



Un-real Estate

The Social Life of Temporary Wealth in China

Ulfstjerne, Michael Alexander

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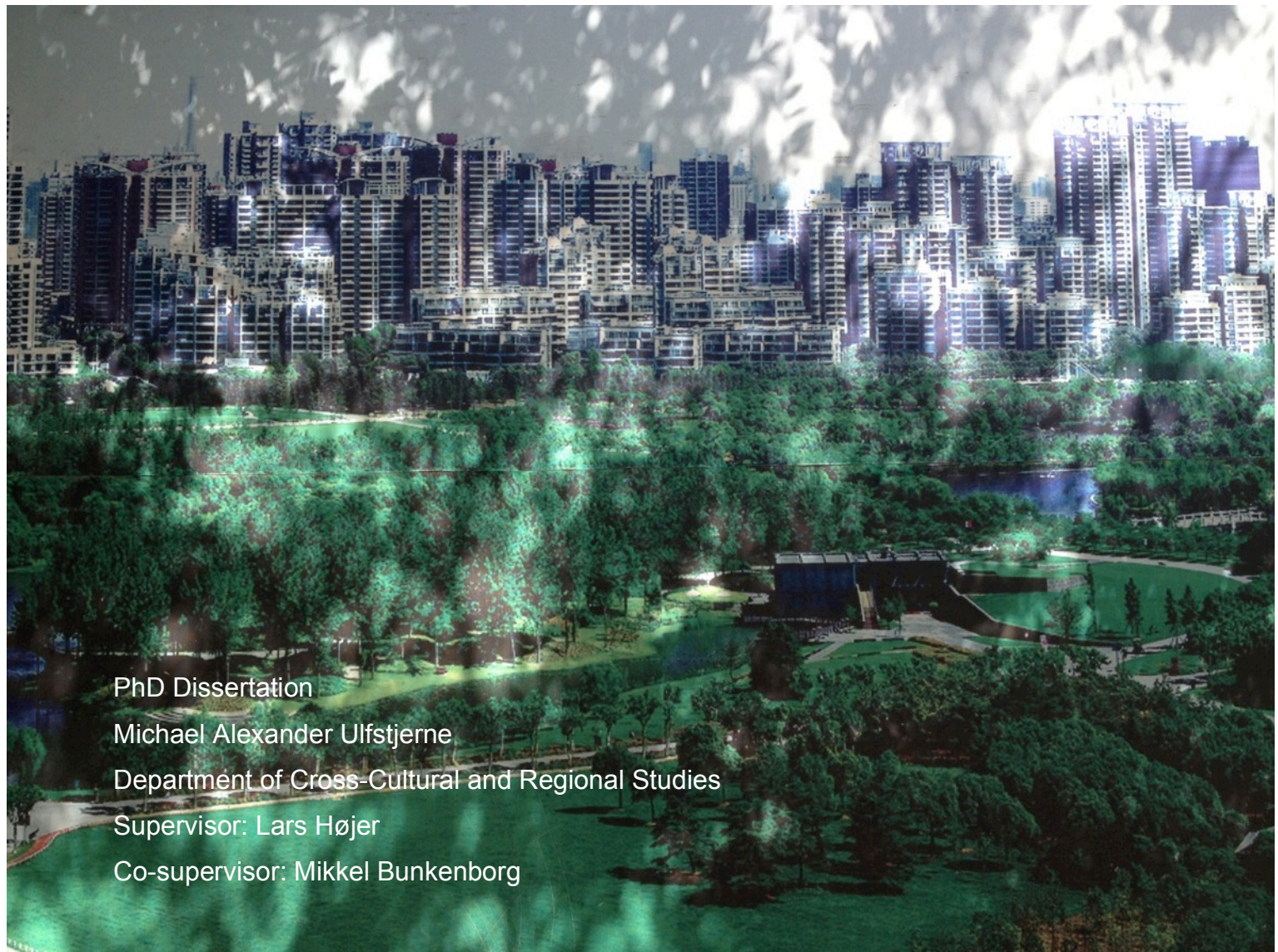
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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



UN-REAL ESTATE

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF TEMPORARY WEALTH IN CHINA



PhD Dissertation

Michael Alexander Ulfstjerne

Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies

Supervisor: Lars Højer

Co-supervisor: Mikkel Bunkenborg

Dedicated
Lavinen & Spiren
In recognition of the debts that I have accumulated
amid lengthy absences

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Summary

This dissertation builds on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, but also on data collection and interviews that stretch back to 2008. Exploring and tracing the momentum of a local economic boom into its subsequent bust, the dissertation examines the diverse ways in which citizens from various strands of society were affected by, and actively took part in, the boom as well as the bust. To examine this trajectory, the chapters of this dissertation analyse schemes across scale, moving from the overarching schemes of states to the private sphere of interpersonal relations of exchange.

The first part of the thesis shows how the intensity and scope of Ordos' boom and bust was facilitated by a particular configuration of components, including windfall profits from a resource bonanza, a local state eager to leapfrog into urban modernity, generous relocation compensation, and lax enforcement of regulations that could inhibit private, informal investments in the property development sector. Yet beyond these configurations that brought about an almost perfect storm considering the pace and scope of Ordos' growth and decline, the same chapters explore a broader, popular sense of urgency beyond that of elite pro-growth coalitions. The local property development sector had been boosted through informal credit arrangements, locally referred to as 'folk lending' (*minjian jiedai*) or 'high interest loans' (*gaolidai*). The second half of the dissertation unfolds the intimate relationship between the expansions of the city and the everyday financial disposition of the local populace. These chapters take a closer look at the social and material effects of the boom as funds and aspirations evaporated in the aftermath of what proved to be temporary and, in hindsight, precarious wealth. Beyond the simple scramble for power and wealth, mass participation in the schemes attested to a wider re-shuffling of values and the recalibration of local systems of wealth distribution, including the meanings of labour and money.

Boom, bubble, and bust, this dissertation argues, are not about failure as such. It concerns the momentum that forms and drives schemes into a collapse. Rather than a straightforward case of state failure or dispossession by effect of large-scale development schemes in China's hinterlands, the dissertation shows how a 'community of the bubble' took form. A community that was fraught by a widespread urgency to catch up, and one that eventually helped consolidate or conceal the more dim sides of Ordos' growth. The local resistance to accept reports that held Ordos to be a 'modern ghost town' due to its excess construction as well as rumours about the impending burst of financial bubbles was a defining

feature of this community. This resistance cut across class, ethnicity, and employment sector, and accentuated an intimate space of common, yet unspeakable knowledge. In between the local state's attempts to leap forward and the population's reaction to this leap, the analytical aim of the dissertation is therefore to shed light on the more subtle forms of complicity and dependency upon which the broader development was founded. Instead of being a retrospective optic that investigates why schemes fail or go awry, the dissertation examines Ordos' urban *leap* as it unfolded, while shedding light on what such failures produce.

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In the course of this dissertation, I have accumulated a great deal of debts of gratitude, and only few will be acknowledged here. First of all, not much would have come out of this if it wasn't for the generosity and companionship of the people that I encountered in the field. Some appear in this book under pseudonyms, yet still deserve great merit. I particularly want to thank Mr Li for putting up with my many tiring questions, for his assistance in all my inquiries, our heated discussions, and to his family who were also indispensable for the becoming of this dissertation. I'm also deeply indebted to the civil servants of Ordos for their friendship and generosity, allowing me insights into private as well as public matters, and all that in between.

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Last but not least, those who have been by home front supporters throughout the entire process of fieldwork and writing: my *carnalita*, Frida Stepputat, whose support and optimism simply makes times brighter; the great support of my dear parents, including those of my better half. Without their support this would not have been possible. To my son, Leo: you have helped keep my mind and heart in place. Even so kind as to caress my hands in the belief they had been worn from long days of hard labour. To my partner and love, Maya Mynster Christensen. Thank you for your patience throughout absences of all sorts. For your sharp observations and loving support. And the effort you put into the final process. Although they are merely words, these are for you.

Notes on the Text

On transliteration: Throughout the text, Chinese words are written italicized using the pinyin form. The most central Chinese terms are listed in a glossary in the end. Only in the few cases where characters' multiple meanings might help readers make out other meanings than that of my translation do I include Chinese characters. Names of people and places generally appear in pinyin, apart from a few cases where different kinds of romanization are common. For instance I refer to Ordos and not *Eerduosi*, and the Chingghis Khan instead of *Chengjisihan*. Translations from Chinese to English are my own, although the few passages, proverbs, and bits of interviews that was beyond my language proficiency, have benefitted immensely from the kind help and assistance of Mikkel Bunkenborg and Lan Wang Valeur.

On currency: throughout the dissertation Chinese Renminbi is referred to as RMB or Yuan. The exchange rate in 2011 was approximately 1 US dollar to 6,45 RMB, or 1 Euro to 9 RMB.

On names: In the dissertation's second chapter high-end developers, international architects and renowned Chinese artists are identified by their real names due to the wider publicity of the case. Yet as a general rule, apart from those few who expressed that they rather appear by their own name, I refer to interlocutors using pseudonyms.



Ordos Municipality, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China

Prologue

The Sweet Taste of Dividends!

I first encountered Mr Liu in March 2011 in a small, soon-to-be evicted rural site called *Honghai* (Red Sea) in Inner Mongolia's urban and economic growth hub, Ordos Municipality. *Honghai* was located outside the rapidly expanding urban fringe in an area that had been almost completely rebuilt and modernised in the course of a few years. Residential high-rises had been approaching on the village's horizon for some time and soon the expanding line of tower blocks would also absorb Mr Liu's small village site. When we met Mr Liu was 26 and lived together with his uncle and three other family members in a 40m² rural type brick house. Although the local administration offered generous compensation packages to speed up the clearing of land for the construction of new modernised districts, Mr Liu was sceptical about the government's decision to evict and relocate. Yet, left with no option, a few months later several of the families that resided in *Honghai* received compensation packages that included a new modern apartment along with a direct cash payment. Mr Liu recalled how suddenly, on the table in front of him, he saw more money than he had ever encountered. Such money had been unthinkable only few years back and one could slave for a lifetime without ever seeing that much cash. They had simply become 'millionaires overnight' (*yi ye baofu*). Yet in Ordos, Mr Liu remarked, millionaires counted for nothing and could even be considered poor. On our first encounter following relocation Mr Liu came to pick me up in his brother-in-law's new Toyota Land Cruiser. After treating me to a sumptuous meal, Mr Liu insisted that we 'could drive anywhere we desired'. He and his sister's family had been relocated in a 105m² apartment in a new, though largely unfinished, residential migrant complex (*yimin qu*) located close to his old rural home. Most of the villagers around their old brick house were relocated into the same complex. Despite accounts from a few of the elderly people of their difficulties in adapting to the change, Mr Liu had already started to enjoy what he termed his 'new life' (*xin shenghuo*). Upon receiving compensation several family members decided to pool together a large part of the funds to 'invest' (*touzi*) in private high interest loans, rather than depositing them in the bank. Mr Liu summarised their rationale:

We discussed what to do with the money. None of us knew anything about bonds or stocks. Neither did we understand how to make a business from property

development or other kinds of industry. Also, interests in the bank are too low. So we finally decided to invest the funds in the business of a friend we had a strong relation to [guanxi hen tie de pengyou] (literally, iron relation friend).

Along with several other of the resettled villagers, Mr Liu and his family made loans to a successful real estate developer who also originated from the same peri-urban area, but was now engaged in the urban construction industry in Ordos. Revisiting his initial scepticism before relocation, Mr Liu explained how his sentiments had changed. Now life was certainly more convenient. He added how he was simply enjoying ‘the sweet taste of dividends’ (*lixī de tiántou*). Many days, he would skip his job labouring at a car repair shop, a job that paid less than 3500 RMB a month (580 USD). Work was simply not worth the effort, and he found it hard to focus on it. He would rather have fun and drive around with friends. Aware that he was approaching a proper age for settling down, Mr Liu was planning to marry a girl from his hometown. But for that he would need more money or at least property of his own. He had therefore thought out an investment plan to set up his own coal truck repair service with a couple of friends. He gathered that this investment would enable him to save up money to buy a nice apartment in the city’s new flagship development, the Kangbashi New Area; a location that he, as many others, believed to have much better surroundings than the old, chaotic and more crowded urban areas. In Mr Liu and his neighbours’ ‘new life’ dependency on ordinary salaries was suddenly made redundant due to the dividends from private lending. For many of the resettled peasants who would otherwise be forced to undertake undignified labour such as keeping the streets clean, washing toilets, picking up garbage etc. these dividends provided a means to escape such demeaning tasks that migrants would usually undertake in cities, while simultaneously making far more than what farming or other forms of low paid wage labour would earlier have brought in.

In March 2013 I met Mr Liu at the site of his investment, which he had managed to pull off; a ‘mobile truck repair facility’ that rendered services to the heavy traffic of coal trucks that, until recently, had only intensified ever since extractive industries took off in the late 1990s. The facility was located at a dirt layby off one of the city’s entry roads. Mr Liu and two co-investors would usually hang out inside an old second-hand caravan; a place they could stay warm, play cards, eat and pass the time in between clients. Yet, as they all lamented, time in between clients seemed to be expanding into endless waits. Ever since the

coal market changed the previous year their business had only yielded small sporadic profits. Besides the decline in extractive industries, the local real estate sector collapsed in late 2011. In the blink of an eye the value of Mr Liu and his family's new property was dramatically reduced. With the collapse, the majority of local property developers faced bankruptcy and some fled. Consequently, the prospects of getting back the compensation funds that Mr Liu and his family had invested as an interest-bearing loan into their 'iron friend's' endeavour were next to none; even the monthly dividends that had made life sweet vaporised along with Mr Liu's impending marriage, now indefinitely postponed.

This dissertation is an ethnographic account of Ordos' spectacular growth, and the equally spectacular decline that residents such as Mr Liu and his family faced as the twin bubbles of local property markets and informal finance collapsed. Although eviction and relocation amid China's turbulent processes of urbanisation are often conceived along the lines of dispossession, Ordos presents us with a less straightforward picture. Rather, the dissertation unveils how 'the sweet taste of dividends' rendered everyday financial dispositions complicit with state schemes of modernist urbanisation. Tracing the making and unmaking of schemes that tied together household economies and private entrepreneurship with the state's wider ambitions, this dissertation aims to contribute to studies that grapple with the enchantments and disenchantments of capitalist and urban transitions in China, and more broadly.

INTRODUCTION

Boom, Bubble, and Bust:

Ordos is located in the southwest of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. The whole municipal region has an administrative area of 86,752 km² and a total population of 1,548,000 (2009 census). Since 1954, the region had been administered as the prefecture-level Yeke-juu League, an administrative unit that until recently made up the majority of Inner Mongolia. Although the league had begun to profit from the extraction of its abundant natural resources during the 1990s, the broader population were still racked by poverty and the urban areas characterised by decrepit infrastructure. In 2001 the region changed administrative status from league to municipality, an administrative designation more aligned with China's central administrative division. From that time on a set of radical changes took place. Since 2002, extraction of coal in Ordos increased by 40 times in parallel with a rise in GDP from 17 billion (RMB) in 2001 to 365 billion (RMB) in 2013, i.e. a 21-fold increase in twelve years (Ma 2013). After successive reforms, by 2011 Ordos had become China's largest supplier of coal. Much of the revenue gained from resource extraction was re-invested into new urban areas and infrastructural developments. Yet the speed and scope of urban transition in Ordos was closely connected to the particular way the local administration aimed to pre-empt the widespread contention that is well documented in China's intense economies of forced rural and urban evictions and resettlements (cf. Hsing 2010: 108; Li Z. 2010: 142; 2006: 475; Wu 2007: 11, 12). Under the guise of this policy that was later called 'the Ordos Model' (*eerduosi moshi*), the local government would push two sectors in particular: extractive industries and property development. As illustrated by Mr Liu and his family, high-level compensation packages and, in some cases, government subsidised housing were to make relocation swift and facilitate the clearing of land needed to expand mining activities and urban expansion. The massive scale of rural to urban relocations as well as inner city redevelopment was to create demand for new housing, and serve as a catalyst for property sector development and its related industries (Zhang Z. 2007). Although this policy was never publically addressed, it was central to the pace and scope of urban transformation.

