Scholars often refer to these processes as “neoliberal urbanism” (He and Wu, 2009; Lin, 2014; Lin and Zhang, 2015).

As a result of this urban-centric dual accumulation strategy, urban villages have emerged in many Chinese cities. Since village land cannot be sold on the market, when the urban zone of a city expands outward into the surrounding rural area, the engulfed villages are not absorbed into the urban sprawl but remain in place. The villagers remain “peasants”—holders of rural hukou—despite living inside the metropolis. Once the villages’ agricultural land was expropriated by the state, villagers substituted their agricultural income by renting out rooms to rural migrants, whose need for low-cost housing was neglected by city governments (e.g., Song, Zenou and Ding, 2008). As this proved lucrative, villagers built extensions to their houses, up to four or five stories high. Construction and land use regulations were often violated, and the environment and infrastructure of villages designed to accommodate just a few hundred people was placed under immense strain. Migrant tenants came to outnumber local villagers by as many as ten to one (as in Laosanyu), or sometimes more (Xia, Wu, and Wang, 2010b).

Strategies of urban-rural differentiation were not limited to institutional mechanisms, however. They were reinforced via multiple administrative, cultural, and semiotic practices, all of which worked “to isolate the peasantry, not just geographically but socially as well: to create what amounted to ethnic ‘boundary markers’ around them” (Solinger, 1999b: 27). Scholars have noted the racializing characteristics inherent to the policing of rural migrants, where features such as dialect and physical appearance mark them out for disciplinary action (Alexander and Chan, 2004; Han, 2010). In what Małgorzata Jakimów (2012: 660) refers to as “internal orientalism,” a Weberian-informed conception of citizenship has taken root in China that preserves citizenship as an exclusively urban category, with those from the countryside considered noncivilized, even savage. Such conceptions were normalized in the statement of one public security officer in Beijing, who allegedly remarked that “these out-of-towners are no better than animals” (reported in a South China Morning Post article in 1991, quoted in Solinger, 1999a: 458).

Similarly, it is well documented how Chinese state actors have promoted a discourse of “suzhi” 素质, meaning “cultural quality,” which, denoting the desired traits of a modern citizen, works to differentiate the population into those of more or less value (as assessed by one’s usefulness to global capital). As Yan Hairong argues, to be of “high quality” is to possess the abstract traits of civility, discipline, and modernity, all of which are associated with the urban citizen (Yan, 2003). Conversely, to lack suzhi is to be considered
“culturally defective” (Lin, 2015: 37). This justifies practices of disciplining and governance toward those considered “low suzhi” and inculcates various forms of conduct in those who aspire to citizen status (Yan, 2003). Thus, for a peasant to migrate from village to city in search of low-paid work is to become fully human (Yan, 2003: 501)—to raise one’s cultural status out of savagery.

Within cities, as Luigi Tomba (2009) has observed, suzhi denotes responsible conduct in keeping with social order, while low suzhi connotes the potential for social unrest. Hence, local urban governments have deployed a variety of segregating practices to maintain social control. Residential areas are zoned and “sealed” 封闭, meaning gated off, into distinct communities, or “shequ” 社区. Some of these are private compounds for the middle classes and newly wealthy; others are former socialist work units. Urban villages, since they occupy rural, not urban, land, do not count as shequ and so are exempt from such modes of regulation. Governance regimes and the degree of autonomy between different shequ vary depending on the position of residents within the city’s social hierarchy. Compounds for laid-off workers are subjected to a far greater degree of monitoring and surveillance than their wealthier counterparts (Tomba, 2014: 29–61).

Local party branches asserted greater control over the shequ committees under the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao administration (2003–2013), coordinating their activities with neighborhood policing. These bureaucratic-residential networks, penetrating into the everyday lives of households, focused on monitoring the “underclass” at the lowest end of the social strata. In some cases, local surveillance work extended to “house calls” and “heart-to-heart talks” in the homes or workplaces of those deemed potentially problematic in order to identify areas of rising tension (Thornton, 2017: 264–68). Within this underclass, multiple intersecting practices of governance, social positioning, and cultural assumptions produce hierarchical divisions between the local urban poor and rural migrants, hindering cross-class solidarity and further relegating migrants to the lowest rung (Cho, 2012).

For example, through routine grassroots work, street-level cadres may establish lasting social connections with urban residents. On the other hand, migrants—their work and abodes often informal and temporary—have a more distant relationship with local bureaucrats. Layered onto these institutional “othering” effects is the “historical baggage” of inferior rural associations that migrants carry with them into the cities, rendering them “uncivil and uncontrollable” in the eyes of local officials (Cho, 2012: 197). All of these structured effects and practices contributed to the management and control of the low-cost workforce on which China’s export-led state development project depended.
State Project 1: China’s New National Development Project

China’s export-led state development project hit a crisis in 2008 following the GFC. The government responded with a substantial stimulus package focused on infrastructure and building projects geared toward boosting domestic demand (Naughton, 2009). Long-term efforts to transform the economy into one founded on urban middle-class consumers and the high-tech service sector intensified. This was reflected in multiple state strategies, taking place at different scales, to reorganize the hierarchical urban-rural divide. In the countryside, this included reforms to agricultural land organization, leading to the emergence of new forms of class differentiation and processes of in situ urbanization (Zhang, 2015; Rosenberg, 2013). Recent research demonstrates how rural land transformations, and the movement of people from rural to urban areas are increasingly driven by political alliances between local governments and the real estate industry (Andreas and Zhan, 2016; Hayward, 2018).