At the time of my arrival in 2011 Ordos was still in the midst of a building euphoria

and expanding rapidly on its fringes, while simultaneously modernising existing urban areas. Streets were clothed in either lavish real estate advertisements or municipal government slogans propagating the collective responsibility to ‘build a civilised city – be a civilised citizenry’. Although citizens would largely ignore official civilising rhetoric, real estate had become the talk of town and during summer 2011 most locals I encountered, and even many in-migrating construction workers, taxi drivers, and cheap labour force workers serving food or cleaning the streets would be knowledgeable about m² prices in various developments. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, years of growth saw a steep increase of registered property developers: while no more than seven developers were listed in 2001 this number had risen to more than 400 by 2011 (Qin 2011). In the years from around 2005 local property prices rocketed with a three to four-fold increase within just a few years. The on going construction of countless new luxury apartments, five-star hotels (and even talk of building seven-star hotels), central business districts, and glossy, glass-clad office buildings all appeared to generate a kind of optimistic attachment in both the long- and short-term residents of Ordos: ‘of course more people will come, it just takes time’; ‘Ordos is not a bubble, but a process’, were common rationales. ‘Ordos will surpass Beijing’ a local librarian working inside one of Ordos’ new landmark buildings even prophesised. The city’s horizontal and vertical expansion into new, modern spaces whipped up its citizens to commonly declare that their city had finally shed its marginal and underdeveloped status. From being a poor outpost characterised by outbound migration and infertile soil for subsistence farmers, Ordos became one of the fastest developing regions in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR). Displaying a yearly revenue growth of 32.5% and sustaining an annual average GDP growth of 18.5% between 2006 and 2011, Ordos seemed unaffected by the global financial crisis.¹ And due to its abundant energy resources and real estate-driven economy, Ordos gained a reputation as ‘China’s Dubai’ in popular as well as official discourse. In 2008, the Inner Mongolian Region and Reform Commission appointed Ordos as an outstanding example of successful economic development and modernisation, and despite its particular economic base, Ordos was not framed as a unique phenomenon. Instead, the ‘Ordos model’

¹ <http://www.gohighfund.com/articles/22> (last accessed on June 4, 2014).
<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90778/8323346.html> (last accessed June 2, 2014).

was framed as a pattern for other developing regions to emulate.²

Yet, already in the autumn of 2011 the first signs of the increasingly fragile economic and social conditions would surface. Despite significant signs of inflated real estate prices (Powel 2010), a pandemic of land speculation, and the increasingly pyramid scheme-like nature of local finance, few citizens in Ordos openly anticipated the decline. The optimism I had encountered throughout the first part of my fieldwork was shattered when the local property market and lines of credit supply crashed towards the end of 2011. According to the estimates of employees working with land and resources, the crash paralysed around 80% of on-going construction projects, halted the urban renovation process, and triggered the outbound migration of labourers who had arrived just recently to seize the opportunities offered by a boom-town economy.³ The millions of square metres of idle construction that were laid bare as premature ruins would lend more weight to the words of those analysts who held Ordos to be a paradigmatic example of China's fragile real estate situation (Chovanek 2010). When asked about real estate prices in 2012, local developers estimated that prices had plunged around 70% within a year, while others underlined the problem of evaluating property prices in a market with no buyers. In the following year, the coal industries suffered from a decline in demand and prices dropped by almost half within a single year span.⁴

In light of this decline, from 2012 onwards I experienced how the vacant, modernised spaces from which wealth and modernity had been so easily inferred, would reveal a more shadowy side. It turned out that the local property development sector had been boosted through informal credit arrangements, locally referred to as 'folk lending' (*minjian jiedai*) or 'high interest loans' (*gaolidai*). Although difficult to measure, one report (Li X. 2011) assessed that almost 80% of the funds invested into the local real estate sector had been mobilised through *gaolidai* in a myriad of different forms that all had in common the fact that formal institutions did not regulate them. This meant that there had been little consideration of collateral, which allowed capital to flow much faster than in the formal banking system. In terms of participation, *gaolidai* proved to be a far from peripheral phenomenon. A general assessment was that between 80% and 90% of the local adult population would somehow take

² Inner Mongolia Economic Information Network Date: 2008-06-18
<http://61.138.111.231:8008/Content1.aspx?id=29129&columnid=70> (last accessed on May 28, 2013)

³ China Daily 12 July 2013. <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20120430000003&cid=1503> (last accessed on June 2, 2014).

⁴ <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90778/8323346.html> (last accessed on June 2, 2014).

part in lending and borrowing. The scope of the phenomenon gave rise to expressions such as ‘mass lending’ (*quanmin fangdai*) and even prompted a relabelling of Ordos as the ‘city of loans’ (*jiedai zhicheng*). In the wake of what locals and the media coined as a crisis, bankruptcy and insolvency cases quickly spread and many debtors were unable – or simply unwilling – to pay their debts. A majority of the population lost family savings, including the relocation fees that many received during the years of urbanisation and large-scale resettlements. Debt-related lawsuits became endemic and quickly surpassed the local legal capacity that, in turn, provided strong incentives for the use of alternative ways to bring in outstanding loans; often by daily phone calls, threats, or outright violence – making private debt-collecting into a profitable endeavour. Despite many improvements and its leaps, the ‘model city’, it turned out, had become a model for crisis as well. Due to the escalating mountain of unpaid debts and broken promises, some of my interlocutors referred to the economic downturn as a ‘crisis of trust’ (*xinren de weiji*), as if to stress the intimate nature of the financial schemes. As the decline gained force, not only were the basic expenditures of the household economy radically re-oriented, but much more seemed to be inverted: trust, social boundaries, perceptions of state, and personal aspirations.

The Argument

As illustrated by the young hopeful Mr Liu’s brief encounter with wealth, an emerging sense of opportunity materialised for a broad cross section of citizens; Liu’s progression from relocation and compensation on to his active partaking in the *gaolidai*, only to become a frustrated creditor was a largely common trajectory. The new horizons of prosperity and urbanity that materialised, albeit briefly, compelled me to examine the mood that emerged from rapid urbanisation and economic boom; investigate the values that undergirded the transformation; and, by tracing interlocutors from boom to bust, address the material and social effects that followed as the mass of urban property devalued and money evaporated into failed investment schemes.

Within the last decade the tendency towards an oversupply of urban space produced at local level by governments across China has been widely documented (Hsing 2010: 41, 42; Wu 2007: 9); an oversupply more popularly coined ‘China’s Ghost Cities’. In April 2010 Time Magazine ran a photo journalistic report about municipal level government’s proclivity

to expand cities into new, modern, yet largely vacant districts. In this report Ordos was selected as the most representative (Time Magazine 5 April 2010).⁵ The nationwide booming property development sector combined with economic incentives to sub-national level governments has partly created the foundation for this phenomenon. Yet, in an attempt to not simply render Ordos' boom–bust trajectory as an unintended consequence of fiscal decentralisation policies or render Ordos' ruinous leap forward as yet another instantiation of state planning failures, the dissertation looks closer at the nature of the excess itself, the imaginaries on which it thrived and the predominant practices that flourished in these promissory environments. In doing so, it shows how the intensity and scope of Ordos' case of housing glut and ensuing real estate collapse was facilitated by a particular configuration of components including windfall profits from a booming resource economy, the urgency of a local state eager to leapfrog into an urban modernity, and lax enforcement of regulations that could inhibit private investments in the property development sector. Yet beyond these configurations that brought about an almost perfect storm when considering the pace and scope of Ordos' growth and decline, the chapters of this dissertation carve into a broader sense of urgency beyond that of elite pro-growth coalitions.

Boom – bubble – bust, I argue, is not about failure as such, but about a formation of a mood, and the momentum that drives schemes into a collapse. The dissertation reveals the muddled nature of concrete development by untangling the intimate relation between the local property market and the precarious forms of financing that fuelled it. A 'community of the bubble' fraught by a widespread urgency to catch up, the dissertation shows, helped consolidate a great many transgressions and regulative inconsistencies, simply as incidental to the pre-crisis economy.

A central contribution of this dissertation is therefore to engage with broader social and economic vulnerabilities in contemporary forms of Chinese urbanism through an examination of popular imaginaries and aspirations that occurred widely beyond the disposition of any particular class or social category. Particularly the link between the property development sector and the plethora of informal financial practices – the *gaolidai* – allows insights into how Ordos' urban leap was mediated by these practices and permeated by

⁵ Time Magazine 5 April 2010. <http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1975397,00.html> (last accessed on August 9, 2014).

a strong belief in the ever-increasing value of urban property. Ethnographic attention to changes in the local distribution of creditability and debt among Ordos' citizens has wider relevance within the field of studying informal finance in China, and given the scale and ominous nature of the crisis that followed, within research that grapples with capitalist transformations more broadly. There have been a number of studies that have scrutinised urbanisation in Chinese inland and minority regions (Jankowiak 1993; Bulag 2002; 2004; Gaubatz 1996), and another set of studies that have dealt with the nature of Chinese informal finance (Tsai 2002; Li and Hsu 2009; Jiang S. 2001). Yet there is a lack of studies that engage with what proved to be an intimate relation between the expansions of the city and the everyday financial transactions and debts between neighbours, family members, friends, and colleagues; something that was inescapable in Ordos. Ethnographic accounts of these transactions throughout boom and bust marked a progression from the intimacies of a 'bubble community' to a widespread sense of social fragmentation, sometimes expressed as a collective 'loss of face'.

Being located in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, an examination of the social and material consequences of such urban leaps contributes to an existing body of work on regulation and governance in China's frontier regions (Bulag 2002; 2004; Sneath 2000; Bequelin 2004; Yeh 2005; Brox and Beller-Hann 2014). Although local government officials' proclivity for widespread corruption and their transgression of central state-stipulated regulations was commonly acknowledged among the population, not many brows were raised during Ordos' tremendous growth. But in the aftermath of the crisis questions of regulation and social order became a pressing issue among interlocutors and almost everyone else I encountered in Ordos during fieldwork. Moreover, despite the local government's strong rhetorical emphasis on 'urban planning' and 'scientific development', a consistent lack of regulative authority played an equally great part in the production of what proved to be temporary and, in hindsight, even precarious wealth. This way, the dissertation engages with emerging forms of urbanism that capitalise on regulatory inconsistencies, essentially producing urban environments from what is *not* planned. In some cases, even conjuring up value from urban environments that weren't built, yet that nevertheless yielded effects, even in their absence.

This brings me to the title's emphasis on 'un-real' estate. Real estate is a legal term referring to a certain domain of typically immovable property, in most cases meaning land

and what is developed on it. Whereas *real* refers to something tangible (thing, matter), *estate* denotes ownership within a certain regime of value. With the emphasis on real estate rather than, for example, high-modernist urban planning or state development schemes, I put a greater emphasis on the marketised aspects of schemes, and the involvement of non-state agents. And, by adding the *un* to the real estate I wish to draw attention to the speculative economies of not finishing construction; economies that play out between the imaginary and the real, but also to their financial fragility, open-endedness, and the challenges these pose for planning. In their work with marketing strategies for urban residential areas, Morrison and Skjulstad coined the term ‘unreal estate’. These authors’ use of the term concerns the phenomenon of digital projections of commercial property on the Internet; these projections are technologies that give spectators an impression of actually being in the not-yet built spaces (Morrison and Skjulstad 2010). For the purpose of this dissertation I broaden the concept to emphasise the more intangible, speculative, and imaginative effects of value that undergird much contemporary urbanism in China, and beyond. Moreover, examining un-real estates *in the making* serves to capture the discrepancy between local state rhetoric and social reality through a lens that relies less on the retrospective gaze that is canonised in the literature on state planning, often revolving around issues of ‘failure’. Complementing critical accounts of failed state attempts to leap forward and populations’ reactions to these leaps, a central aim of this dissertation is to shed light on the more subtle forms of complicity and dependency upon which the broader development is founded. Instead of a retrospective lens that investigates why schemes fail or go awry, I examine Ordos’ urban leap as it unfolded, in other words shedding light on what failures produce (cf. Ferguson 1990). Looking into the effects of investment schemes that cut across public and private, even of those that ultimately fail to materialise, I argue, opens for a broader understanding of schemes, scheming, and complicity.

Background – The Making of a Perfect Storm

To understand the particular set of transformations that set the background for this dissertation three main premises need brief mention: changes in national energy resource policy, the proliferation of municipalities in Inner Mongolia, and the broader incentives for redevelopment and urban expansion for sub-national level governments.

Resource Economy:

The city rests at the top of the Ordos Plateau at 1200 metres above sea level, an area situated between the lower reaches of the Yellow River to its north and the Great Wall of China towards its south. The urban region is located on the plateau and has a continental climate with four clearly distinct seasons and over 40 days a year of strong winds. Dry grasslands and desertlike areas largely constitute its western parts, and on its eastern side are loess landscapes. The Kubuqi and Maowusu deserts make up 48% of the total district. Some areas, however, do have extensive agriculture whereas the inhospitable conditions of others allow little to grow. Water resources are scarce which has been identified as one of the most serious challenges for urban development in Ordos (Erdos Urban Development Strategy 2005: 17). Apart from the scarcity of water reserves, the Ordos Plateau contains one sixth of the coal reserves in China and in 2002 China's largest unexploited natural gas reservoir was discovered (Ibid: 25). Initially, a streak of reforms in China's energy resource policies laid the foundation for Ordos' tremendous economic growth. Since the 1990s the main share of China's coal production moved westward into areas of Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia; all places that had extensive reserves of coal and where geological conditions made these reserves accessible for extraction. Throughout the 1990s Ordos saw a steep increase in the number of small collieries, which in 1998 added up to 1,900, all distributed around the Ordos Plateau. From 1998, however, efforts were made to reduce the number of smaller companies and re-organise coal production. Locally, a succession of reform campaigns were initiated, following three five-year plans of nationally-stipulated reforms in the coal sector: the first from 2001–2005, the second from 2006–2010, and the third period was launched in 2011.⁶ These were primarily aimed at consolidating mining activities within fewer large mining conglomerates by issuing attractive policies for merging into larger conglomerates e.g. by prolonging land use rights to mining as well as doubling limits for output production. Moreover, many smaller firms were forced to close after failing to meet the new requirements for efficiency, mechanisation, and levels of taxation (Woodworth 2013: 24–29). These changes in China's domestic energy policy instigated large-scale transformation of the cities in the affected regions and, given its primacy in terms of quantity and accessibility, the Ordos region oversaw some of the most exhaustive of these. In Ordos, municipal revenue generated

⁶ For a more substantive overview of the restructuring and reforms in Ordos' coal sector in the years throughout the three Five-year Plans for Coal Industry see Woodworth (2013: 25–31).

from taxes and licences in the coal industry rose from 9.7% of Municipal GDP in 2002 to 30.6% by 2010 (OBS 2011; see also Zhang Z. 2007: 30).⁷ Ordos' growth pattern is therefore intrinsically intertwined with changes in the national resource policy, and fluctuations in demand, particularly for coal. Just as the resource boom had proved prodigious for growth, fluctuations in the market and declining prices proved equally shattering for the local economy and businesses. By 2013 a decline in demand halted production, and, as Mr Liu's small venture to service the traffic of coal trucks in Ordos attested, it thus also had devastating effects on small businesses connected to the coal industry.

Municipalisation

Besides the immense changes brought about by the geographical restructuring of the energy sector, another central aspect of Ordos' urban transformation was a change of administrative jurisdictions. Since the 1990s, several leagues have been transformed to prefecture-level cities, a process that is now taking place throughout most of the region and is referred to as 'league transformed to municipality' (*meng gai shi*). The division of the Mongolian territories into leagues (prefectures), banners (counties) and arrows (townships) was carried out at the beginning of the Qing period (1636-1912) when these were centrally administered by Li-Fan-Yuan (Court of Colonial Affairs). The People's Republic maintained these divisions, although there have been shifts in jurisdictional territories and administrative designations. Before 2001, the Yeke-juu League's seven banners enclosed the banner-level city of Dongsheng. From 2001 the league was redesignated as a municipality, and Dongsheng as the municipality's only district. Despite covering an immense territory (87,000 km²) of mostly scarcely populated rural land the nominal change to Ordos Municipality recalibrated the entire region as distinctly urban. In his work on municipalities as emerging governing entities in the IMAR, anthropologist Uradyn E. Bulag observes how the nominal celebration of the territory's ethnic legacy with its exotic ring obscured what was essentially a move to reconfigure the ethnic-administrative division of league into a municipality, a designation

⁷ Due to the geographical distribution of accessible reserves, wealth was not distributed equally across the region. In effect, this generated a large economic gap in between areas with intensive resource extraction and those that lack access. The imbalance in revenue and income was most visible between Dongsheng district and the three banners in the east that accounted for about 80% of DGP and government fiscal revenue – and the four banners in the west that were relatively underdeveloped (Erdos Urban Development Strategy 2005: 30, 35). Yet despite the regional disparities, official sources held Ordos up as proof of sound planning, moreover reflecting the successful implementation of national level development policies.

aligned with the dominant territorial system in China (Bulag 2002). Leaving behind the league (*meng*), Bulag argues, was simply the latest in a long line of attempts to homogenise, ‘harmonise’, and exploit China’s frontier regions. Besides geopolitical questions of governing minority areas, a set of attractive incentives prompts local governments and prefectures to apply for promotion to obtain municipal status. These incentives mainly concern the expansion of local states’ regulatory and fiscal ambit, including more autonomy to stipulate their own policies (Chien 2011: 133, 134; Chung and Lam 2009). This was essential to the crafting of the municipality’s strategies to stimulate property investments, relocate citizens etc. The administrative upgrade served to incorporate the wider rural region of Ordos into what Professor Hsing entitles an ‘urban-dominant territorial governance system’ (2010: 94). The authority gained from this upgrade was pertinent in the process whereby rural hinterland was converted to urban land. The instigation of large-scale development projects at the urban fringe areas, later lampooned as ‘China’s modern Ghost Town’, was therefore predicated on a broader restructuring of administrative and territorial powers.