A watershed moment came in 2014 with the high-profile publication of two national policy documents: the National New-Type Urbanization Plan 2014–2020 国家新型城市化规划2014–2020 (Central Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2014) and the Opinion on Furthering the Reforms to the Household Registration System 关于进一步推进户籍制度改革的意见 (State Council, 2014). Together, these documents enshrined central state plans to “promote the orderly transition of the agricultural population into urban citizens” (State Council, 2014). This constituted a sea change for China’s development, when localized processes of population reordering already taking place under the radar were firmly consolidated at the national level. Restrictions on permanent movement from the countryside into towns and small or medium-sized cities were to be relaxed, and urban hukou status was to be extended to a further one hundred million people. The eventual goal was stated to be the elimination of the dual urban-rural citizenship classifications (State Council, 2014). However, for China’s megacities, those with a population of over five million, new barriers for entry were to be introduced (Hayward, 2022).

In CPE terms, these 2014 documents constitute a key moment in the crystallization of a new national-level state project geared toward reconfiguring “the dominant principle of societal organization” (Jessop, 2016: 44). As new restrictions are placed on access to life in China’s largest metropolises, the pivotal boundary on which China’s national economic strategy is organized is shifting from one that divides urban from rural to one that secludes the megacity from the rest.
The governments of China’s largest cities are proliferating boundary-making practices, producing multiple differentiated citizenship categories, and enacting new strategies of exclusion or expulsion in order to limit city populations and ensure the cultural level of their inhabitants. These include the “points-based system,” whereby applicants for urban hukou are numerically evaluated on the basis of age, educational attainment, professional skills, and other factors (Johnson, 2017; Guo and Liang, 2017; Zhang, 2018; Liu and Shi, 2020). Alternative strategies of exclusion include “functional dispersal,” whereby industries considered undesirable are relocated out of the city, taking their low-cost labor along with them (Zhang, 2018). Similarly, a policy known as “using education to control the population” deliberately restricts access to public schooling for migrant children, leaving thousands of migrant parents with no choice but to return to the countryside (Friedman, 2018). The evictions of migrant workers from Beijing in 2017 adhered to this same logic (Friedman, 2017; Pils, 2020). Sealed management, officially launched in 2010, was one localized, historical precursor to the watershed moment of 2014. Xiong Yihan (2017: 13), a scholar of public affairs at Fudan University, argued that it constituted a state strategy of “using housing to control the population.” Thus, the program should not be understood in isolation from this broader tectonic shift, but as one micro-step toward it.

**State Project 2: Global City Beijing**

As China’s national-level state development project was transforming, a set of distinct but closely interrelated state projects were evolving at the local levels—projects to construct global cities.² Forty-three Chinese cities had announced global city projects by the late 1990s (Xuefei Ren, quoted in Timberlake et al., 2014: 162). As a theoretical concept, a global city is a nodal point in the world economy for the concentrated accumulation of international capital and high-value-added industries (Sassen, 1991). In China, global cities are deliberate “place-promoting projects,” or branding strategies, promoted both by the central and city governments, designed to attract both national and foreign investment (Timberlake et al., 2014: 162). While China’s global cities compete for investment and central state funds, they also cooperate via their particular specializations. For example, Shanghai operates as a commercial center and Guangzhou as a manufacturing center, while Beijing acts as both a political and regulatory center and as a center for research and development (Lai, 2012; Timberlake et al., 2014: 165).³ The headquarters of national banks, China’s largest state-owned enterprises, and many regional headquarters for transnational corporations and financial service companies are located in Beijing (Lai, 2012; Timberlake et al., 2014).
Beijing’s municipal government first declared its world city aspirations in its Urban Master Plan 1991–2010, emphasizing plans to focus on high-value-added industries and less on manufacturing (Wei and Yu, 2006: 388; Gu, Wei, and Cook, 2015: 915). From 1978 to 1998, tertiary industries as a proportion of Beijing’s GDP increased from 23.7 to 56.6 percent, by which time the number of rural migrants in the city had reached around three million, working mostly in various service sectors and in construction (Gu and Shen, 2003: 109–12). Beijing’s global city plans received a further boost in 2001 with the successful bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, regarded by both national and local officials as a chance to remake Beijing’s image on the world stage (Wei and Yu, 2006: 391).