Expansionist Schemes and Informal Finance

The inclination to modernise or expand its urban territory, is therefore in no way particular to Ordos, but is seen across China. From the vantage point of regional governments, urbanisation is often seen as a pathway to economic success (Wu 2007: 9). Central to understanding local states’ motivation to expand and modernise cities is a change in the configuration of fiscal powers at local and regional level governments. As one effect of fiscal decentralisation policies issued by the central state since the 1980s, sub-national level governments gained more authority to devise what they believed to be attractive economic policies.⁸ In the quest for rapid development and higher revenue streams, local governments sought to remove legal and administrative barriers that could somehow obstruct growth and, in many cases, instigated ambitious schemes of urbanisation. Development crazes followed in many of these regions, including Inner Mongolia (Bulag 2002: 112). Two effects of fiscal decentralisation are particularly pertinent to this study: first, the increasing pressures for local governments to cover their own expenses related to infrastructural developments, providing

⁸ For an in-depth analysis and overview of fiscal decentralization policies since reform, see Tsai 2004. Policies did not simply move toward an even greater level of local authority and decentralized system but has moved back and forth with shifting policies of taxation and systems of revenue collection and sharing.

social services to citizens etc. have generated a hoarding of off-budget revenues made from e.g. exploiting land leases. The leasehold market was established in 1988. Here, land-use rights were effectively separated from land ownership. Although formally all land still belongs to the state, the reality behind these new land politics has created a real estate-driven economy in which the local state acts as a commercial allocator of land-use rights (Wu 2007: 10), thereby securing much of its revenues. The most central event that facilitated this was a 1990 ordinance to the Land Management Law that allowed cities to sell long-term leases and keep 60 per cent of the profit from these sales, while the rest would go to central government (Davis 2003: 187). The commercialisation of user rights thus stimulated steep growth in the property development sector and its related industries. It has also forged a close connection between the capital-intensive real estate sector and local government officials in what Li Zhang terms ‘strong pro-growth coalitions’ (Li 2006: 464). The land lease economy has become the pivot of local and regional governments’ financial and political strategies and thus also the locus for social contention and public discontent (Guo 2001; Ong 2012; Li 2006). The establishment of the leasehold market generated a set of economic incentives to set in motion various forms of urban expansion, often under the guise of following the latest trends in urbanisation. In the 1990s these took the form of development zones (*kaifaqu*); more recently we have seen the proliferation of ‘university cities’ (*daxuecheng*) and mixed-use real estate projects such as ‘new cities’ (*xincheng*) that include commercial, residential, administrative and cultural spaces (Hsing 2010: 98, 104, 109). The Kangbashi New Area that had appealed to Mr Liu as the place he planned to settle down with his future spouse, was one example of these mixed-use urban developments. While being the municipality’s most prestigious development, it was also the most central site for boosting revenues through allocating land-use rights. A second consequence of fiscal decentralisation policies is subnational-level governments’ permissiveness toward the rise of informal finance and its role in providing credit to the private sector (Tsai 2004). In one of the key studies on Chinese informal finance, Kellee Tsai states: ‘the production of informal finance operates more like an underground factory fuelled by a permissive configuration of local political and business interests’ (2002: 32). Informal finance is often understood as a kind of grassroots solution to the scarcity of formal credit, at times even posited as an ingenuity that marginalised social groups use to survive in the face of bureaucratic constraints (Hart 1970; 1973). Yet from Tsai’s observation above, and by tracing *gaolidai* funds as they flow between state and non-

state institutions, I do not assume a strict division between formal and informal spheres.

Ordos' particular trajectory of modernist urbanisation and the proliferation of informal financial practices are thus closely related to the restructuring of national energy policies, the geopolitical aspects of urbanisation and development schemes in China's autonomous regions, and the political and economic incentive structure for sub-national level governments.

Analytical Frame

To examine the momentum and mood that undergirded the development and the various ways that agents across public and private spheres engaged economically and socially with the urban and fiscal changes dealt with above, the analytical framework for this dissertation unfolds schemes through a progression that moves from the overarching schemes of states and into the private sphere of interpersonal relations of exchange. The study's focus on schemes and forms of complicity contributes to three main bodies of literature: critical studies that deal with state failure and planning, research on finance as it expands into new territories of life, and a regional body of literature that deals with capitalist and urban transitions in China. The first part – 'from Compliance to Complicity' – shifts the emphasis from a focus on a compliance–resistance binary opposition in reactions to state schemes, to a focus on complicity, putting greater emphasis on what lies outside formal plans. In other words, on the ways agents from across private–public domains were actively scheming. The second part – 'the Financialisation of Everyday Life' – locates these schemes in relation to the millenarian and spectral character of wealth in Ordos. Addressing the effects of the making and particularly the unmaking of schemes as they materialised among interlocutors in Ordos, the dissertation contributes to anthropological discussions of debt and exchange. In the final part – 'Vernacular Urgency' – I turn to the particular vantage point that influenced prevailing forms of imagining wealth and participating in the schemes. By this I aim to contribute to regional studies of wealth, money and capitalist transitions in China.

Statements about how Ordos, as China's Dubai, was 'a process, not a bubble' attested to a widely shared perception. And, moreover, one that was central to the way that development was fraught with intimacies that are not easily captured by official development rhetoric. In his work toward crafting an anthropological theory of value, David Graeber contends that value, as an action that is 'meaningful', can only attain meaning within broader symbolic and social systems: value, Graeber writes, 'is the way actions become meaningful to

the actors by being placed in some larger social whole, real or imaginary' (Graeber 2001: 254). This 'whole', I suggest, is a valuable heuristic tool to understand interlocutors' adamant faith in the ever-escalating property values, that in hindsight was both imaginary and real. With this emphasis, comparison is intrinsic to value, as it needs to resonate with a larger whole. It is therefore this 'whole' that I am interested in, and how a reconfiguration of wealth and power influenced prevailing imaginaries of what was and is deemed valuable, and what actions were perceived as meaningful at particular junctures in time. By emphasising the temporary nature of wealth I adopt such 'wholes' less as sound and stable constants, but as processes, and as sets of relations that might be made, and unmade (cf. Verdery 2003: 13).

From Compliance to Complicity

The grand modernist planning and urbanising schemes of nation states have been thoroughly treated in historical and anthropological accounts issuing a firm critique of the myopia of states' attempts to leap forward (e.g. Scott 1998; Holston 1989; Ferguson 1999; 1990; Lu 2006): how these leaps are qualified in a population, or, conversely how populations resist and undermine states' attempts to leapfrog. By broadening the ambit of James Scott's critique of the state gaze, the theoretical direction of this dissertation follows the thread of Michael Herzfeld (2005a) and Tania Murray Li (2005) in their development of James Scott's argument (1998) to address how schemes 'work on, and through the practices and desires of the local population' (Li 2005: 383). It particularly looks into the forms of complicity and intimacies that also characterise the nexus between bureaucratic institutions and their publics beyond the binaries suggested in the state optic (Herzfeld 2005a: 375; Steinmüller 2010). Tania Murray Li departs from Scott's ambition to identify 'pristine places outside power, pure sites of resistance' and instead aims to untangle 'positions', which, she suggests, enables more contradictory and ambiguous practices and subject positions that emerge in between margins and centres, dominant or subaltern standings, compliant or resistant, to be accounted for (Li 2005: 386). This move allows us to acknowledge how state-ordained goals might find support in realms of informality that exist even beyond the state's regulatory ambit, and conversely, how forms of resistance or contradictions emerge from within the state apparatus itself. Shifting the emphasis away from why schemes fail to what such failures might produce as they are reworked through the imaginations of a populace, in turn, redirects our attention towards the messy and often contradictory nature of schemes (cf. Ferguson 1990; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003; Nielsen 2007). Drawing on Foucault's work (1979) on the 'instrument-effects'

of failures, James Ferguson moves beyond questions that concern the intentions of planners and, rather, sees development projects as different kinds of intervention: i.e. interventions that are less inclined to achieve the proposed targets such as, for example, alleviating poverty, yet nevertheless succeed in expanding a state's bureaucratic powers (1990: 254-255).⁹ Both Ssorin-Chaikov and Morten Nielsen's rich ethnographies provide examples of counter-intuitive effects of state 'failures' and, in an argument kindred to that of Ferguson's, show how even failed attempts to leap forward don't necessarily fail in all aspects of state building. Most relevant to the present case is Nielsen's work on housing in the peri-urban areas in Maputo where he shows that state-defined programmes, somehow counter-intuitively might actually best succeed as they fail. The inconsistencies and holes in planning processes are exactly what enable people to inscribe themselves in these programmes (Nielsen 2007: 705). State-ordained projects might therefore, in this perspective, find support in areas that lack regulation or are defined by illegal practices. Adding another dimension to thinking through schemes and forms of complicity, Yael Navaro-Yashin's work on Northern Cyprus as a 'make-believe space', raises the question of materiality's role in the co-production and crafting of the post-war polity. Asking the paradoxical question as to how 'the make-believe is made' and what practices constitute it, Navaro-Yashin probes into the everyday realities of Turkish Cypriots in an investigation that engages with the entanglements of materiality and subjectivities in the making of space. Navaro-Yashin therefore brings to the fore the effect of materiality in the co-production of the 'make-believe' (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 10, 42). In this light, objects like new cartographic reworkings of a given territory or, in Ordos' case, excess supply of vacant urban space, are not neutral containers of human subjectivity but serve to co-opt and influence.

In light of these accounts, materiality as well as realms of informality can act like *polyfilla* in the often dysfunctional or fragmented ways that local states attempt to transcend and leap forward, in part helping to fill out vacant urban spaces, to appropriate regulatory gaps, or put them to other uses. In short order, the shift from compliance to complicity

⁹ Ferguson's wider argument deserves mentioning as it addresses the 'instrument-effects' of the development industry that despite its ambition to be non-political, actually serves to 'de-politize' genuinely political questions of poverty as well as state interventions (Ferguson 1990: 256). Considering concepts like scientific development, modernist urbanization, harmonious society etc., the development rhetoric of the Chinese state's bears resemblance to Ferguson's account of how the development industry effectively concealed the more subtle effects of intervention.

redirects our attention to the often-contradictory ways that development schemes play out in between the blueprints of planners and the active scheming of those engaged. While compliance has been granted much attention in ethnographic writing, complicity has mostly been raised to shed light on the muddled relations that inhere in ethnographic practices¹⁰ – relations that play out between ethnographer and object, or the complicities that can be integral to fieldwork itself (Marcus 1997). To this purpose, however, complicity served as a lens through which to understand the muddied relations that I encountered in the field, rather than those that are intrinsic to ethnographic knowledge production.

The Financialisation of Everyday Life

Increasingly, social science is turning its attention to the provincialising of finance, i.e. how financial imaginaries and technologies play out outside Wall Street: on *Main Street* and even beyond (Elyachar 2005; Simone 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Martin 2002).¹¹ The pace with which unimaginable wealth followed on from poverty in Ordos at the turn of the century, and then, for the most part, evaporated equally fast lent the Ordos debacle a distinctly millenarian character, with its abundance of popular imaginaries¹² of ever-accumulating wealth and magically high yields from simple investments. In their groundbreaking account of new forms of speculative enchantment in the moment of entering the new millennium, Jean and John Comaroff hone in on the manifold and often obscure ways that contemporary capitalism plays out in peoples' lives. By coining the term 'millennial capitalism' they not only paint a portrait of capitalism by the term of the century, but moreover also succeed in portraying the obscure and magical nature that also characterises much of contemporary capitalism: broadly framed under the rubric of occult economies, the authors list various sorts of monetary magic and beliefs, including the spread of Ponzi and pyramid schemes, as

¹⁰ For two exceptions that both engage contemporary China see Steinmüller 2013 and Osburg 2013.

¹¹ 'Provincializing finance' was a session of the Annual Conference at the American Association of Anthropology, 2013, arranged by Llerena Searle and Sohini Kar.

¹² Although strongly inspired by the work of both Sartre (2004) and Foucault's (1984) contributions to theorising the imagination, this dissertation remains critical of the emancipatory and creative capacity that is widely attributed to the imagination. In a recent volume on the faculty of the imagination and its role in anthropological analysis, Sneath, Holbraad and Petersen (2009) examine how 'technologies' mould our ways of imagining. Rather than the all-encompassing use of social or political imaginaries, as a template through which people in societies make sense of the world (cf. Taylor 2002; Gaonkar 2002) almost on a par with notions like culture or ideology, the authors suggest that imagination hinges on materiality (Sneath, Holbraad and Petersen 2009: 19) thus opening for closer attention to how changes in the physical environment reconfigure values and imaginations.

examples of wealth magically brought about with little or no productive economic activity. Drawing on their own ethnographic account as well as those of others, the authors broaden the geographic scope of their argument and establish how ‘new forms of enchantment’ are increasingly normalised with the financialisation of everyday lives (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 293).¹³

A focus on capitalist enchantments enables us to make sense of Ordos’ widespread speculation and excess construction less as a singular case, but as part of a wider global context where prevailing forms of financial imaginaries compel people to conjure up spectres and speculations of abundance, as implied by easy or fast money. Not spectres in a metaphorical sense, but in the sense that these spectres are as real as they come, considering the very tangible effects that they brought along. It is through this understanding of ‘spectres’ that I engage with what are more popularly designated, ‘China’s ghost-towns’. Not so much for their already well-documented scarcity of inhabitants and excessive construction, but more for their density of monetary beliefs, financial enchantments, conjuring up of values, and the city’s widely perceived capacity to ‘transform the universe of the marginalised and disempowered’ as stated by the Comaroffs (2000: 292). Yet rather than making a general inquiry into broader assumptions about the nature of either growth or decline, I follow Ferguson’s (1999) invocation to draw up ethnographic accounts of decline (and growth), as they manifest in peoples’ experience and through their shifting reactions and strategies, and not from teleological assumptions about the generalised nature of crisis and overproduction in capitalism.

To counter the temptation to reduce what I term complicity to *centrifugal* effects of capitalism as it expands into new territories, I want to emphasise the way that both growth and decline were shaped by local conditions: What motivations forged the making of schemes and what compelled agents to participate? The urgency that drove schemes into a collapse was most evident from informal financial schemes that proliferated during the years of growth. What became apparent already by summer 2011 was that many daily transactions were in one way or another related to the market for informal finance. Before as well as after

¹³ The Comaroffs’ account of ‘Millennial Capitalism’ deals particularly with these economies in the context of a neoliberal order. Applying the concept of neoliberalism to a Chinese context entails a set of steps and discussions that lie outside the ambit of this thesis. For a recent example that deals conceptually with neoliberalism in a Chinese context see Ong and Li 2008. For a critique of the use of neoliberalism in the context of China see Kipnis 2008.

the crisis, social encounters during fieldwork would often revolve around the issue of loans, access to funds, investments, and the intentional delay of payments. Although citizens were rarely occupied with the official development rhetoric, the spectacular architecture, or the implications of becoming more civilised, the informal realm proved intimately linked to the local administration's leap forward. Akin to Katherine Verdery's observations from the pyramid schemes in post-socialist Transylvania (1996), the scope of informal finance in Ordos compelled citizens to conceive of money, indebtedness and value in new ways. An examination of the intimate link between informal financial transactions and the building boom can therefore help shed light on inhabitants' motives for participating beyond the simple question of pecuniary gain or simple compliance with state-ordained ideology.

As an effect of changes in fiscal policies as well as changing configurations in local administration, new things were brought into the commodity sphere: land, by far, being the most important. In Ordos, agricultural land yielded little produce and thus held little value besides the use and appreciation of families occupying it before the 2000s. With the sudden intensification of both extractive industries and schemes of urban expansion, however, these plots suddenly attained an economic value that, as illustrated by Mr Liu and his family, was unimaginable for most of those who had resided there for years. Often in the form of direct cash payment or subsidised housing this value was quickly deposited into new forms of wealth. In particular, the newly-constructed urban areas and modernised districts became the most common objects of investment that for most families in Ordos were crafted as a store of wealth until sometime in 2011. A wealth that proved highly vulnerable. Only a few months later many of these apartments transformed into spaces of anxiety, becoming the pivot of inter-family grudges over debts and lost profits. As assets devalued, credit suddenly became scarce and beyond a certain threshold, extensions on loans were perceived as unpaid debts. As ever more present in anthropological takes on finance and crisis more broadly, debt has become a central focus of attention (see, for example, High 2012; Peebles 2010; Graeber 2011; Villareal 2014; Williams 2004). Detailed ethnographic work illustrates how standardised breaches in reciprocity and relations of exchange can result in broader changes in moral outlook and transactional orders (cf. Roitman 2003); moreover, how such breaches might also serve to highlight different class dispositions in terms of what happens when the

‘lure of credit’ turn into debt (James 2014), or when debts are never ‘socialised’ within a community (Peebles 2012).¹⁴ Anthropological work on debt is thus closely related to theories of reciprocity that treat the question of what happens when debts are never squared, for society as well as for the individual (Mauss 2011; Sahlins 1972; Lévi-Strauss 1969: 496–97; Peebles 2012: 429; Williams 2004; Roitman 2003), a topic that proved particularly relevant throughout the latter half of fieldwork when small-time creditors like Mr Liu struggled to recover their deposits in local *gaolidai* schemes.

Vernacular Urgency

Ordos’ accelerated trajectory of boom-bust condenses a set of social and material transformations that offer insights into how citizens and sojourners manoeuvred and made sense of such rapidly changing horizons of value. But what made up these horizons, and how do we conceive of these in light of the recent decades of turbulent capitalist and urban transformations in China?

Besides being located at the periphery of financial centres, Ordos’ urgency to catch up with and even surpass China’s coastal cities was characterised by a sense of developmental ‘lateness’ similar to the one Li Zhang (2006) observed in the context of Kunming, another latecomer city in China’s urbanising growth. The urgency to develop and become a modern city, however, extended beyond elite pro-growth coalitions and stirred up sentiments among a broader section of Ordos’ population. Hence the notion of vernacular urgency, implying that urgency manifests as intersecting interests across scales and public-private domains. Urgency, as I use it here, designates a feeling of some action that needs be taken toward something. In this light it often takes an object, and might therefore also be conceived as conditioned by lack: be it of money, mobility, homeownership, regional development, modernity, and so on. Urgency thus seeks to fill out something perceived as missing. A kindred sense of urgency can be traced in Julie Chu’s “Cosmologies of credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China” (2010). Here Chu traced the momentum and migration frenzy between Fuzhounese whose desires for mobility unfolded in a reality fraught by uncertain

¹⁴ By this I do not simply imply that money destabilises social relations or causes ruptures in cultural traditions. As the premise for extending loans is a specific calculation about a future repayment, credit implies trust or some form of faith (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992: 9; Shipton 2007). Hence, credit and monetary debt do not only cause ruptures in cultural traditions, but also function as a mediator of trust and mutual accountability (cf. Bloch and Parry 1989).

destinations, often mediated through transnational smuggling networks. Chu's subjects' strenuous efforts to migrate are seen against their experience of living in the rural backwaters of China's modernisation and development, and thus reflect a similar sense of 'lateness'. Founded in the feeling of being left behind and general perceptions that wealth is fleeting, Chu's interlocutors' sought to secure their destination through a variety of strategies that included spirit money and the mobilisation of vast social networks that more often than not involved a great deal of monetary and even 'cosmic debt' (2010: 5).