Yet, as in many Chinese cities, Beijing’s global city project has long rested on two political and socioeconomic dilemmas. The first is its reliance, simultaneously, on a low-cost labor supply and a land accumulation regime. Urban villages are key sites of land accumulation strategies. Thus, in the run up to the 2008 Olympics, a spate of urban village demolitions took place (China Daily, 2004). These were geared, nominally, toward clearing space for exhibition sites or green areas connected to the event (Shin and Li, 2013: 565). Yet this pretext was—as was par for the course—utilized by local officials to further development projects with a view to generating both land revenue and private wealth (Shin and Zhao, 2018). As scholars have long observed, demolishing urban villages conflicts with the city’s need for low-cost labor (e.g., Song, Zenou, and Ding, 2008). This contradiction results in seemingly irrational policies by local officials, who demolish villages in some parts of the city while turning a blind eye to their reemergence elsewhere (Zhan, 2018: 1538). This dilemma is also reflected in central-local tensions. For example, directives from the center to provide low-cost housing are ignored or deliberately skirted by city governments in favor of lucrative land conversion projects (Timberlake et al., 2014: 167).

The second dilemma at the heart of Beijing’s global city project is that the demolition of urban villages on which the municipal government depends for revenue conflicts with its imperative to maintain social stability. Social stability is of paramount importance in Beijing on account of its role as China’s capital city and political center. I discuss below how both of these dilemmas have been playing out in practice, and attempts by local officials to resolve them.

**Dilemmas in Practice: The Labor Supply and Social Stability**

Daxing district, as the location of many urban villages, is a key location where these dilemmas play out. As part of the municipal government’s global
city plans, Daxing had been earmarked since the early 1990s as the location for a high-tech development zone centered in Yizhuang, a township in the north of the district (Gu, Wei, and Cook, 2015: 917). According to China Daily, under these plans, Yizhuang was formally rebranded as “E-town” in 2007 (China Daily, 2014). A planning document for Daxing district for the period 2005–2020 is revealing (Beijing Municipal Planning Committee, 2007: 21–22). While many scholars argued that urban villages are necessary to ensure the migrant labor supply (e.g., Zhang, Zhao, and Tian, 2003; Song, Zenou, and Ding, 2008; Zhan, 2018), the document demonstrates that local officials perceived the matter differently. The category of the “floating population” 流动人口—a general term for rural migrants which misleadingly implies a unified group4—was recategorized into two classes, as the following excerpt illustrates:

[It is necessary to] flexibly and thoroughly use the regulatory effects of the economic threshold brought about by urbanization to regulate the changing spatial distribution in populations of different quality; on the one hand, through the construction of basic facilities, to optimize the residential environment and guide those of high-quality talent to come and live in Daxing’s new urban zones and focal new townships. At the same time, in this way, to adjust upwards the corresponding urban commodity prices, so raising the economic cost of living for the low-end outsider population, dispersing the low-end population congregating in the new urban zones. (Beijing Municipal Planning Committee, 2007: 21–22)

Here, municipal officials disparage low-cost migrants as the “low-end” population and propose to deliberately raise the area’s cost of living in order to deter, or “disperse” them.5 Meanwhile, “high-quality talent,” posed as an opposite category, is to be strategically “guided into” the city. The document further advocates removing the “low-end population” both by “restructuring” (demolishing) urban villages and by tightening measures of governance:

In addition, [it is necessary to] increase the extent of comprehensive management of the low-end outsider population, in particular, pushing forward with the restructuring of the “urban villages” and the urban-rural fringe zone, strengthening the management of housing rentals . . . and adopting all kinds of measures to eliminate “blind spots” in urban management, reducing the space for the low-end outsider population to congregate. (Beijing Municipal Planning Committee, 2007: 21–22)

Based on this document, the claim commonly made by urban village scholars that they are essential for the city’s labor supply is evidently disconnected
from how many local officials conceive of the problem. As the kind of labor force that Daxing requires is reclassified—from low-cost labor to “high-end” white-collar workers—the first of the abovementioned dilemmas is resolved. Urban villages are deemed no longer necessary, because the low-cost rental housing they provide is no longer required.

As to the second dilemma, following the GFC, Beijing’s land market crashed, but rocketed again in 2009, intensifying pressure on the municipal government from developers and real estate corporations whose desire to access village land amplified accordingly. In 2008, municipal government income from land leasing amounted to 49.4 billion yuan. By 2009, it had risen sharply to 92.8 billion yuan (Gong, Zhang, and Lan, 2010). Thus, for local officials, the need to maintain social stability in the course of the demolitions became increasingly urgent.

One prominent case highlighting this problem concerns the “restructuring” of Beiwu village in 2009, one of fifty “key villages” selected as high-profile pilots for urban village demolition-and-relocation projects. Beiwu was located in Haidian district. This district is relatively central, and its lucrative location allowed for a more generous relocation package than would be possible in other, more remote parts of Beijing. Local villagers in Beiwu were to be transferred to a plot of land large enough to encompass their new homes, extra housing units for rental income, and a commercial plot with space for a restaurant, hotel, and car dealership, all to be managed by the village collective (Gong, Zhang, and Lan, 2010).

However, even this supposedly ideal relocation scenario resulted in serious resistance from villagers. The well-known lawyer and civil rights activist Xu Zhiyong, then a representative of the Haidian People’s Congress, provided an eyewitness account of the demolition process. Xu explained how demolitions legally require the prior written consent of villagers. However, in the case of Beiwu, the term “voluntary evacuation” was applied. While implying that the villagers’ agreement had been obtained, in practice it served as a pretext for bypassing legal proceedings:

In June 2009 I responded to a request from some villagers to go to Beiwu to inspect. There I spoke randomly with about 30 villagers, not one of whom was “voluntarily” moving out. The reason was very simple—one square meter of land compared to one square meter of tower block, the difference in value is plainly obvious. When villagers have their own land they can build rooms to rent out, but once they move to a tower block it’s not clear what they’ll rely on for a living. (Xu Zhiyong, 2010)
Xu returned to the village shortly after its demolition, during which one of the villagers, who had already been attacked and injured by a gang the night before the demolition, had poured gasoline over himself which he ignited when the demolition team attempted to remove him from his house. Xu recounted:

In the case of Xi Xinzhu’s self-immolation when faced with demolition and relocation in Beiwu, the forced demolition was carried out by the village committee which sought to change the usage of the collective land under the auspices of “villagers’ voluntary evacuation.” They had no planning permission, no document of official approval from senior authorities, there was no hearing, no demolition and relocation permit, no dispute adjudication, no application for use of force, no legal procedure at all. Xi Xinzhu’s home, to which he held contracted property rights, was simply knocked down. (Xu Zhiyong, 2010)

Thus, at this historical juncture, when there was particular pressure on local officials to proceed with village demolitions, they were faced with the tasks of both transforming the local labor supply from “low-end” to “high-end,” and maintaining social stability during the impending processes of village “restructuring” which were evidently meeting strong resistance from villagers.

**Webs of Interlocution**

*The Discourse of Beijing’s Urban Villages*

Along with the socioeconomic conditions in which Beijing’s urban villages are embedded, which all but predetermines their demolition, they are simultaneously enmeshed in a semiotic structure that warrants their removal. The Beijing municipal government’s Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011–2015) concerned the city’s appearance and environment and called for building a “humanistic Beijing, hi-tech Beijing, green Beijing” 人文北京、科技北京、绿色北京 (Beijing Municipal Committee, 2011). These three concepts, all of which had been deployed in the international branding of Beijing for the 2008 Olympics (Brownell, 2009: 48–49), were considered integral to constructing “a world city with Chinese characteristics” (Beijing Municipal Committee, 2011). Such a city, the plans continued, required “basically eliminating ‘urban villages’ and other such dirty 脏, chaotic 乱, and backward 差 phenomena which impact the lives of urban citizens” (Beijing Municipal Committee, 2011: 20). Pairing the three aforementioned concepts—renwen 人文, keji 科技, and lüse 绿色—with cha 差, zang 脏, and luan 乱, respectively, is revealing of how the municipal government’s planning discourse
constructs urban villages, and their inhabitants, in stark opposition to the desired vision for Beijing, thus justifying certain policies toward them.⁸

Renwen refers to the cultural activities of human society. While the term’s official translation was “humanistic,” discussions concerning its appropriate meaning with respect to the Olympics ranged from Beijing as the embodiment of Confucian cultural values to the expression of a cosmopolitan, globalized modernity (Leibold, 2010: 20–22). Since the city in this context stands as a metaphor for the people within it, I understand the term as associated with suzhi, and believe it is best translated as “cultured.” In contrast, cha is an abstract term referring to a lack of positive characteristics, often signifying poor quality. In reference to the urban village, it denotes the poor infrastructure and material conditions therein. It also refers to the lack of suzhi of the inhabitants, rendering them “backward,” denying their place in Beijing. The implied solution is their transformation into “quality” citizens through state governance practices, or else, their expulsion.

Lüse denotes state goals of achieving a green urban environment, in the sense of being beautiful and environmentally friendly. This concept brands Beijing as embodying the civilized trait of sustainability and an aspirational middle-class life (Shin and Zhao, 2018). In contrast, zang signifies the villages’ grubby physical appearance, often strewn with rubbish and lacking sufficient hygiene facilities. It further implies the muck of rustic life, so implicating the inhabitants, designating them as misfits outside of modern urbanity. As Hyun Bang Shin and Yimin Zhao have demonstrated, the concept of “Green Beijing” further justifies processes of land accumulation in the interests of producing green spaces, laying the ideological groundwork for the urban villages’ removal (Shin and Zhao, 2018).