Investigating the construction of the Chinese post-socialist subject, Lisa Rofel (2007) points to the historical constitution of certain desires. 'Desiring subjects', however, are not distributed evenly as some desires are marginalised while other kinds of longing and aspirations are celebrated in the new post-socialist/neoliberal condition. Rofel's ethnography marks out the heterogeneous desires of what she terms the 'neoliberal subject', yet her ethnography is also a striking account of a narrowing of alternatives: 'The desiring subject functions variously as a trope, a normative ideal, and a horizon of possibility – or impossibility. It promises new freedoms even as it seems to be the only game in town (Ibid: 6). 'Desiring China' cuts across widely different phenomena, scales, and social groups in a unifying move that places the desiring subject at the core of post-Mao China (Ibid: 30, 197). Li Zhang's account of middle-class aspirations shifts the emphasis from how these subjectivities are constituted and follows them as they materialise in new forms of homeownership in Kunming (2010). Linking the spatial transformation of the city with these citizens' yearnings for and experiences of an urban modernity, Li Zhang's analysis similarly underlines the strong drive that urges prospective homeowners to jump into the mortgage market, despite pronounced anxieties about being in debt (Ibid: 64). More related to the precariousness of new wealth and the forms of sociality that produce and distribute it, John Osburg (2013) provides a thought-provoking account of the workings of elite networks in Chengdu. Osburg's analysis of the gendered forms of sociality that perforate contemporary business culture, as well as his observations about transactions on the margins of legality have been a central source of inspiration for me to make sense of the wider 'anxieties' and moral compromises that accompany prevailing forms of particularly new wealth. The scramble for new wealth and the blurred lines between state–society and formal–informal that characterise the nature of elite networks in Osburg's account underscore the importance of looking beyond these divides as Ordos' schemes were not easily captured through these binaries.

In short, the analytical stance of this dissertation is to contribute to each of these three sets of literature through its focus on actively taking part in schemes driven by a particular urgency fraught by latecomer imaginaries of wealth. The ‘social life of temporary wealth’ is therefore first and foremost posited as the active making and unmaking of schemes across different scales.

Fieldwork and Methods

Ordos first caught my attention in 2008 after an interview with Shanghai-based architect and urban theorist Bert de Muynck. Bert had just returned from Ordos where he had looked into the initial preparations for a large creative cluster development. The more I learned of the development, the more it drew me in, and I finally decided to frame it as the topic for a PhD. dissertation. The project, as I had first imagined it, came out as the perfect way for me to trace my earlier interest in Chinese cultural industries into emerging forms of contemporary Chinese urbanism. Everything fell nicely into place at first: 100 international architectural groups designing unique billionaire villas in the Inner Mongolian desert, the construction of a creative industries cluster located inside a newly built and much hyped urban district, and a resource-rich city making ambitious efforts to modernise and expand its territory. From 2008 on, I kept myself updated on the web, looking for new developments in the creative cluster project and Ordos City more broadly. The discussions regarding technicalities and the ideas behind the many unique architectural structures continued on a vast scale. Equal amounts of allure and scepticism surrounded the project, and the wider municipality. Yet it was not until March 2011, after having received the PhD. stipend, that I paid my first visit to Ordos, doing a pilot trip for my upcoming fieldwork. Excited to finally see the real life dimensions of the spectacular designs I had followed online, I set out to visit the creative industries cluster. Despite being listed and illustrated in locally-distributed pamphlets promoting the city’s more prominent venues, I had no luck in locating the site. After five days of searching I had exhausted my opportunities: emailing contacts on promotional material for the project, Google Earth, asking migrant workers, receptionists in various hotels, taxi drivers, infrequent pedestrians, and police officers. Nobody knew of either the creativity cluster or had heard of any international architects building unique villas. The failure to retrieve what I had imagined to be my main ethnographic site forced me to reorient many basic assumptions and practical objectives of my doctoral study. My interest in the nature of a creative industries cluster had set me down in a place where some real estate projects appeared to evaporate into thin air or,

as I would later learn, simply never really materialised other than on the Internet, and in the imaginations of speculators, curators, architects and anthropologists. The somewhat strange experience, encountering nothing of the sort I had anticipated, compelled my return in summer 2011, broadening the scope of my gaze from creative clusters to include the wider context of Ordos' spectacular urban growth.

The main interlocutors that I trace through this ethnography can be subsumed under two broader categories of mostly male, urban dwellers: one group is a batch of private entrepreneurs of both Han and Mongol ethnicity who set up an investment company in 2010. One of these entrepreneurs in particular, Mr Li, played a great part in the process with his generosity, offering me assistance, and allowing me to tap into his broad social network that included high-ranking officials as well as people with influential positions in local businesses, employees in banks, mobsters and so on. Mr Li himself was introduced to me through a common friend who I had met in Beijing, and although this friend was at the periphery of Mr Li's network I was quickly befriended, and could always rely on him for help, questions, contacts etc. Mr Li had received several years of education in the UK before returning to Ordos just as the economy was taking off. His stay abroad enabled us to communicate in both Mandarin and English, which was particularly helpful at the outset. The second group consists of predominantly ethnic Mongol civil servants, employed in different government institutions, most of whom had been recently relocated in Ordos' newly constructed cultural and administrative district. In addition to these, many other urban dwellers and sojourners have informed this work. Altogether I conducted seven months of fieldwork. Besides the brief pilot trip in March 2011, two and a half months were conducted before the economic decline while the rest was conducted after, over three trips between March 2012 and September 2013. The effect of doing multiple stretches of fieldwork effectively meant that I lost track of some interlocutors that I had encountered during the economic boom in 2011. Yet, because of my repeated returns, the interlocutors I managed to trace gained more confidence in my engagement with Ordos, particularly as I kept coming back even during the economic decline. As a euphemism for studying them, a few of my more consistent interlocutors rendered these returns as a gesture of solidarity on my behalf. This generated a greater basis for trust and also access to information that was difficult to obtain at first. As, with each additional visit, friends and interlocutors came to better understand the objectives of my study, they proved increasingly ready to network on my behalf: setting up meetings with people that I 'should

know', doing formal presentations at lunches or banquets, many times without further elaboration or acting on any request from my side. As several of my closer acquaintances had vast social networks I gained immensely from these involuntary networking activities. Altogether I recorded 63 interviews, yet the bulk of data came from field notes and more casual conversation.

Main Ethnographic Methods

My initial ambition to look into urban planning and its associated ideology meant that the first chapter mostly draws on archival work, assessing development plans, official rhetoric, distributed promotional material, designs, and identifying various stakeholders in the process. Reading Scott's (1998) and Holston's (1989) critiques of high modernist cities directed my methods and analytical gaze towards, on the one hand, tracing out ideological underpinnings of the urban leap, while, on the other, being attentive to the ways that pioneer inhabitants would adapt to, comply with, or undermine these new spaces. Although these methods and assumptions proved less useful to grasp the muddled and sometimes ambiguous ways that locals understood and appropriated the overall development, these steps did yield valuable insights. In the second chapter, interviews mainly target various professionals connected to the planning, design and construction of urban projects in Ordos from 2008–2013. These included international architects, employees at the ministry for land and resources, construction workers and worksite managers, urban planners, and Chinese architects employed at China Architecture and Design Research Group (Beijing). All of these contributed to gaining a better understanding of the contradictions and conflicting interests in landmark projects and the uncertain outcomes of processes of planning and construction. Observations and shorter stays at building sites during the course of fieldwork (2011–2013) also proved productive in this regard.

As chapter three and four primarily deal with forms of complicity and the ways the official leap translated into the lives of the group of civil servants (chapter three) and private investors (chapter four) respectively, it primarily rests on varying degrees of participant observation, interviews and more casual conversation with these young men. Besides observations and interviews made at the two groups' sites of work, leisure, investment, and living, interlocutors' families and extended networks formed an important base for collecting material and gaining a better understanding of the local transition between 2011–14. Particularly the many joint road trips in and outside the urban areas proved highly evocative

for several reasons: first of all, car *cultures* perforated social life in Ordos in a myriad of ways: as index of occupation, status, conspicuous consumption, leisure, showcase, industry, and urban design (see Ulfstjerne and de Muynck 2012); secondly, driving was a key activity where these interlocutors could privately reflect upon visible changes in the environment, sites of investment, losses, and the entwinement of personal and collective histories. Similar to the significance de Certeau attributed to ‘walking in the city’ (1984), from the experience of daily commutes, pimping cars, and road trips in Ordos, *driving* in the city made for a valuable methodological and heuristic tool.¹⁵

The most classically dense ethnography (in the sense of engaging with people) cumulates from the middle of the dissertation and towards the end as it moves into the theme of indebtedness and the way it played out in between friends, colleagues, and within families (chapters four, five and six). In order to do so, the ethnography draws on observations collected before and after the crisis, and particularly relies on interview accounts and participant observation among creditors, debtors, lending officers in underground banks, and informal debt collectors. Besides allowing access to the core of family conflicts over bad investments and unpaid debts, following the pathways of credit similarly brought me through an array of institutions including formal banks, the quasi-legal lending intermediaries, ownership registration offices for cars and real estate, public offices for civil complaints, local courts, and finally through the provisional institutions set up to pre-empt further escalation of debt-related violence. In addition, to contextualise field observations I further draw on legal reports, national legislation, and interviews with local law practitioners. Although topics such as informal finance and indebtedness are notoriously difficult to gain access to, due to their sensitive nature, the scope of the *gaolidai* phenomenon in Ordos and the fact that debt figured everywhere in most interlocutors’ lives, from daily conversations on buses, to jokes, in newspaper reports, and citizens filing public complaints, made for a dense ethnographic experience; one, that enabled insights into matters that are often concealed or have been documented as difficult to access for ethnographers (cf. Yan Y. 2009: 200-201; see also James 2014: 18). Despite the visibility of *gaolidai* in public life, insights into the more

¹⁵ In a recent anthology about car cultures, Daniel Miller (2001) notes how cars now transcend their functionality, and examines the many ways in which cars are an integral part of a wider cultural environment and connected to the way we perceive ourselves as humans. Coining the term ‘vehicular animism’ Alfred Gell takes a step towards ridding the car of its widely perceived connotations of alienation, and instead points to the fact that cars often serve as extensions of people, prosthesis-like (Gell 1998: 18).

detailed accounts of private economies, participation in illegal lending transactions, intimidation, and debt-related violence demanded a greater level of trust, and this was therefore better assessed in the very last periods of fieldwork.

Examining the social life of temporary wealth I obviously owe a deal of retrospective debt to Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff's notion of the biography of things (1986) as they bring attention to how things take on value, the particular contexts where things appear, how they move and operate. For my purpose, the social life of temporary wealth seemed best assessed by tracing the transactional pathways through which money and credit flowed. Putting these ideas into practice, however, proved less straightforward. For one, tracing the exact lines of credit and monetary flows was simply not possible. So, to provide a more coherent biography, I needed to stitch together the general patterns from observations made on different visits, among different interlocutors and also, to the extent it was needed, rely on verbal accounts of the trajectories of money and credit. Incidents such as that of Mr Liu's resettlement were central, as these connected the official policies and their implementation during the leap, i.e. the massive land acquisitions, generous compensation fees and subsidised housing with a surge of informal financial activities. Much of the capital received from compensation flowed from the new enclaves of resettled peasants and low-paid labour and was absorbed by the bustling property development industry. Moreover, as implied by the title, besides credit/money, temporary wealth most often took the form of real estate. Nevertheless, following the social lives of real estate projects that failed to materialise or were simply speculative called for additional methodological considerations. Conducting fieldwork in Ordos presented me with two central challenges that I will address briefly in the following: the methodological predicament of studying vacancies in the city, things that fail to materialise and locations defined by the absence of occupants; and the challenge of encompassing both boom, bubble, and bust and writing about it.

Urban Vacancies

A methodological challenge that came along with the economic decline was that several interlocutors that I had encountered during the boom simply upped and migrated elsewhere. Others fled into refuge, hid at home, or simply felt embarrassed to expose their economic and social slump. In addition, with the crisis, many places that were under construction or briefly occupied were abandoned and quickly fell into ruin. This prompted me to pay greater attention to processes of ruination and the material condition of things. In his work, "Social

life of empty buildings”, Mathijs Pelkmans (2006) captures the discrepancy between transition rhetoric and socioeconomic reality in post-socialist Georgia through an ethnographic account of empty buildings. Also drawing on Arjun Appadurai's work (1986) Pelkmans addresses how buildings are ‘consumed’, and essentially how their value is ‘negotiated in a process of politicised social exchange’ (Pelkmans 2006: 197). Besides scrutinising discrepancies between plans and social reality, spaces that for some reason are vacant or empty, call for an ethnographic engagement with material conditions, their alterations, and maybe particularly with their absences. Within recent trends of ethnography we see more and more emphasis put on things, that the implications of their particular absence might yield even more influence and obtain more potency than were they present (Bille et al. 2010; Hetherington and Lee 2000; Fowles 2010).¹⁶ Missing relics, Ground Zero, phantom limbs, empty tombs are all examples that display the long-lasting effects and, in some cases, efficacious nature of things that are not there.¹⁷ Hetherington and Lee observe how innovations in material culture studies do little to shed light on things that are defined by a lack of characteristics, what the authors more specifically refer to as ‘blank figures’ and their role in the constitution of social order (2000: 173). What is often left out from careful accounts of regulatory authority and planning is attentiveness to the things that exist outside regulations and plans: the efficacy and openness that reside in vacant urban spaces themselves. By examining urban vacancies I therefore follow the trail laid out by recent anthropological and archaeological studies that do ‘mind the gap’, that immerse themselves in unoccupied and empty spaces, paying ethnographic attention to the present absences that exist in the field (cf. Pelkmans 2006; Armstrong 2010; Edensor 2011; Fowles 2010; Bille et al. 2010; Højer 2009). Admittedly, this shift of emphasis doesn’t necessarily reveal how such vacancies emerge. Yet I argue that by shifting our ethnographic gaze towards materiality including its absences, we might better examine the particular transformation of urban spaces and the ways this relates to personal accounts of temporary wealth. Moreover, how an

¹⁶ As Bille et al. point out in their introduction reflections upon the significance of absences are not new but have been treated within certain strands of philosophy (2010). The authors mention Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, but others such as Roland Barthes’ work on photography or Sartre’s imaginary (2004[1940]) have equally made important contributions to an anthropology of absence.

¹⁷ Jesus’ missing body was taken as proof of his divinity, rather than a case of e.g. grave robbery or simply post-mortem misplacement (cf. Fowles 2010). Another example is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier that, as Benedict Anderson notes, by the quality of being empty serves to represent the “ideal everyman, willing to sacrifice himself for the glory of the nation” (1991: 9).

investigation of what is absent, imagined or speculative might help shed light on the multiple ways that people inscribe themselves into the wider trajectories of Ordos' boom to bust development.

How to write it?

Conducting fieldwork during both boom and bust left me with an impression of getting a glimpse into not-so-everyday-lives. This did not mean that everything was perceived as rupture as several aspects of social life played out unchangeably throughout both boom and bust. Yet while writing up the dissertation I faced a difficulty coming to terms with the radical changes in atmosphere, transactional forms, shifting sensations of speed and standstill, and the changing horizons of possibility. How could I capture this in writing? No ethnographic sites are static, and many ethnographers grapple with the problem of social change during fieldwork and writing up. But it made little sense to describe one side without the other, the boom without the bust, or vice-versa. It necessarily divided my writing into a 'before', and an 'after', which made it impossible to write in a meaningful way using the literary device of the 'ethnographic present' (for discussion of 'ethnographic present' see Hastrup 1990). Yet, as social as well as material conditions deteriorated rapidly, the terms of fieldwork conducted after the bust could equally be graduated into *stages of after*. For this reason I stick to the past tense, and signal whether activities occur before or after the bubble burst.

A Superficial Account:

Michael: 'I've come from Denmark to do research here'

Zhuhui: 'ah, you're in the cigarettes and liquor business'¹⁸

Michael: 'No, research'.

Zhuhui: 'Oh'.

Michael: 'I am from Copenhagen University in Denmark and have come to Ordos to do research on urban development.'

Zhuhui: 'Hmmm, so Denmark is a developed country. What kind of cars do you like to drive there?'

¹⁸ One of my more embarrassing yet common language mistakes was confusing the pronunciation of 'research' in Chinese, which with a change of intonation, or an ill-disposed ear would often result in my main objective for coming to Ordos being heard as 'cigarettes and liquor'.

Michael: 'Well, I am not sure Denmark is more developed than here. Development takes a completely different form. For example I don't really have a car, and only use a bicycle to get round. Bicycles are better for the environment and they might even get you a little exercise.'

Michael: 'So what kind of business do you do here?'

Zhuhui: That's right [pauses]. Would you prefer a BMW, an Audi or a Mercedes?'

Michael: 'Well, I don't know. Many drive second-hand vehicles in Denmark so there are not that many brand new cars' [longer pause, smoking] 'I personally quite like the Audi.'

Michael: 'But many like BMWs and most taxi-drivers prefer Mercedes. My mother drives an old BMW'.

Zhuhui smiles and appears more content with the last answer. He just bought a new BMW.

Zhuhui and Mr Li were both investors in Litai Investment Group, a newly established group of young investors who had just recently moved into the new office spaces at the Coal Tower, one of the many office buildings burgeoning throughout Ordos' urban areas. The above was my first and probably worst attempt at an interview at Litai's offices during summer 2011. As my car enthusiasm and knowledge of Chinese vehicle vernacular in general fell short, conversations often contained uncomfortable pauses. In Ordos in 2011, my many questions about urban planning, modernisation, civilisation campaigns, transitional economies would often end up in conversations about plans to expand business, money, and the quality of vehicles and drivers. Beyond the appeal of fast cars, expanding business, making and spending money, the inability to tease out lengthy narratives among the majority of interlocutors and urban sojourners seemed influenced by the dynamic that fieldwork took place during the boom. 'Ordos' Speed' (*eerduosi sudu*) was an expression that locals used to refer to several things: designating the leap from being an unknown outpost to becoming known as China's Dubai; the pace of property development in Ordos; and the velocity in which money circulated spurring new investments and occupational forms. One effect of 'Ordos' speed' was that things changed quickly, but also that many were prone to look ahead instead of backwards. 'Here there was no history before', one interlocutor remarked. A

statement, that despite its obvious contrariness attested to the sensation of moving at a high velocity compared to what was before. In other words, the pace of things, I argue, also sped up an exhilarated form of sociality that left little room for *deeper* contemplation: not insomuch as interlocutors were indisposed as such. Simply, that the pace of development and the enchantments of the new commodities that were suddenly within reach, affected forms of sociality. People that were in the periphery of networks engaged each other as friends and possible business partners, celebrations and spectacles of consumption were rife: banquets, displays, business deals, networking activities, Karaoke, bars, and drinking. My own position as an ethnographer was also tainted by a degree of complicity during the bubble, not only insofar as emerging new study objects and forms of ethnographic fieldwork are increasingly linked to a premise of complicity (Marcus 1997), but also as I was taken in by the momentum of growth. In 2011 the time I spent, particularly with investors, proved somewhat contagious as I also became attracted to the lure of supplementing my PhD grant by tapping into Ordos' new wealth and opportunities. During a brief period, daily notes and observations were divided into field notes and joint Litai business ideas. I even inquired about 'investing' into the informal lending, yet lacked financial capacity and the nerve to move on it. On several occasions interlocutors wanted to discuss opportunities for collaboration. These ventures would generally take two forms: import of goods from Denmark and real estate. The latter was by far the most common and I was invited to provide ideas and international contacts for purposes of design and architecture. I was never expected to raise funds.

The ethnographic *shallowness* that might strike some when reading through the dissertation may to some extent reflect my choice not to dwell on, nor to draw out lengthy, painstaking narratives of growing up in the backwaters of China's modern and rich coastal areas.¹⁹ Yet, I hope to convey that *shallowness*, beyond its common normative associations with something negative or undesirable, reflected a momentum during the leap. With the benefit of hindsight, the task of delineating financial bubbles before they burst, adds some measure of weight as to what ethnography might gain from looking at surfaces, complexions, and appearances (Taussig 1999; Tsing 2000; Irving 2011; Sørensen 2014). In his work

¹⁹ This choice is largely an attempt to account for something beyond what Joel Robbins calls 'the suffering subject', a category that has been at the privileged centre of attention in much anthropological work from the 1990s, as earlier studies of 'savages' increasingly were replaced by empathic accounts of 'the suffering slot' (Robbins 2013: 448).

“Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labour of the Negative” (1999: 5), Michael Taussig unravels the strong emotions that surface when something precious is debased, or defaced. A move that compels us to take appearance at face value: ‘the reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth, I call *the public secret*, which, in another version, might be defined as *that which is generally known but cannot be articulated*’. This reconfiguration dictates an inverse logic whereby ethnographers are better off scratching surfaces rather than attempting to uncover a truth concealed;²⁰ i.e. an ethnography that engages the reservoir of meaning and affection that inheres in appearance, and the immense value that is attributed to faces and the ways these work (cf. Goffman 1967; Kipnis 1995; Yan Y. 1996: 133; Wilson 2002; Hertz 2001). Concepts such as ‘surface’ and ‘face’ in the traditional Western use of the terms implicitly juxtapose surface with depth, appearance vs. a hidden reality (for a critique see Miller 2005: 32). In his brilliant work on ‘face-talk’, Andrew Kipnis draws up a comparative genealogy of the meaning of faces and shows how the early translation from Chinese *lian* and *mianzi* into English ‘face’ came to designate the Chinese persona as false, indicating an ‘absence of sincerity’ (Smith in Kipnis 1995: 124). As Chinese people appeared fond of faces, they were assumed more disposed to value social appearance rather than that which lies underneath or inside. Kipnis’ work moves beyond this impasse as he emphasises how surface and face in China might better be thought of as ‘constitutive visibilities’: i.e. essentially relational, communicative, and interactive.

Instead of a retrospective gaze that quickly identifies investors as irrational speculators, Taussig (1999) and Tsing (2000) thus open the way for questions that grapple with why anyone could believe it to be true, and thus posit the economies of bubbles and appearances as a social production of ignorance – i.e. a public secret. In the pioneering volume “Deep China, the moral life of the person, what anthropology and psychiatry tell us about China today”, Kleinman et al. seek to uncover the *real* state of the Chinese moral persona and its transmutations through the past decades of ravaging societal transformation ‘beyond the surface facts’ (Kleinman 2011: 2). While I sympathise with this ambition, I do

²⁰ Taking a less metaphorical approach to the topic of surfaces, archaeologist Tim Flohr Sørensen reminds us that a surface might less be thought of as a singular thing, but as an assemblage of old and new surfaces: ‘surface is anything but zero-dimensional, one-dimensional or two-dimensional; it is multi-dimensional, and the surface is where things emerge, transform and dissolve. [...] Existence at the outermost boundary is liberated of the trivial sequence of past present future, because surfaces are permeable, branded by frictions’ (Sørensen 2014). And, fictions I would add.

hope to convey throughout the dissertation that the ‘perceptual, emotional, and moral experience of Chinese’ is not always best sought in the deep.

Outline

The dissertation is structured along two lines: one related to a temporal progression, and the other to schemes. Although several passages slip back and forth, the overall progression of the dissertation traces the time from boom, over bubble, to bust. As to the second line, the dissertation attempts to provide a sense of the shifting scales of schemes moving from the overarching state-ordained schemes to the realm of the most informal and *intimate* of schemes.

Chapter 1, ‘City – Makes Life even Better’, treats how urban transformations and particularly the expansion into the Kangbashi New Area were legitimised, drawing attention to the ideological tenets of development. Looking into how the transformation was enforced, but also financed and co-opted, the chapter aims to show how a vernacular urgency grew alongside local leaders’ ambition to leap forward.

Chapter 2, ‘*Unfinishing Buildings*’, moves from the level of planning and development rhetoric to examine possible trajectories of prestigious real estate projects in the new urban areas. This highlights the forms of collusion between financiers and local officials, and by pointing to an economy of not finishing real estate projects, the chapter draws attention to the volatile and speculative nature of much real estate development in Ordos and more broadly.

Chapter 3, ‘The Iron Bubble’, examines the basis of the widespread, yet sometimes ambiguous, belief that Ordos was failsafe. It does so by following a group of civil servants whose worksites were relocated in Kangbashi New Area through their overlapping professional and private endeavours. From this group, I show how prevailing ideas of Ordos’ abundant resource wealth and real estate’s intrinsic value proved essential to the optimism that reigned until the collapse of the local property market. Examining what could be criticised and, reversely, what could not be pronounced, the chapter draws attention to the intimacies that defined a complicit community of the bubble, before it burst.

Chapter 4, ‘The Tower & the Tower’, marks the dissertation’s turning point between boom and bust as it accentuates the temporary nature of both wealth and much of the sociality that came with it. Tentatively examining whether and, if so, how, the excess of vacant spaces might be complicit in Ordos’ wide course of decline, the chapter traces the changes in

prevailing forms of occupancy from the time of the boom into the time of the crisis by honing in on the activities of a newly established investment company. Paying attention to the shifting uses, effects and perceptions of vacant urban space, the chapter argues that occupants' decisions about how to perceive these spaces, along with efficacy of vacant space itself prompted not only financial speculations, but also waning and rot.

Chapter 5, 'City of Loans', examines what compelled the mass participation in informal financial schemes, and how the financialisation of everyday lives influenced social relations as lines of credit collapsed and dividend payments stopped. Tracing out credit relations and the role of the *gaolidai* among lenders and borrowers, the chapter draws attention to the intrinsic relation between real estate development and the widespread market for informal financial practices. *Gaolidai* practices, this chapter shows, served the double purpose of financing the building boom, but also mediating and conveying the feeling of taking part in urban life. Addressing key issues in the discussion regarding informal economy, it will be argued that we need not locate *gaolidai* in a domain separate from state institutions nor regard informality as a marginal phenomenon.

Chapter 6, 'Debt of Dreams', follows interlocutors in the time of economic decline in their attempts to recoup funds lost in failed investment schemes, or through increasingly common practices of debt evasion. As liquidity dried out and *gaolidai* schemes collapsed, debt became a main area of contention. Taking unpaid debts as its object, the chapter addresses the nature of local legal action and the new institutional frame that was set up to handle these debts. Examining what happens when debts are continuously deferred and debt evasion becomes the rule and not the exception, the final part elucidates how the particularities of economic decline in Ordos manifested in an emerging morality of taking without reciprocating.



A city made for speed is made for success –
Le Corbusier

CHAPTER 1

CITY, MAKES LIFE EVEN BETTER

This chapter starts out with a brief historical outline of the development since Ordos changed into a municipality in 2001, placing particular emphasis on the expansion of Ordos into the Kangbashi New Area. Although limited in scope, this provides some background on Ordos' development and thus serves as an expanded context for the analysis in the proceeding parts of the thesis. The bulk of data for this chapter relies primarily upon official promotional material, urban campaigns, strategic development reports, and interviews with citizens who were affected by processes of eviction and relocation. The present chapter asks, **how were Ordos' ambitious schemes of urban transformations legitimised and what underlying values drove the enforcement of these?** The analysis presented here draws on anthropological critiques of high modernist planning projects tracing out the underlying values, assumptions, and intentions that lie at the heart of these grand projects (Holston 1989; Farish 2009; Scott 1998). The first two sections draw on these perspectives to understand what spurred and directed Ordos' modernist urbanisation. However, despite the temptation of rendering Ordos' leap forward as simply yet another instantiation of high modernist planning, the latter part – 'High Modernist Schemes, a Discussion' – will address shortcomings of applying this explanatory frame to the case of Ordos. Often, analyses that engage with built environments identify a correlation between architectural design, power, and intention. Structures impose order and instantiate the ideologies or interests of planners and power holders (cf. Caldeira 2000; Davis 2008; Harvey 2003). Questioning this assumption, the analysis draws attention to the fragmented nature of state, the diverse interests vested in the expansion, and does not therefore assume a simple correlation between central state ideology and the way urban transformations materialised in Ordos. Next, rather than understanding the local populace's compliance with the state's attempt to instigate leapfrog growth as an indication of a weak civil society, the chapter suggests that we must regard Ordos in terms of its place-specific modality of modernist urbanisation and the way generous relocation packages translated into a sense of urgency in the lives of local citizens. This allowed many,

irrespective of their ethnicity, to experience the qualitative changes that the lure of modern urban life had to offer.

How was development legitimised?

In 2010–11, the Ordos municipal government's party office and board of management released a small promotional video about the vision and construction of the municipality's new flagship development, the Kangbashi New Area. The video was distributed as a gift among future investors and more prominent visitors to the city. Housed in an ornamental cardboard box 'Kangbashi' was written in Chinese and Mongolian characters, with English characters adding: 'The city of quality'. The footage and narrative offers a view of the way the new urban area was conceived, imagined, and projected. In what follows, I recap some of the video's most central features and statements:

Zooming in from outer space, the gaze of the viewer drifts across ice-covered lands. Landscapes transform while contours of trees, mountains, and dry plains appear far beneath the spectators' gaze. A river flows through the landscapes and as we approach the ground a monumental mausoleum emerges. The camera zooms in on a bronze statue of Chinggis Khan. The statue fades slowly and morphs into a burning flame while a Chinese voiceover narrates the great Khan's cultural legacy and the geological and cultural origins of the Ordos plateau. Shortly after, a Mongolian string instrument, the Khuuchir (*sihu*), accompanies the narrator's voice. Three golden characters, Kang-ba-shi, elegantly appear across a cloth in both Mandarin Chinese and Mongolian script. The narrator tells of the genesis of Kangbashi, allegedly deriving from the name of an old, wise teacher called Kang. The scene shifts and small children in traditional Mongolian dress play around horse-driven chariots in a grassland setting. They gather around teacher Kang, who is dressed in a Chinese scholar's robe and draws Chinese and Mongolian characters on a blackboard, . The children sit on the ground smiling and listening to his teachings. Pages on a calendar turn us forward in time until the years of the Cultural Revolution. A young woman in Mongolian clothing walks across vast dunes of desert, a single green plant stands out in the yellow sand. Close by, a young soldier works alongside a cohort of the People's Liberation Army, all planting trees. Suddenly, the young woman reappears, but now dressed in uniform, also planting trees alongside her fellow comrades. A small child in minority dress offers the soldiers a bowl of water. On the side of the bowl Chinese characters say 'glorious' (*guangcai*). The narrator tells of 'green dreams' while the vast desert suddenly transforms into lush forest in a wavelike motion, a green

tsunami. Everything blooms. Forests, trees and small yellow flowers stretch upwards. Again, the calendar brings us forward another decade. Now we are set in a rural site, 30 years after teacher Kang had first arrived. A red tractor carries a group of Kang's students away after a heartfelt parting with their old teacher at the entrance of a school. A flock of birds fly across the sky. The voice explains how we have now reached a 'new era' (*xin shidai*). Planes fly over agricultural land, modern irrigation systems emerge and more green and lush landscapes come into view.

An elderly Mongol minority woman waits by a bus stop to receive a group of young students, all dressed in modern clothing. They embrace each other and together raise their gaze. An eagle drifts across the blue sky and slowly an urban grid comes into sight in the eagle's line of flight. The urban grid that manifests is the Kangbashi New Area. The blueprint magically transforms from vision to city. In the same sequence the Mongolian string instrument fades away and is replaced by electronic music in a strumming reggae rhythm. The scenery changes and modern office buildings spring out from the ground similarly to how the speedy vegetation did in the preceding sequence. Inside one of these buildings young employees work on Samsung computer screens around a model for the new district's layout. New residential housing, large blue lakes, busy construction sites. People draw, plan, and calculate. A high speed train cuts across the screen on an elevated rail. The Mongolian string instrument harmonises with the reggae rhythm. Building cranes stretch towards the sky against orange sunsets. Construction: science parks, modern industry, aeroplanes, children flying kites. Western and Chinese businessmen walk down the aisles of modern office buildings followed by women in traditional Chinese dress. Kangbashi manifests itself with monumental cultural institutions, modern architecture and, on the grand Chinggis Khan Square, hundreds of Tai Chi practitioners move synchronically in spotless white clothing. A man clothed in a modern suit with a briefcase speeds by on roller skates. Police officers guide the traffic and escort school children. Young students flock to Kangbashi's new library. Modern luxury vehicles cruise down the ample streets and new car exhibitions showcase brand new designs. An exhilarated Western racing driver stands at the new 'Ordos International Circuit' track. Women dance in traditional minority costumes, flowers and plants are watered. Small romantic encounters take place. We see a graduation ceremony at the Kangbashi University, graduate caps fly into the sky. Inside museums hip youngsters gaze at paintings. Live specimens of ethnic Mongols seated in front of yurts are on display in

another museum, smiling. The camera zooms out from the museum and into large restaurant kitchens, preparing sumptuous banquets. A whole lamb is carried into a bustling restaurant. Red wine is poured into wine glasses. Shiny musical instruments playing in nightclubs fade into the night traffic that lights up the city. More dancing, this time modern. The large fountain in Kangbashi's manmade lake erupts against a background of the municipality's new administration buildings. Abundant fireworks explode into colourful patterns above the air of Kangbashi. Narrator's voice: 'Kangbashi doesn't turn its back on its future generations nor does it ignore the prospects brought along the ample roads of tomorrow [...] Modern, green, ecological, civilised, liveable. Such perfect environments are not a fairytale here. Kangbashi learns from the wisdom of the ancestors while it embraces the whole world [...] If you imagine a city's development is like the growth rings of a large tree, Kangbashi is one of modernisation's most beautiful rings. [...] Kangbashi is an entirely new horizon on the Ordos plateau'. The feature finishes off with a slogan that was widely posted around the urban districts: 'City – make life even better' (*chengshi-- rang shenghuo geng hao*).

The narrative and cinematography of the eleven minute-long promotional film essentially conveys an image of the successful urban transformation of Ordos as a frontier in two paramount senses: *development* – displaying advances in technology and improvements of the environment, emphasising steep economic growth; and *cultural* – depicting a civilised urban citizenry who quickly adapt to and benefit from the new array of cultural institutions and opportunities offered by the modern city; a city designed to ensure harmonious ethnic co-existence at China's cultural frontiers. Both of these include portraying Ordos as an exemplar of successful implementation of central state policies. The following outlines how urban transformation was partly legitimised through these two aspects respectively.

Development Frontier

At the municipality's inauguration ceremony in 2001, the local party secretary, Yun Feng, inferred several things from what he termed 'becoming a city': first, becoming a city would increase the local capacity for growth, macroeconomic controls, and resource management, while also 'advancing the socialist legal system'. Other purportedly intrinsic effects of becoming a city were technological innovations, opening Ordos up to the world through reforms. And, bearing a resemblance to earlier planned leaps, Party Secretary Yun Feng paired 'leapfrog growth' and 'stability' in such a way that these could unite in a 'harmonious and united situation' (Yun Feng in Woodworth 2013: 38). The official celebration of the

transformation from league to municipality was to happen on an auspicious date. Although approval of the administrative change, from Yeke-juu league (*Yikezhao meng*) to Ordos Municipality (*E'erduosi Shi*), came as early as April 2001, the local government decided to wait until August, a month associated with harvest and abundance, to launch the ceremony. In the Chinese post-reform years, August has become an important month number in the new Chinese astrological tradition as the Cantonese pronunciation of 8 (August) *fa* is phonetically identical that of the character *fa*, meaning to make a fortune (*facai*). Early accounts of Ordos' transformation show how local leaders tapped into this economic reform superstition, although there was some debate whether to launch the celebration on August 18 or August 28, in other words having to decide whether to make one (8 - 1 - 8 = make one fortune) or two fortunes (8 - 2 - 8 = make two fortunes). Eventually, the local administration was forced to postpone the inauguration of the new fortunate and prosperous municipality until September due to unfinished infrastructure (Bulag 2002: 196). Beyond persuasive urban imaginaries of wealth and fortune, 'leapfrogging development style' (*tiaoyueshi fazhan*)²¹ was, and – judging from the Ordos government homepage – still is, a key term that officials use to characterise Ordos' transformation. Rhetoric thus boosted the new municipality's commitment to engage with the perceived inadequacies of urban infrastructure and environment. The renewed emphasis on urban planning was devised to engage with the 'backward' conditions, and a year after league transformed into city Ordos Urban Planning Bureau was established, in 2002, bringing ever more emphasis to the role of planning and zoning strategies. Albeit carefully timed to fit with the auspicious nature of certain numbers and dates, the transformation itself nevertheless bore witness to an affirmation of a 'scientific' (*kexue*) rationale that becoming a city would not only improve the region's poor conditions, but in addition, through implementing new effective bureaucratic measures and regulations, Ordos would soon become a 'regional growth pole'.