Finally, keji signifies science 科 and technology 技. While the latter evokes a high level of development and advanced industry, essential markers of the world city, the former indicates rationality and order. Thus, 科 works in opposition to the luan (chaos) of the urban village and also provides its remedy, directly warranting the imposition of governance. In signifying lack of public order, luan refers both to the out-of-control building fervor of the villagers, deemed the cause of the overwhelming numbers of migrants, and to the criminality and moral degeneracy of the migrants. As to the first, state newspaper reports often referred to “private and chaotic building” 私搭乱建, the higgledy-piggledy array of ramshackle structures erected by villagers themselves. This involves setting up roadside stores on the ground floor and, on the upper floors, renting rooms to as many people as possible, resulting in jumbled streets and serious overcrowding “everywhere one looks” (Xia, Wu, and Wang, 2010a). This expression further connotes the large numbers of migrants living in the villages, giving them the epithet daoqua 倒挂, meaning
“inverted,” emphasizing how the number of local inhabitants is greatly surpassed by that of migrant tenants.

Scholars of urban studies usually translate 倒挂村 as “village with an inverted population.” This translation misses the term’s derogatory inflection, however. Daogua, in my view, cannot be disconnected from the political discourse in which it is embedded, which depicts urban villages as fundamentally luan, chaotic. I therefore translate 倒挂村 more literally as “upside-down village,” which better captures the instability and disorder the Chinese term implies. This is captured well in an article on sealed management published in the party journal Beijing Branch Life 北京支部生活, which describes “the prominent problems caused by the daogua population” as “disordered management, a high crime rate, chaotic public order, a dirty and chaotic environment, and all kinds of hidden dangers” (Wang Xiaoxia, 2010: 30).

The Discourse of Sealed Management

The representations and tropes of the Beijing municipal government’s discourse toward urban villages overlap with, and are reproduced in, public discussions of the sealed management program, which likewise construct the local urban villagers, and the migrants living there, as problematic and requiring of resolution by state action. For example, one of the earliest references to Beijing’s sealed management program, which appeared in the party publication Beijing News 新京报, described its purpose as “transforming the original, open, natural villages through man-made scientific regulation” (Liu and Lü, 2010).

The public discourse surrounding sealed management is further encapsulated by a public security report advocating the program by Yuan Zhenlong, a scholar of public security at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, published in the reputable Blue Book Annual Report 蓝皮书 policy series (Yuan, 2011: 241–51). The reproduction of linguistic tropes and representations within the report demonstrates how the sealed management program is structurally inscribed within the broader discourse of the municipal global city project, thus accommodating to its overarching logic and imperatives.

Yuan’s report focused on Daxing district, in particular its five northern townships, Xihongmen, Huangcun, Jiugong, Yinghai, and Yizhuang, in which all sixteen villages of the original pilot program were located. Yuan alleged that local officials referred to this area as the “pain belt.” According to the report, these five townships contained ninety-two urban villages and housed 500,000 members of the “floating population.” The area is portrayed in the report as an anarchic moral wilderness, outside the norms of social order. Yuan associates “private and chaotic building” with overuse and
wastage of village resources, misuse of land, safety hazards, ruining of the village’s environment and historic appearance, and the breakdown of social order due to the numerous unregulated tenants (Yuan, 2011: 244). The over-crowded apartments, Yuan claims, serve as “criminal hideouts,” “sheltering vice and filth” and “evil criminal gangs” who organize prostitution, gambling, and drugs, produce and sell counterfeit products, and exhibit “extreme individual behavior” (Yuan, 2011: 244–45). Yuan depicts the migrants as rootless, directionless, psychologically unstable, and prone to violence. They demonstrate an “unreasoned hatred of the police” with whom they wage a perpetual “guerrilla war.” Described as “idlers” and “loafers,” they wander in and out of the villages, which, with their many narrow roads and small entrances that leave them “exposed on all sides,” are natural havens for loiterers who frequently engage in opportunist theft, break-ins, and street brawls (Yuan, 2011: 244–45).

The depiction of the urban villages as harboring criminality is heightened by the strategic use of quantitative data. According to Yuan’s report, from 2005 to 2009 these townships were the loci for 80 percent of the crimes solved in Daxing, 80 percent of arrests in Daxing, and the homes of 80 percent of crime victims in the district (Yuan, 2011: 245). The clear implication based on a superficial reading of these numbers is that the migrants living in this area are primarily responsible for the high crime rate. Indeed, the numerical repetition gives the strong impression that 80 percent of the migrants in the area are criminals. However, the figures tell us nothing about whether the perpetrators of these crimes live in Daxing’s urban villages, whether the crime rate is higher than in other parts of Beijing, or whether, given the high numbers of migrants in the area, migrants are any more (or less) prone to committing crimes than local Beijingers. In fact, the figures may only indicate that residents in these townships are disproportionately targeted by the police, or that they are disproportionately the victims of crime (on the manipulation of crime statistics regarding migrant workers, see Zhang, 2001: 208).

Yet almost identical figures were reproduced across a number of different sources. In addition to Yuan’s report, I found them also in the aforementioned article on sealed management in *Beijing Branch Life* (Wang Xiaoxia, 2010), and in an article on a spate of murders in Daxing in the journal *Oriental Outlook 瞭望东方周刊* (Wang Kai, 2010). These murders—in fact, cases of “familicide” 灭门案—were presented in the article as symptomatic of the social depravity inherent to these villages. The three unrelated incidents occurred in quick succession on November 27, December 27, and December 31, 2009, in the townships of Huangcun and Jiugong. Thirteen people died, all of whom were close friends or relatives of the perpetrators, including wives and parents. Local police highlighted the apparent lack of motive in
each case and, citing the murders as indicative of the psychological instability of migrants in the area, used these cases to justify and promote sealed village management (Wang Kai, 2010).

Aside from the criminal gangs and mass murderers, another subset of migrants were deemed particularly troublesome—petitioners. Petitioners travel to Beijing from all over the country to report official grievances. Since 2003, they had begun to arrive in such large numbers that urban villages where they congregated came to be known as “petitioner villages” (Li, Liu, and O’Brien, 2012). Laosanyu was one such place and, according to newspaper reports, at times 70 percent of the migrants living there were petitioners (Jiao, 2010). Beijing at this time was proving increasingly unwelcome to petitioners, however. They were labeled “pestering petitioners” who “cause disturbances” (Yuan, 2011: 245) and were associated with violent activism (see, e.g., an interview with Chen Dabao, chief of the Daxing Public Security Bureau, quoted in Wang Kai, 2010). According to an interview reported in the Hong Kong newspaper South China Morning Post, Kong Qingming, then chief of the village security patrol at Laosanyu, claimed that petitioners are “mentally problematic . . . they seem to be hostile toward society. They sometimes steal stuff and . . . are constantly looking for problems. Their moral standards are too low” (Jiao, 2010).

Practice and Effects

Village Communitization Management

Once it was apparent that sealed management had not been well received by the public, government officials dropped the word 封闭 and rebranded the program 村庄社区化管理 (village communitization management). This served to associate the program with the shequ community governance programs being implemented elsewhere. The adding of hua 化, here translated as “-ization,” to the term shequ implies a process of transformation. Thus, the village is not yet a community on a par with its urban neighborhood counterparts but is on its way to becoming one—joining the ranks of the urban civilized through means of this very program. As a second report in defense of the program by Yuan Zhenlong and his colleague Zuo Xiuyang argued, sealed management was designed to bring “modernized urban management” to the villages, precisely in order to “lessen the urban-rural divide” (Zuo and Yuan, 2012: 150).

According to Zuo and Yuan, the program adhered to the basic principles of “crime prevention through environmental design,” a technique for lowering crime rates by organizing urban space with a view to disincentivizing criminal behavior, first pioneered in the United States in the 1970s. In accordance
with this theory, they argued, the program aimed to lower the village crime rate in four ways: by redesigning the village entrance, by installing surveillance technology, by regulating the village’s appearance, and by setting up a comprehensive work center for providing a variety of security and public management services.

The comprehensive work center was the village headquarters for the so-called “three stations and one office”—the “floating population services and rental management station,” the “security patrol work station,” the “police work station,” and the “dispute arbitration office.” This multifunctional center was responsible for the registration of migrant tenants, the provision of public security, and intelligence and information gathering (Zuo and Yuan, 2012: 148; see also Xu Bin, 2010). It was usually located next to the main gate of the village, so that those entering and exiting could be clearly viewed from it. It served as the base from which trained security teams patrolled the village streets twenty-four hours a day. In the police workstation, police officers watched monitors linked up to the many security cameras in the village. Next door was the dispute arbitration office, where the “security and stability information team” was located, consisting of one team member for every fifty to one hundred households. Team members were responsible for spotting emerging quarrels between neighbors and preventing their escalation. They were also tasked with watching out for signs of criminal activity.

In the rental management station, the residential area of the village was divided into several community management units. Each unit covered about twenty households and had an assigned staff member responsible for keeping a dossier on every household (Wang, 2012). All housing rental operations in the village were numbered, registered, and logged on a computerized database. Each rental tenant was taken to the floating population management station on arrival with their identification documents, where they were registered and audited, and their background checked for any past problematic activity. Having passed the checks, they could be issued with an entry permit showing their details. When they moved out of the village, they were again taken to the management office to check out, enabling at least the partial tracking of migrants’ movements.

The task of regulating the village’s appearance involved professional cleaning teams maintaining tidy streets, producing a civilized vista less conducive to petty criminality (Zuo and Yuan, 2012: 148). To “clean” 清理, however, contained a further meaning—the removal of housing constructions that violated regulations and safety standards. Such buildings were to be reported to the village committee and village party branch. Since many of the buildings were constructed hurriedly and cheaply by private households in order
to bring in migrant tenants, a large number were eligible for demolition (see also Zhang and Zheng, 2019: 4).