The inauguration speech was in no way exceptional and was resonant with widespread assumptions about urbanisation in China. Assumptions that presuppose how urban transformation will naturally bring about a faster pace of development, higher rates of economic growth, and finally even a more culturally adept and civilised citizenry through means of education and campaigns (cf. Bakken 2000; Anagnost 1997; Greenhalgh and

²¹ <http://www.ordos.gov.cn/zjordan/sqgk/> (last accessed on April 24, 2013).

Winckler 2005). In the movie sequence, the city emerges as the last in a long line of evolutionary steps. Its almost magical pace of emergence is combined with an emphasis on urban planning as the device that ensures its scientific and sustainable path of development. Although the video mainly promotes the Kangbashi New Area, it simultaneously buys into a widespread imaginary of the contemporary Chinese city, of which anthropologist Uradyn E. Bulag writes: ‘Cities have emerged as the centres where industrial miracles and ‘actions’ occur, pointing towards a future utopia, departing from Mao’s ideological ambivalence, and are represented in the media as an embodiment of modernity’ (Bulag 2002: 212). Other research indicates that the lure of an urban modernity was not solely a post-reform phenomenon in China, but something that stretches back into the tide of high-socialism where the perks of urban life (electricity, cinema, phones) were to transform rural communes into better places (Lu 2006: 109).²² Yet, despite whatever ideological ambivalence toward urbanisation might have existed before, urbanisation itself has become a central index for development in provinces across China.

The celebration of successful frontier development was also evident in an exhibition held at the Dongsheng Museum in 2011, called ‘the Campaign to Open Up the West – ten years accomplishments in Ordos’ (*eerduosi xibudakaiifa shizhounian chengjiu zhan*). In the exhibition the municipal government paraded Ordos’ accomplishments by historical comparisons drawn from the years between 2001–2011:²³ the poor housing and infrastructural conditions of the Yeke-juu league were juxtaposed with photographs and illustrations of the new modernised cityscapes and grand infrastructural developments. While there were no express roads prior to 2000, by 2009 Ordos had constructed 658 km of public express roads, one step towards becoming a central node in a wider region connecting Baotou, Hohhot, and Ordos. Colourful charts exhibited steep curves displaying Ordos’ almost mythical economic growth rates, improvements in the energy sector, and technological efficiency in the extractive industries. Moreover, pictures and other charts illustrated the large-scale reforestation and anti-desertification programmes, and the construction of the brand new, iconic cultural institutions. Further charts still showcased a decade’s worth of improvement of

²² *loushang louxia – diandeng dianhua* translated as, ‘upstairs downstairs, electrical light and phones’ was a slogan that expressed how urban life would permeate rural existence, in turn, making rural life even more ‘ideal’ with its combination of natural landscapes and urban facilities such as cinemas, electricity and phones (Lu 2006: 109).

²³ The exhibition was based upon Ordos Bureau of Statistics data from 2001–2011.

social conditions related to health and educational services, new programmes of vocational training and urban civilisation programmes for resettled peasants. The spectacular developments were accompanied by acclaim and positive testimonials made by central state officials who had visited Ordos.

The exhibition served a dual purpose: firstly to showcase Ordos' sound planning and successful development, but also to place Ordos' development trajectory firmly within a broader political narrative of 'a scientific concept of development', and more specifically, as a positive example of the campaign to 'Open up the West' (*xibu da kaifa*), launched in 2000.²⁴ Common to Chinese frontier regions and, in particular, the autonomous regions in China, is that these have been subjected to a number of policies, often veiled in official rhetoric of improvement and development (Bulag 2002; 2004; Sneath 2000; Bequelin 2004; Yeh 2005; Brox and Beller-Hann 2014). Cities are central in this process as they offer sites for the implementation and evaluation of such policies and are thus focal points to ensure the proper governance of China's minority areas (Holbig 2004: 340). The campaign to 'Open up the West' was purportedly designed in an attempt to bridge the widening gap between China's quickly developing coastal regions and China's western regions, lagging behind. The official tenets of the campaign were aimed at developing infrastructure, launching environmental protection programmes, providing better education, and building more conducive environments for entrepreneurial activities. Fiscal decentralisation policies were issued creating incentives to attract outside capital and a highly-skilled labour force, coupled with tax reductions, better access to credit, and extended periods of land use. This would ease the pressure on coastal regions by creating incentives for Han Chinese to immigrate inland. Moreover, the 'opening' of the Western regions would ensure access to resources for the rest of the country. Beyond development rhetoric, the campaign involved a broad range of different agents and contradictory objectives that, as Holbig (2004) observes, would often conflict. The advance of infrastructure, Han settlement, and distinctly urban development were clear, yet less outspoken, steps to secure Han Chinese territoriality and interests throughout China's border regions. Local populations were thought less inclined to resist Chinese sovereignty if the region was developed along with a rise of citizens' living

²⁴ Western China has been a vaguely defined term, but in the case of the 'Open up the West' campaign 'the West' came to include the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Qinghai, and Gansu. Furthermore, it also included the five autonomous regions of China, and Chongqing Municipality (Goodman 2004).

standards. Accordingly, a central assumption of the policy was that harmony and social order were most likely to be secured if minority nationalities had better opportunities for economic development (Holbig 2004: 352). The campaign's emphasis on infrastructure includes not only roads and other transportation networks, but as the Ordos Party Secretary so vividly illustrated in his inauguration speech, the urban itself had become a lever in the political infrastructure, an ideological and technological device for progress. The following excerpt extracted from the Ordos government homepage draws a direct line between the campaign and the official tenets of Ordos' development path as formulated by the municipal government's administration:

With the deepening of western development, Ordos has taken advantage of its resources and followed the scientific rule of development [...]. Ordos emphasises "Green city and Husbandry Growth", taking the lead to promote grazing land rest, grazing prohibition and grazing rotation, and contributing relentless efforts to reduce the burden of farmers and herdsman.... transfer them to better-conditioned areas, and help them to attain an affluent living. [...] In recent years, Ordos carried forward the spirit "transcending oneself, promoting civilisation and achieving excellence" [...] so as to build a city with more vitality, strength, charm and harmony, and to enhance the development of politics, economy, culture and social welfare.²⁵

Again, phrases like 'achieving excellence' by 'transcending oneself' expressed the municipality's ambition to leapfrog the progressive states of urban development and catapult its citizens into a more civilised, perfect, and prosperous urban life. As an integral part of the development policy discourse in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Hu Jintao, emphasis was placed on principles of social and political stability by creating a 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*), environmental sustainability, and the acknowledging the principality of 'social needs'. Rhetoric such as this, as well as Yun Feng's inauguration speech, illustrated the ambition of Ordos as a frontier region to inscribe itself into the broader values of

²⁵ OMG: http://www.ordos.gov.cn/english/eeds2/201207/t20120724_656109.html (last accessed on August 6, 2013).

contemporary Chinese urbanism by bestowing large-scale urbanisation schemes with contemporary values such as harmony, social welfare, and ecological and economic sustainability. But furthermore, it even appeared Ordos was set to surpass many of the coastal regions by instigating ambitious environmental projects. The urban expansion schemes were paralleled with ambitions to give priority to sustainable energy solutions, transforming Ordos into a ‘green city’, and consequently, as stated by the previous local government Party Secretary in Ordos: ‘build a civilized way of life’ (Forsythe 2009). In 2010 Ordos claimed international attention when the municipal government, in collaboration with private and corporate investors, strove to reconcile economic growth and urban development with environmental protection, launching several large-scale projects to advance within the field of sustainable energy solutions. Most notably the Ordos government joined forces with First Solar, Inc. to embark on the world’s largest solar energy power plant.²⁶ These ambitions were not only manifest in rhetoric but could be inferred from the environment. Following its green and civilised line, mini-solar panels combined with small wind turbines were installed along many of the municipality’s new and ample avenues and on smaller stretches of expressway towards the neighbouring cities (Pond 2010: 43). Although Ordos’ leap forward was essentially premised on extractive industries, primarily coal, the greening ambitions would almost obliterate its fossil-fuelled boom in a wholesale transformation from grey to green. In brief, Ordos Municipality profiled itself by placing particular emphasis on the ‘social needs’ of its populace, as well as prioritising environmental sustainability through its ‘green city’ label, and ensuring a harmonious city.

Coming back to the eleven-minute long promotional video in light of the above, we see how the successful urban transformation of Ordos was rendered as perfectly aligned with China’s broader modernising and urbanising trajectory. The video exemplifies the strong utopian drive that underpinned Ordos’ urban construction, its grand ambitions, and thus provides a preliminary idea of some of the ideological components that characterised the

²⁶ The 2GW First Solar project is to be built in multiple phases initiating in 2010 and with the expected finish date in 2019. First Solar is merely one part of a planned 11.95GW New Energy Industry Demonstration Zone in Ordos. The energy zone is planned to combine wind, solar, hydroelectric and biomass power sources in order to provide renewable energy to the broader region (First Solar Webpage) <http://investor.firstsolar.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=201491&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1356152&highlight>. The site was last accessed in August 2010. Now it is no longer available. Neither is information on any new developments or news about the energy zone.

years of growth until the time of the crisis. The rendition of history moving forward in calendric time towards ever-more glorious, and advanced states of explicitly urban living alerts our attention to the teleological underpinnings and evolutionary rationale that encapsulate the form of modernist urbanisation as it was promoted in Ordos. Moreover, the rapid industrialisation, green growth, urban planning, and emerging business culture suggest a perfect synchronisation between Ordos as developing frontier and the central state policies of the day.

Cultural Frontier

The local government's appropriation of the CCP's concept of 'scientific development' (*kexue fazhan*)²⁷ combined with the path laid out by the campaign to 'Open up the West' served to legitimise a broad range of spatial and social transformations. These included large-scale processes of resettlement, urban renovation, wasteland policies,²⁸ the exclusion of more traditional forms of subsistence economies, and a set of educational and civilising campaigns. In the Kangbashi movie, the didactic nature of the city drew legitimacy from the mythical character of teacher Kang 康 (being the character for healthy, peaceful, abundant – and also an ordinary Han Chinese surname), purportedly the man who gave his name to the new district. Analogous to the wise teacher Kang who arrived in Ordos to teach the ethnic minority children, the new district of Kangbashi teaches through its spectacular modern design, impelling the population towards better education, international business, cultural awareness, and the prevailing urban values that characterise a city that 'makes life even better'. Claiming to 'reduce the burden of farmers and herdsmen' by moving them to areas with 'better conditions' served to legitimise the forced resettlement of local farmers who inhabited the territory needed for the urban expansion. Moreover policies that are supposedly meant to halt grassland degradation by e.g. 'converting pastures to grasslands' (*tuimu huancao*) also exclude the more traditional (and ethnic) forms of subsistence economy in the region like that of pastoral Mongolians (cf. Yeh 2005; Sneath 2000).

As evident from the promotional video, the official version of Ordos' leap did not eradicate minority culture, but rather seemed to embrace it as a characteristic feature of the

²⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/julian-baird-gewirtz/scientific-development-an_b_1182514.html (Last accessed on May 15, 2014).

²⁸ For more on the wasteland policy see Peter Ho 2003.

city. The minority issue was central in the genesis and the designs of the district; clearly a brand that could give Ordos a competitive edge pitted against other municipal regions. Yet the video also effectively conveyed the idea of harmonious interethnic coexistence, as manifested by the minority woman who leaves her traditional garments and joins the batch of greening pioneers dressed in Liberation Army clothes. Such imagery subtly designates the ethnic (sedentary) Han as arriving in what was already a desert, assisting the local population (Mongol, pastoral) by planting seeds, making it green, and in this way subtly identifies who are deemed the culprits and who the improvers of the region's progressive desertification. Moreover, researchers have observed how ethnic minorities are often feminised in contrast to the Han Chinese (Gladney 2004), something that is also implied in the scene. From the video, ethnicity was mostly rendered as a question of design and the kind of heritage that one could glance at; even enjoy as live specimens inside museums. With the urban design deeply embedded in the narrative and ethnic myth of the new district, minority traditions exist in perfect harmony with the modern city.

Scrutinising municipalities as emerging (non-ethnic) governing entities in the IMAR, Anthropologist Uradyn E. Bulag observes how the change from league to municipality did not imply the obliteration of ethnic components in regional policymaking or urban planning. Despite the state's proclivity to attempt homogenisation and govern minority areas through large development programmes and urbanisation, Bulag observes how the transition itself was clothed in a great celebration of ethnic culture: 'Nothing could mark this hard-won progress better than dropping the feudal, backward-sounding name Yikezhao Meng and replacing it with E'erdusi Shi, conveying simultaneously a positively exotic indigenous image and a cosmopolitan ring, perhaps auguring humanity's future' (Bulag 2002: 197). The pairing of the name 'Ordos' and 'municipality' intimately linked the exotic image of Mongolian heritage with utopian visions of urban life, consolidating Ordos' past and future in the narrative becoming of Kangbashi. The administrative change to Ordos Municipality did superficially buy into an idea of regional autonomy through its name (alluding to the ethnic legacy of guarding the Chinggis Khan tomb). Yet by becoming a city (*shi*) and leaving behind the prior administrative designation of 'league' (*meng*), it resonated with a longer line of attempts to homogenise and 'harmonise' China's frontier regions. And, by the particular transformation to municipality, the region was subjected to the dominant 'urban centred system' in which the rural hinterland falls under the administrative authority of municipal governments (Hsing

2010: 94, 95). The way ethnicity was celebrated and harnessed in the urban design as well as inside Ordos' new museums, seemed to downplay how the new designation as a municipality essentially meant a change to an administrative unit more consistent with the rest of the country.

In the above discussion I have shown how the urban transformation was sanctified by considerations of auspicious dates, rational planning, scientific development, promises of future utopias, and the friendly ethnic co-existence that one could infer from the built environment. Simultaneously, a perfect alliance existed between central state development policies and the local accomplishments: advancing levels of modernisation, improving the living standards of the local population, launching of environmental protection programmes and the sound and scientific planning undertaken by the new municipal government. Next, foregrounding Kangbashi as the most prominent instantiation of Ordos' leap into an urban modernity, I explore in more depth the dynamics and strategies of city building in Ordos. Finally, engaging perspectives that treat state planning and modernist urbanisation, the last part will draw out advantages and downsides of applying these analytical perspectives to the case of Ordos.

How was the transformation enforced?

As already implied by Yun Feng's speech at the inauguration of the municipality, the region's overall development was framed as a question of creating and managing a modern city. Since Ordos had changed status to municipality, land had taken centre stage for the municipality's transcendence. One of the ways that Ordos sought to rid itself of its mining boom legacy was by implementing strategies that would diversify its economy and expand its narrow industrial base into new capacities. These included creative industries clusters, industrial parks, specialised industrial zones, zones for equipment manufacturing, vehicle themed cultural parks, car assembly and production areas, cloud computing and animation zones. All of these were planned and meticulously designed in collaboration with private and corporate stakeholders. New, grand, sports and cultural venues were designed to host world-class events. Altogether a total of more than 700 km² were laid out as future zones for specialised

production and industry.²⁹ Apart from the redevelopment of already existing urban areas, a majority of these developments would be located in expanding districts and urban areas. This section engages with the policies and practices of eviction and relocation that cleared the land for these many new endeavours. Following this, I move on to shed light on the ways that it was attempted to populate new, modernised urban areas with a more civilised and adept citizenry.

The 'Ordos Model'

In the promotional film mostly desert and barren landscapes made up the space of the new district. In reality, however, several small village sites were located there before. As argued above, urban planning served to legitimise the way land was put to new uses by the 'rational' restructuring of the city in the name of modernisation. The prospect of increased revenue gain from intensified resource extraction alongside the profits from widening the scope for the profitable land lease economy spurred a process of mass evictions and the relocation of tens of thousands of households. Simultaneously, Ordos engaged in extensive redevelopment and modernising of already existing urban areas generating a new mass of relocations, this time in inner city regions. Relocations were thus rampant both in and outside the urban fringe. To provide an idea of the scope of the inner city demolition–construction process, Ordos' most densely populated district of Dongsheng can serve as an example. The district has a population of approximately half a million. In the four years between 2006 and 2010 more than seven million m² of floor space were torn down, relocating more than 50,000 households. This pace would accelerate even further and by 2011 a projected three million m² was to be demolished within a single year (OMG 2011). Other areas boasted similar or even more radical redevelopment trajectories. Yijinhualuo Banner had almost everything rebuilt in the years leading up to 2011. The local government of Yijinhualuo invested 48 billion RMB in order to expand the built up area from 4.5 km² to 32 km² (Woodworth 2012: 87). Amongst these developments was a zone that included 100 densely located high-rises intended for local-level and municipal-level civil servants (*gongwuyuan qu*).