Official sources claimed that the “village communitization” program was akin to gated communities in more affluent city suburbs (Dong, 2010). However, Tomba’s aforementioned observation that the stringency of grassroots governance programs increases along with descendancy down the rungs of social strata is relevant here (Tomba, 2014: 29–61). Moreover, foreign journalists covering the issue were quick to point out the difference between the gating of wealthy urban communities to keep people out, and enclosing villages and imposing a night-time curfew to lock people in (Anna, 2014).

**Sealed Management’s State Effects**

Shuhai Zhang and Guo Zheng’s (2019: 6) observation that sealed management was implemented in areas where migrant crime was not a concern implies that it cannot be understood solely as a crime prevention program. In fact, the program was strategically selected on the basis of its structural alignment with broader state projects of capital accumulation, at both the national and municipal levels. At the national level was a state project geared toward transforming the economy to one based on urban middle-class consumers and high-tech industries, led by large megacities integrated into circuits of global capital. At the municipal level, local officials sought to expropriate urban village land and attract a particular class of worker in keeping with plans for Beijing as a political center containing international hubs for high-tech industries. These overlapping state projects necessitated both the maintenance of social stability to facilitate urban village demolitions and required the “upgrading” of Beijing’s labor force. The choice of Daxing district as the epicenter for the sealed management program was no coincidence. Under the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, Beijing Economic and Technology Area in Yizhuang township was merged administratively with Daxing district and earmarked for expansion (Xiong, 2017).

Harvey (2013: 117) has noted how, in the course of socially turbulent urban transformations which seek to concentrate resources in the hands of a few, “political power . . . often seeks to reorganize urban infrastructures and urban life with an eye to the control of restive populations.” In line with this logic, Yuan Zhenlong informed me that sealed management was specifically intended to provide grassroots governance during a socially unstable time of transition, with the expectation that many urban villages would remain in place for the next twenty to thirty years.\(^{10}\) The excerpt below, from his *Blue Book* security governance report on sealed management, is revealing:
As Daxing transforms from an agricultural area into Beijing’s southern modern manufacturing new town, particularly with the integration of Daxing and E-town Economic Technological Development Zone’s administration and resources, and with the capital’s second airport basically set to be in Daxing, Daxing is looking forward to an important period of rapid development. According to estimates, over the next three years Daxing will have received over 15 billion yuan of direct investment, which will require the requisition of the land, and the demolition and relocation, of 78 administrative villages, and Daxing’s further expansion into the urban-rural fringe zone. This will lead to a change in the scale and dynamic of the interest structure rarely seen in history. For this reason, the urban-rural fringe zone today is seeing many social problems and disputes, and social conflicts are frequent. (Yuan, 2011: 243)

Here, the “many social problems” and “social conflicts” are accounted for not by the opportunist criminals taking advantage of the anarchic urban village environment, but by the historically profound “change . . . in the interest structure.” From the information provided here, it is clear that this euphemistic expression signifies processes of class restructuring through the requisition of valuable resources and their reallocation. This involves the municipal government’s expropriation of collectively owned land, its transfer to developers, and subsequent sale or leasing to domestic or international corporate interests, all at increasingly high profit margins from which the original owners are excluded. As the excerpt indicates, these processes have already been causing widespread dissatisfaction and (as in the aforementioned case of Beiwu) are likely to provoke social unrest. In this context, the reasons for the municipal government’s desire for intensive grassroots monitoring and surveillance of local urban villagers become obvious. Sealed management was a surveillance measure to ensure villagers’ acquiescence as the land of neighboring urban villages was expropriated around them.¹¹

The transformation of Beijing’s labor force through sealed management worked in three ways. First, under sealed management, the demolition of housing in violation of planning regulations would reduce migrant numbers. In their aforementioned report, Yuan and Zuo concurred that this was indeed the case. However, they argued, this was merely an “effect”效果 of the program, not its goal (Zuo and Yuan, 2012: 149). From a CPE perspective, however, it is the structural effects that determine a program’s selectivity and implementation at a particular historical juncture. The destruction of cheap migrant housing required as part of sealed management should not be understood in isolation from the broader state projects premised on the same goals.

Second, given sealed management’s embedding within a wider “web of interlocution,” its rationale rested on the association of migrants in the area,
particularly the five townships that were the focal point of the program, with social disorder. This provided the basis for subjecting migrant tenants to practices of control and expulsion. The program was designed to actively deter—or refuse entry to—those with criminal histories, those without a “proper job” (Beijing News, 2010), or those considered politically troublesome, such as petitioners. For example, according to the aforementioned Kong Qingming, “we are basically blocking them [the petitioners] out. It’s not discrimination. We just don’t welcome them . . . we forbid them to enter our village” (Jiao, 2010).12

Third, as Tomba (2014: 39) observes, the very act of neighborhood enclosure demarcates urban spaces as “civilized,” raising their perceived suzhi and so attracting a higher class of tenant. As was widely reported in the media, following the enclosure of the villages, the cost of living within them increased substantially (Wang and Hu, 2013).13 The rise in rental prices was usually depicted in state media accounts as a beneficial side effect of the increased sense of security and cleaner living environment. However, raising the area’s cost of living was a deliberate goal already stated in the urban plans for Daxing for 2005 to 2020 (see also Xiong, 2017: 13), designed both to price out the “low-end population” and to attract a “higher” class of tenant able to afford the rents and therefore, by default, likely to have a higher-suzhi form of employment.