In some cases, however, resettlement schemes backfired and turned into local disputes. Considering the government rhetoric above aiming to ease 'the burden of farmers

²⁹ Ordos Planning Bureau: http://www.ordosgh.gov.cn/ghzss/ztgh/201005/t20100525_186923.html (last accessed August 20, 2014).

and herdsmen' by transferring them to areas with 'better conditions', the effects of urban expansion most notably concerned pastoralists and farmers, who in many cases were removed from their lands and resettled in 'migrant communities' (*yiminqu*). Resettlements of low-income brackets of the population rarely take up attractive locations within the city, so entire villages would be rehoused in high-rise apartment clusters located outside the urban fringe. One group of farmers, who had resided in a small village in the Yijinhuoluo banner (approximately 25 km from Dongsheng) were recently relocated on the outskirts of the Kangbashi area, as the land was needed for urban expansion. According to villagers, Mr Baiguang Bin, who was Yijinhuoluo Banner's secretary, had delivered a public speech in 2002 stating that the expropriated land would be used for urban construction and public facilities, therefore essentially being in the interests of farmers and herdsmen. Land was explicitly not to be expropriated for the purpose of resale, boosterish purposes, or land lease speculation. Farmers received compensation and were subsequently relocated. By 2005, a pricing land assessment noted a 3,280-fold increase of value of the relocated farmers' property.³⁰ Faced with the spectacular building spree, widespread privatisation, and large-scale villa residential areas, this group of farmers decided to petition the 'Bureau for Letters and Visits' (*xinfang/shangfang*). Petitions from resettled farmers were often silenced locally, and judging by accounts from the relocated peasants it seemed that petitions to the higher levels of regional governments were of little use. Max Woodworth notes an exemplary case based on the experience and testimonies of a group of more persistent petitioners who, upon deciding to bring the case before the IMAR's capital petitioning institution in Hohhot, were not only prevented from leaving Ordos by brute force (some were imprisoned), but the ones who did make it to Hohhot's petition institution were rejected on the basis that employees dealing with such complaints would not feel comfortable raising such an issue that might spur conflict with their colleagues in the Ordos' municipal government (Woodworth 2013: 73,74).

In spite of such instances of petitions, compensation in Ordos was rated amongst the highest in China, reaching as much as 8000 RMB per m². Often included in the resettlement agreement was government subsidised housing. Many families therefore, especially rural ones with larger plots of land, suddenly disposed of over millions-worth of assets. Despite the more resistant communities, most eviction and new construction happened at a brisk pace due to the

³⁰ <http://shehui.daqi.com/article/2856983.html> (last accessed on April 22, 2014).

high level compensation commanded by what was later termed ‘the Ordos model’. Although the model was not part of any official policy or plan, it was nevertheless implemented in practice when land parcels were negotiated. With the intense pace of demolition and reconstruction, many urban households even experienced several turns of relocation and compensation. A large group of new millionaires such as Mr Liu and his family who I mentioned in the introduction was thus produced overnight. Despite the slightly exaggerated pace of the transformation from desert to green city depicted in the promotional video, it did convey some sense of the velocity with which the physical environment transformed in the years of growth following municipalisation.

The City of Quality

Of the city’s horizontal expansion, most notable was the Kangbashi New Area as the municipality’s new flagship project, and this was the main site that was to attract the many new industrial endeavours that would support the city in the long run. According to the local government, Kangbashi should serve as Ordos’ new centre for ‘politics, culture, finance, science and education, making Ordos one of the most charming cities in western China with her ideal, quiet and beautiful living and working environment’.³¹ Kangbashi was designed to act as a new administrative centre for the Ordos Municipality, with the preliminary capacity to house a population of 300,000, this being the projected population for 2020.³² Despite planners and experts’ warnings about the risk of constructing an entirely new urban area in a region that was foremost a net exporter of residents (Erdos Urban Development Strategy 2005: 28), it was nevertheless decided to follow through with the expansion of the city into the Kangbashi new area, located 27 kilometres southwest of Dongsheng District, the *old* administrative centre and main urban core of Ordos.

Upon entering, the expressways unfold into wide arteries of ample roads and avenues. In summertime, approach roads are clothed in flowers, planted to make up ethnic ornaments and city slogans. Large sculptures are erected above these arteries. With its low density of construction, Kangbashi expands outwards in ordered concentric circles opposed to the ad

³¹ http://www.ordos.gov.cn/english/ordos5/200908/t20090811_73261.html (last accessed on April 24, 2014).

³² For more detailed information on Kangbashi’s history, dates, development, and most central institutions see, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1177473.htm> (last accessed on April 24, 2014). See also Woodworth 2012 for a more extensive analysis of design and development of Kangbashi.

hoc, chaotic sprawl of Dongsheng District, the earlier seat of the administration. Apart from larger residential areas primarily designed to accommodate civil servants, Kangbashi was planned to include a range of spectacular museums and theatres, a power plant, automobile industries, a new horse-shaped F3 racetrack, universities, and a prominent middle school. Many of these had been constructed upon my first arrival in early 2011. Large green areas and parks stood in contrast with the general lack of leisure sites in Ordos' other urban districts. Everywhere police patrolled and guided the scarce traffic, traffic signs were abundant, no litter was scattered around, large vacant spaces and spectacular designs all stood in stark contrast to the urban forms that were dominant earlier. Although the ample roads and overall design of the district appealed to more drivers and less to pedestrians, public buses serving commuters inside Kangbashi were free of charge. In short, compared with already existing urban districts in Ordos, Kangbashi was an almost perfect inversion.

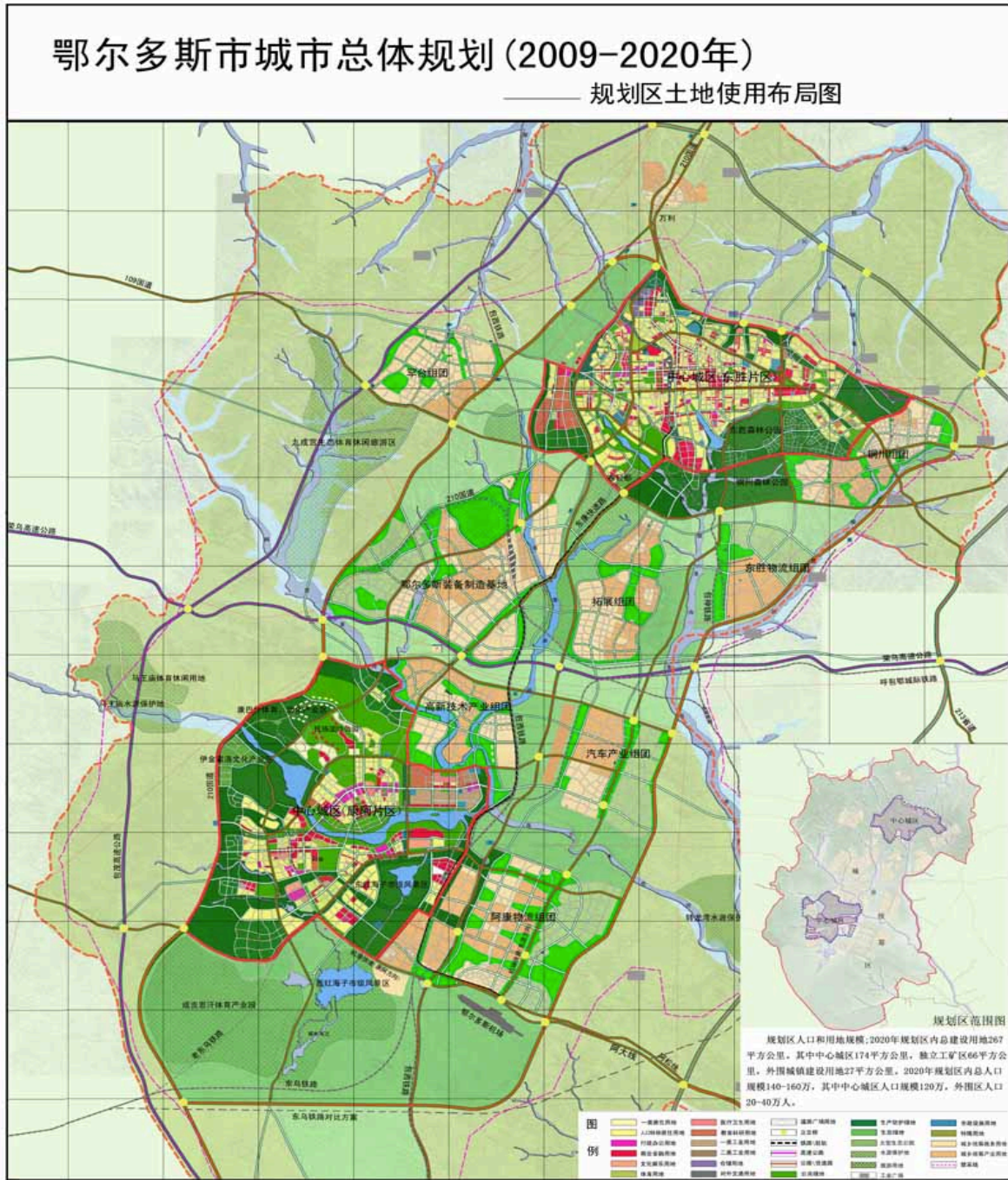


Figure 1. Above we see the master plan for Ordos Municipality (2009–2020) showing land use designations and zoning strategies within the wider municipal region.³³

³³ The Master Plan was retrieved from Ordos Government homepage (Urban Planning Board): Several additional and accessible maps include more in-depth information about planning of new zones, industrial clusters, development of urban management systems, transportation planning, social services including the improvements of Ordos’ educational, medical and cultural facilities. It also includes an overview of future engineering projects and natural disaster prevention. http://www.ordosgh.gov.cn/ghzss/ztgh/201005/t20100525_186923.html (last accessed June 10, 2014)

Initially, Kangbashi was the brainchild of the former and now highly revered mayor and later Party Secretary of Ordos, Yun Feng.³⁴ In its early stages, the area was intended as an Economic and Technological Development Zone called the Qing Chun Development Zone, following the pattern of numerous zoning developments around China (Woodworth 2013: 47). Later on this aim was modified, instead pursuing the rising trend of ‘new town/city’ (*xin cheng*) development project, a trend that had become prevalent in the early 2000s. These ‘new towns’ were characterised by their mixed use including residential areas, commerce, industry, culture etc. bringing together a heterogeneous set of agents and interests in the ‘new town’ development (Hsing 2010: 114). The planned area of the new development was to be 200 square kilometres with an urban core area of 31 square kilometres (Erdo Urban Development Strategy 2005). The new urban core was conceived as a sun rising over a meadow and radiating outward.³⁵ The massive ‘Chinggis Khan Square’, 400 metres wide and 1.6 kilometres long (640,000 m²), connects the new municipal government’s monumental new headquarters to an adjacent cultural area, including Ordos Performing Arts Centre, a library, the Ordos Museum, and a cultural centre – all landmark projects that paraded Ordos’ new cultural ambitions drawing clear lines to the region’s cultural legacy,³⁶ while also profiling itself through the use of renowned architects as to imply its international reach. At the bottom of the square a large manmade lake was located in a straight line directly beneath municipal headquarters that, slightly elevated, could oversee the district from its base on the massive square, surpassing that of Beijing’s Tiananmen in size. As Woodworth observes in his analysis of the core of Kangbashi’s spatial layout, it was designed in a way to cater for several purposes: firstly, the centrality, location and level of the government headquarters was a way to crystallise and monumentalise local state power; secondly, Ordos’ ecological strain would be obliterated by indicating ecological balance and harmony in the design; thirdly, by following Chinese geomantic principles the superior position would ‘ensure prosperity and

³⁴ Yun Feng was secretary of the Ordos Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China and was the most central character behind Ordos’s ambitious urban development through the years of rapid economic growth following the development of its natural resources.

³⁵ Tsinghua and Tongji Universities were contracted to draw up a master plan for the ground area of Kangbashi (see Woodworth 2012). Sub-departments in universities that engage with urban planning and development are increasingly becoming ‘engines of land development’ and local drivers of real estate (Wang and Leng 2012: 63).

³⁶ The performing arts theatre was built in the shape of a traditional Mongolian headdress and the library was conceived as a collection of classic Mongolian texts.

ward off misfortune’; and finally, the slightly elevated and central location of the government followed classical Chinese urban principles where social order and authority would be secured by a spatial iteration of cosmological principles of social order (Woodworth 2012: 89-90). Across from the manmade lake a new financial district, the Xintai central CBD, was marked by a couple of high-rise twin towers, directly facing the government’s new administration as if marking a close bond between the municipal government and the city’s financial prowess. The 2010–2020 master plan (above) envisions a dual urban core made up of Dongsheng District to the northeast and Kang A (Kangbashi and its bordering region Azhen) to the southwest. As seen from the plan above, the stretch between these two cores will make up a central part of the area to be populated with the abovementioned industries, high-tech clusters, sports stadiums, and some residential areas. To speed up the processes of construction, many designs and templates were simply copied and reproduced from other cities.³⁷ One such example was the Kangbashi New Sculpture Park where several hundreds of Western and Asian artists would be paid well simply to have some of their earlier work reproduced in an art and sculpture production site on the outskirts of Beijing. Most artists never oversaw or even encountered their works that were freighted on to Kangbashi. Yet other examples included emulating the designs of bridges, creative industry zones, parks etc.

To attract business, large plots in the newly converted urban land were rendered accessible and allocated to influential enterprises. One of these was Huatai Automobile Company that, as a reward for setting up a local production base was not only rewarded with large parcels of land in the Kangbashi area (4.3 km²) but as state functionaries working with land conversions explained, Huatai’s deal also included valuable stocks in the local resource industry. The government adopted a ‘resources for industries’ policy that granted large-scale industries generous rewards in coal, as an economic strategy to counter the often seen decline in the manufacturing sector that comes along with the expansion of resource economy; a proven path that had struck other similar resource boomtowns as implied in the economic concept of the ‘Dutch disease’. Other companies listed on the Ordos government homepage are Cherry Automobile, and China International Capital Corporation Ltd., the latter focusing on the development of sustainable energy in Inner Mongolia. Smaller commercial enterprises

³⁷ This is not particular to Ordos and replications of both national and international designs are seen widely across municipalities across China (Kongjian Yu and Padua 2007).

would pay little if any initial taxation for the first couple of years, and rent for space would be free of charge in the slow years of starting up. Government promised subsidies for start-up businesses within tertiary industry.

Kangbashi was not merely a functional expansion of the city in order to spur industrial growth. It was also crafted as a showcase for urban planning, architecture, and the new municipality's economic development (cf. de Muynck 2009; Woodworth 2012). Kangbashi did, in many aspects, echo earlier instances of high modernist cities: the grid structure of the city, its zones and clearly defined wards attested to functional and rational principles of ordering; an aesthetic of geometrical simplicity and its immense plazas were clearly in agreement with Le Corbusier's love of straight lines and right-angled intersections. Even more to the point, as an almost perfect mirror-inversion of the disordered nature of previous urban areas, Kangbashi came into being on a purportedly blank slate with the same clarity and utopianism that Le Corbusier had described in his vision of the city of the future, 'La Ville Radieuse' (Le Corbusier 1967). Yet, the neutrality that is often characteristic of high-modernist design was to some extent compromised by the way Kangbashi's minority culture features catered to the market value of its exotic past while simultaneously feeding into Chinese geomancy and classical principles of urban form.

Civilisation Campaigns

As the clearest embodiment of the municipality's ascendance to an urban modernity, measures were taken to alter the quality of its citizens as well. Beyond the physical restructuring of the environment, instantiations of sovereignty are also, and maybe increasingly, linked to the premise of improvement of 'the people' to ensure proper community life within the wider realm of the nation state (cf. Stepputat 2013: 36). In the Chinese context, Børge Bakken (2000) coins the term 'exemplary society' to mean working to improve the quality of populations through educational campaigns and by providing examples of model behaviour. Ordos was no exception. Paramount to the adaptation to the new modern and urban existence, the Ordos administration launched an array of civilising campaigns to ensure synchronicity between civilised urbanites and the new modern environment. Central authorities for the 'Spiritual Civilisation Committee' (*zhongyang jingshen wenming*) declared the collective responsibility to help build a 'National Civilised City' (*guojia wenming*

chengshi).³⁸ The ‘National Civilised City’ emerged as a category in the wake of the reform and opening policy with the aim of building and strengthening a socialist, spiritual, civilisation. As the local administration opted to join the exclusive group of National Civilised Cities, Ordos’ municipal government installed brand new newspaper stands along many roads in the new as well as the old districts to heighten the quality of the population, that was otherwise known for its low literacy rate. Litter bins were set up on most streets to ensure proper waste management. Throughout 2010–2011 much of the urban environment was plastered in slogans, advertisements and banners; groups of young people volunteering as social workers were deployed at street corners to propagate the correct demeanour of an urban citizenry; harsher security measures were implemented at schools; unlicensed rural vendors of foodstuffs were deported from the city centre. Large billboards displayed images of small children reading books and playing violins on virtual green lawns, sitting next to old mills and lakes. Slogans erected along the streets of Ordos prophesied: ‘make life more civilised and beautiful, be a civilised citizen, help create a civilised city’ – all promises of the increasingly civilised urbanites, yet to transcend. During pronounced periods of evaluation all groups of civil servants would take turns at conducting community work, guiding traffic, escorting school children etc. Old Cultural Revolution campaigns resurfaced stipulating new moral and urban messages, reiterating old slogans such as ‘follow the examples of comrade Lei Feng’ as a way to engage young people in volunteer and community work. As government aimed to populate the new modernised cityscape with a more culturally adept, hygienic, consumer-oriented, and law-abiding citizenry, new evaluation parameters were established to gauge to what extent the (urban) leaps were adequately qualified in the population (cf. Bakken 2000; Anagnost 1997; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). In December 2011 Ordos was finally awarded with the provisional title of being a National Civilised City.³⁹

Despite the widespread recognition that orderliness and security were important, most

³⁸ The ‘National Civilized City Assessment System’, was first published in 2005, and acted as the first national standard indicator system to evaluate the effect of ‘mass spiritual civilization building activities’. The 2005 version was later revised in 2008, and after revision comprised 111 indicators. The assessment system purportedly surveys the development level of economy, politics, culture, and social construction as well as the level of ‘spiritual and material civilization construction’ (Zhao 2011: 16-19). For insights on the nature of the evaluation and survey see: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/3771791.htm> (last accessed on April 24, 2014).