Conclusion

Sealed management constituted a strategy of population control as Chinese state actors, at both the national and local levels, sought to reorder the population in the interests of upgrading the national economy to one based on a population of urban middle-class consumers. At the forefront of this vast sociospatial project were selected megacities increasingly connected to circuits of international capital. As Beijing officials enacted this project at the municipal level, they sought to reorganize both space and people in the interests of capital accumulation. This involved a series of boundary-making strategies that determined eligibility for life in the city.

Sealed management involved the coordinated deployment of cultural and political discourses, administrative measures, and spatial design geared toward, first, the monitoring and surveillance of local village residents during a turbulent period of land expropriation. The spatial segregation and tightened security constituted an attempt to prevent villagers’ resistance to enforced and often extralegal demolitions as the class structure of Beijing was reordered. Second, rather than preventing the access of migrants to Beijing, sealed management constituted a vast social filtering system,
expelling or deterring those deemed “low-end,” while allowing the arrival of others. In that sealed management sought to exclude those deemed beneath the eligibility threshold, it can be understood as a precursor to the 2017 evictions of migrant workers in Beijing, which adhered to the same logic.

Sealed management was not, as is commonly understood, a measure to reinforce the urban-rural divide by discriminating against those from the countryside. This is to neglect how, in state discourse, the “floating population” is divided into those considered “high-end” and “low-end,” categories that do not neatly align with urban or rural distinctions. By taking for granted the continuation of the urban-rural dichotomy, by overly focusing on the institution of the hukou, or by neglecting to question the amorphous category of the “floating population,” scholars may see only a partial picture of the far-reaching social transformations that are pivotal to the central state’s plans for transforming China’s national economy. These plans hinge on reconfiguring the urban-rural divide. Control over urban village populations is one important site where this is taking place.

Recent research suggests that the vast majority of migrants in Beijing are not eligible to apply for a local hukou, and that successful applicants tend to be those fulfilling the city’s political functions (Liu and Shi, 2020). Nevertheless, the alternative strategies of governance by which those considered “high-end” are incorporated into the city equally warrant scholars’ attention. As my visits to Laosanyu can attest to, by 2013 urban villages were already becoming the destinations of convenience for many migrant white-collar workers, including nonlocal rural hukou-holders—a more appropriate workforce for the high-end service industries the Beijing government was seeking to attract into Daxing. A systematic study of how the population of Beijing’s urban villages is transforming is beyond the scope of this article but constitutes an important avenue of future research.

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Notes

1. According to Lin and Zhang (2015: 661), “as the de facto owners of urban land, municipal governments are able to engage in land commodification as a means of not only income generation but also power consolidation.”
2. The term used in Chinese state discourse is “shijie chengshi” 世界城市, which translates as “world city.”
3. Beijing’s core functions as a city, as expressed in state planning documents, have remained more or less consistent over time: the national political center, the capital city of a socialist country, the national science and technology center, and the economic center of northern China (see Liu and Shi, 2020: 858–59).
4. As Zhang (2001: 201–204) has pointed out, the term has negative connotations, implying transience and lack of belonging.
5. As Pils (2020: 270) points out, the term “low-end population” came to public prominence with the 2017 eviction campaign in Beijing.
6. Ding Zhiming, representative of the Haidian People’s Government, interview with the author, February 27, 2014.
7. In 2014, Xu Zhiyong was sentenced to four years in prison for political activism. He was released in 2017 but has since been arrested again.
8. The three-part trope zang, luan, cha has long been deployed by state officials of urban villages, in Beijing and elsewhere, as part of a development discourse that justifies their removal (see Zhang, 2001: 208; Siu, 2007: 335).
9. According to Beijing News (2010), the official name change reportedly took place in April 2010, but the term “sealed management” continued to be used by members of the public.
10. Interview with the author, Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, February 26, 2014.
11. When I asked a Laosanyu villager if she was concerned about demolition, she said that she understood that surrounding villages were being demolished but had “no news” that demolition in Laosanyu was imminent. Informal conversation with the author, June 2015.
12. According to one villager I spoke to informally, migrants from Xinjiang were also refused admission. Laosanyu, June 2015.
13. While renting a room in Laosanyu from 2013 to 2016 (as a research base, I did not live there), I paid 500 yuan per month. Prior to sealed management, the price per room had been as low as 200 yuan.

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