³⁹ Any city that obtains the title of ‘civilized’ must, however, prove civilized for another four years before finally being appointed as *long-term* civilized. Parallel to the National Civilized City agenda, Ordos further opted to become a ‘National Hygienic City’, an assessment implemented by the ‘National Patriotic Health Campaign Committee’.

of my interlocutors considered the whole ordeal of civilising campaigns to be part of officials' ambitions to climb up the Party ladder. Citizens, including low and mid-level state functionaries, would explain how enforcement was less bothersome and more lax during the periods in between alleged assessments, but an annoyance during evaluation. The dubious effects of civilising campaigns echoed James Holston's observations from Brasilia (1989) where the population that were imagined to become the pioneer citizens of the nation's new modern capital simply did not comply with the overall agenda. Inhabitants would even subvert the ideological tenets of urban planning by occupying and using the city in unintended ways. Despite similarities, there was a deeper ambivalence in the way Ordos' citizens engaged with the leap. The majority of citizens that I encountered explained the monumental designs, the rhetoric, and the civilising campaigns as something that was not intended for them – something that pertained to a political realm, often implied in the notion of 'prestige projects' (*zhengji gongcheng*). Although official discourse, slogans, or civilising campaigns were mostly ignored or simply considered bothersome, this did not seem to rob citizens of their trust in the broader course of successful urban development. But from where did this trust emanate? Judging from the shortcomings of the local government when it came to convincing the local population that campaigns and civilising discourse were more than a political spectacle, the local state's boosterish rhetoric and development discourse was not what prompted investments or compliance among the population. But, then what was? Engaging with these questions, the following part reviews central points in the literature that deal with modernist urbanisation in order to trace out similarities and differences.

High Modernist Schemes, a Discussion

Anthropological and historical accounts of planning and state ordained leaps have critically engaged with questions of ideology and social engineering through a focus on the underlying assumptions that direct planning. A common assumption was that a thorough and scientific restructuring of the physical environment will make new kinds of persona, and eventually transform society in the direction intended by the planner (Brandtstädter 2007; Harvey 2003; Holston 1989). In his study of Brasilia, James Holston deciphers the appeal of modernist aesthetics in a development context. Holston points to affinities between 'modernism as an aesthetic of erasure and reinscription and modernization as an ideology of development in

which governments, regardless of persuasion, seek to rewrite national histories' (1989: 5).⁴⁰ In this light, schemes of modernist urbanisation are thus often seen as a correlate, or complimentary to the state. In his work "Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed" (1998), James Scott identifies four core components of high-modernist planning: firstly, an administrative approach to affect a given territory, its population and resources. Secondly, common in high modernist planning is a naive belief in the way technology can bring along progress by a mastering of nature. Thirdly, behind the blueprints Scott identifies an authoritarian government that monopolises decision making. Finally, the last common denominator of the cases scrutinised by Scott is the compliance of a weak civil society that goes along with the state's desire to modernise. Docile subjects are thus – without regard to any kind of cultural, religious, or social considerations – catapulted by technology into the visions of the state (Scott 1998: 4-7). Despite the more obvious spatial aspects of planning practices, scholars further note how leaps to modernise also produce certain temporal orders, rhythms, and perceptions of time (cf. Ferguson 1999; Verdery 1996: 40–43; Harms 2011). Treating urbanisation in Vietnam, Erik Harms observes the intimate relation between urban development in Ho Chi Minh City and a particular temporal logic: the 'forever arriving better future' (2011: 91). This, he argues, entails living on the ruling 'party's time' which essentially is a propagandistic temporal order that is highly teleological and progressive (see also Fergusson 1999: 4, 5). Archaeologist John Fowles observes how 'the very notion of evolutionary progress relied upon a hidden teleological compulsion for society to acquire more and more of its missing things, gradually filling out a checklist of civilizations predetermined accomplishments' (Fowles 2010: 34). In this light, terms like 'transcendence' or 'development' work along a reverse temporal logic and are predicated on things that are yet to materialise.

As has been argued, much contemporary Chinese urban planning exhibits a strong proclivity for modernist ideas of scientific rationalism in a kind of 'tabula rasa logic' (Visser 2010), drawing much force from a utopian forward orientation, as clearly devised by the

⁴⁰ In 1958 Chairman Mao illustrated a similar modernist proclivity to rewrite history, stating: 'Apart from their other characteristics, the outstanding thing about China's 600 million people is that they are "poor and blank". That may seem a bad thing, but in reality it is a good thing. Poverty gives rise to the desire for change, the desire for action and the desire for revolution. On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written, the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted' (Mao 1958 in Lu 2006: 1).

promotional film. In Ordos, evocative concepts and utopian rhetoric were aptly orchestrated by the local administration in its development rhetoric of ‘becoming a city’, and of transcending Ordos’ temporal and spatial marginality through urbanisation. Through plans, calculations, and the almost magical – yet scientific – path towards fulfilling the visual markers of progress as it was imagined Ordos indexed the strong orientation towards the future, a future that served to legitimise the ongoing process of construction and the grand transformations that seamlessly combined the traditional with the modern. A similar push toward modernisation is found in Li Zhang’s analysis of urban development in Kunming, China. Here she illustrates how cities perceived as ‘lagging behind’ (*luohou*) consequently look to China’s modern coastal areas and developing zones for model developments (Li 2006: 463), and from its lateness a more radical process of urban redevelopment manifests. In light of these insights, understanding China’s ‘underdeveloped’ inland territories as places that are, by implication, unfilled or incomplete thus correlates well with existing development rhetoric or schemes to improve social conditions. In addition to these features, it’s important to note that urbanisation in the IMAR includes the element of governing minority areas, which may further opt for stronger state regulation of frontiers through urban planning and the implementation of development programmes. Towards the end of his rich work on municipalisation in Ordos, Uradyn E. Bulag raises the question of whether and how a resistance to urbanise might emerge, one that might challenge the Chinese state’s exploitation of the region’s resources and people (Bulag 2002: 223). Bulag’s hopeful passage, addressing the region’s future autonomy in the face of a sovereign state’s attempt to regulate, control, or exploit its populations and territory does, to some extent, reiterate the critical accounts of high modernist planning with their narratives of improving social conditions which, in turn, serve to legitimise a line of authoritarian interventions.

Evidently, the above accounts provide us with a forceful palette of techniques to decipher and launch a critique of modernist urbanisation at China’s minority frontiers. Ordos’ schemes of urban expansion translate well into critical meditations that portray state interventions in frontier regions, they raise the issue of social engineering, and enable the exploitation of resources and labour force (Scott 1998; Wu 2007; Farish 2009; Holston 1989). Even in hindsight, the acute crisis that occurred towards the end of 2011 makes it even more tempting to render Ordos’ urban transformation as yet another instantiation of failed high modernist planning with dire social and economic effects. However, as argued in the

chapter's introduction, the high modernist reading only brings us part of the way in understanding Ordos' urban transition. Binary categories such as state vs. civil society, power vs. resistance, planning vs. local reactions tend to cloud other issues of equally great importance. A central problem is that these perspectives tend to reduce ethnic or local reactions to either that of submission or resistance (Li 2005). Taking one step towards understanding how the leap materialised in the lives of the resettled population, the following part takes up two central questions that a high modernist perspective falls short of unfolding in more depth: in the first part, 'State – Seeing like a Company', I turn to the question of the ambiguous nature of local state governance. Next, in 'Catching Up', the dissertation proposes that to understand Ordos' particular trajectory of modernist urbanisation we have to encompass a more deep-seated and vernacular form of urgency that existed beyond the political and economic elite that directs much of contemporary Chinese urbanism. As an effect of Ordos' resettlement policies such urgency was coupled with the enchantments of visible wealth that, in turn, further exacerbated the speed of urban transformation. In short, such traits make Ordos a less straightforward case of dispossession or state planning failure.

State – Seeing like a Company

During the process of construction, the Ordos Government homepage boasted its financial prowess as it explained how construction relied, primarily, on investment by other parties:

Without investment from the government, Kangbashi New District wisely takes advantage of the local market and raises money from various channels [and is now] on the way to a very successful new district construction [...] The district's very sound planning, infrastructure construction and ecological system have attracted many investors.⁴¹

In the case of Kangbashi, two strategies in particular were applied to finance the development: first the government established a City Investment Corporation, appointing key

⁴¹ http://www.ordos.gov.cn/english/ordos5/200908/t20090811_73261.html (last accessed on April 24, 2014).

The page further states: 'For these years, by means of issuing bonds and bank financing, the district has secured 1.15 billion yuan from the Development Bank to ensure investment in the new district's construction. At present, according to the listed price of the land, benefits on land selling can reach five billion Yuan for each item, which has laid a very solid foundation for the district's sustainable development'.

characters in the municipal government as managers of the corporation.⁴² As municipal governments are essentially not allowed to borrow money, the City Investment Corporation can, through its legal guise, use large parcels of land for collateral and in this way indirectly raise funds through bonds and bank loans.⁴³ Municipal-level governments increasingly leverage local developments by establishing limited liability companies that can borrow money, and, through recent reforms of the Chinese bond market, even issue debt (Walter and Howie 2011: 134). A second way that the municipal government would trim initial expenses was through so-called Build–Operate–Transfer (BOT) schemes that are forms of project financing where private sector agents finance, design, operate, and profit from infrastructural projects until an agreed time where it will transfer into the hands of the local state. For instance a private developer will finance and construct a piece of express road and can collect fees from users until the end of a certain time frame when these rights and maintenance responsibilities shift to public hands. These BOT are now commonplace for private sector involvement in China’s infrastructural and urban development (see, for example Shen, Lee and Zhang 1996). Despite soaring revenue streams, these did not suffice to finance the city’s ambitious urban expansionist schemes. Therefore, to a large degree, the financing of the new district development relied on emerging forms of land mortgaging and nebulous forms of non-state investment. In practice, many of the local improvements were carried out through extensive redevelopment projects in which municipal governments established their own land development companies that, in Ordos as in many other cases, were strongly co-opted by commercial and private sector developers. As professor Hsing notes in her rich work on the territorial strategies of municipal governments in China, such companies act with the benefits of being both public and private: this enables them to gain access to credit, use new forms of financial vehicle with the limited liability of non-state actors while they simultaneously undertake public tasks as they conduct land surveys, designate certain buildings as dangerous (*weifang*), commission redevelopment zones, conduct land value appraisals and title

⁴² A report dealing with Ordos’ urban development strategies states: ‘the government is supplying the land and has also received a 240 million Y loan with private investors covering the rest of the investment (approximately 360 million Y). The government’s loan is to be repaid through land leasing charges.’ (Erdos Urban Development Strategy 2005:27).

⁴³ From 1994 local and municipal governments were banned from borrowing money. Yet, in 2008, it was officially permitted for local governments to run deficits. This created what economists Walter and Howie (2011: 138) refer to as a ‘bonanza’ for local governments as many went full-scale into new possible ‘financing platforms’ (*rongzi jingtai*).

verifications, and cadastral registration in a highly capital-intensive practice (Hsing 2008: 65).

But why not simply expand the already existing urban area on its fringes, why locate the new urban area further away, forcing the population to commute? Commonly, one can identify a gradual rent level that moves out from the urban core. The most valuable land and highest land leases are most often those located at the heart of cities, near its cultural institutions, close by business districts and administrative centres. In this light, Ordos' strategy for urban expansion and, in particular, the construction of the Kangbashi New Area, provides an apt example of how a doubling of city centres can enable an almost mythical rise of real estate value on land that otherwise would be of little worth, in terms of financial evaluation. Whereas earlier development zones revolved around discourses of industrialisation and had their success measured in industrial output and contribution to GDP, 'new town' developments like Kangbashi emanate from a distinctively urban discourse and with their mixed use spanning from residential units, to commercial areas, and cultural and administrative centres etc. the success of 'new towns' is measured by increase of property prices, real estate and infrastructural developments (Hsing 2010: 114). The oversupply of urban spaces, sometimes popularised as 'modern ghost cities', is therefore partly attributable to the economic incentives and territorial strategies of municipal-level governments and the powerful coalitions they make up part of. As seen from the prevailing models that the municipal government employed for financing infrastructural and new district developments, a large part of the design and management of the new developments was undertaken by agents in the private sector or, at least, through opaque models of co-operation and ownership. Moving beyond a sole focus on state, Fulong Wu, the editor of 'China's emerging cities: the making of new urbanism', observes the retreat of the state as a central developer of infrastructure (Wu 2007: 10). These trends make Ordos a less straightforward case of state planning. Although Scott himself anticipated critiques of his work by writing '...large scale capitalism is just as much an agency of homogenization, uniformity, grids, and heroic simplifications as the state is, with the difference being that, for capitalists, simplification must pay' (Scott 1998: 8), I argue that before we engage the capital-intensive practices employed by local level governments across China from the same set of analytical propositions as that of authoritarian states, we need to consider the effects of these new configurations of power and financing.

The assumption that there exists a perfect alignment between design and planners'

intentions might also be compromised given the opportunistic drive that underlies many developing municipalities. As mentioned in the introduction, fiscal de-centralisation brought about a more competitive relation between sub-national level governments that spawned further opportunistic behaviour on several levels of state. Many of these therefore find ways to dodge or circumvent centrally stipulated regulations that could inhibit local growth and investments. Bulag writes: ‘Thanks to the state’s fiscal devolution policy in the 1990s, non-coastal regions could exercise their own authority to devise more attractive policies. As all development-crazed regions, including Inner Mongolia, vie for their own comparative and competitive advantages to attract outside capital, they compete to remove ever more legal or administrative hurdles’ (Bulag 2002: 112). This premise compels us to look beyond local development discourse, officials plans, and architectural design in order to question the congruence between the tenets promulgated by central state and the multiple and often contradictory practices of local governments.

Catching Up

Before municipalisation urban planning played a minor role and the plans that were openly declared held little sway in face of the chaotic realities of life during the initial phase of the economic boom. As a consequence, the municipality’s strong emphasis on urban planning and visible commitment to redevelopment translated well into the local population’s desire to improve the conditions of the city. Initially, the 1990s economic growth fostered by extractive industries was not accompanied by improvements of the urban environment. Dongsheng District, that had acted as the Yeke-juu league’s main administrative core until municipalisation, was overpopulated, planning perceived as dysfunctional, chaotic and lagging behind. Environmental conditions that were already strained by industrial pollution further worsened as citizens were solely dependent on coal as the energy source. Due to the earlier policies giving primacy to industrial-based planning there were few places in the city for leisure activities. Citizens, even those as young as in their late twenties, could give vivid accounts of the limited infrastructure before the modernistic urbanisation had begun to gain momentum. As land was needed for resource extraction and anti-desertification campaigns, much of the population living outside the urban fringe was relocated inside the city, putting an even greater strain on the city’s services and infrastructure. Those who had grown up in Ordos would primarily describe the time before the economic growth that commenced in the 1990s by a characteristic ‘lack of development’. While driving through the new modernised

cityscapes one interlocutor even pointed out how, ‘here, there was no history before’, giving a striking account of the sense of time lag present in areas that had yet to catch up with the booming coastal regions of China. Others recalled the one-storey wood and mud brick housing that preceded modern apartments, the lack of water and electricity, and widely-attested scarcity. The perceived shortcomings of the city’s decrepit infrastructure were, however, also juxtaposed with memories of small fishing ponds outside the urban fringe and the intimacy of family and friends before urbanisation had gained momentum compared to the speed, bustle and pressure of the present. Yet, when asked, most preferred the development path, or at least saw it as an irreversible process. Mr Qiu, a young man (31) who had grown up in a small mud and brick house in the rural Yijinhuoluo Banner (Ejin Horo) outside Dongsheng, noted the stark contrast between the poverty and scarcity that characterised his upbringing and his contemporary life style:

The greatest difference is simply the money. I can now realise things that I couldn't before. For example, the restaurant I plan to open. That would have been impossible before. But now I can raise the funds to do it. We [friends] can do new things together, go invest, do some business. [...] Before, I could maybe raise a few thousand RMB, ten thousand maybe. Now I can 'take out' [na chulai] millions. The life of herding sheep is impossible to compare with the present. [...] Even my grandparents' lives are more convenient now. Before we lived in a small village, where you had to walk to the well to fetch water and carry water home, houses were not airtight and winters were cold ... Although the village did have electricity, the television had only two or three channels. Also, there were really no broadcasts until maybe around six or seven in the evening. It wasn't convenient then. Now even the lives of my grandparents have improved. They live in the city now, in tall buildings with running water, plenty of television channels, and a toilet that can flush. The move from village to city has brought a lot of good.

We talked inside a private room in a luxurious coffee chain that had recently opened in Ordos during summer 2011. At that time Mr Qiu was always dressed in top-end foreign brand names, wearing Gucci glasses and a 500,000 RMB Patek Philippe watch; a birthday present awarded to him by his father. During the years of growth, Mr Qiu explained how his father

had spotted an opportunity to become an intermediary in non-bank money lending. Despite their simple living conditions his father was a well-respected man in the community, and thus many locals had great trust in him. This made him a reliable middleman in such matters. As business expanded, Mr Qiu joined in to assist his father and before long, they were no longer poor. In 2010, Mr Qiu and his father's business would bring in a yearly profit of approximately 6 million RMB (1 million USD). It's hard to turn your back on that, Mr Qiu noted. When Mr Qiu married a few years back he bought a spacious modern apartment and a new BMW-7 Series, more suitable for urban business and matters of finance, he explained. Although Mr Qiu admitted that he would rather spend time with his wife and daughter than do 'big business' and felt somewhat ambivalent about the exuberant spending: cars, consumption, extra homes etc., he believed the process to be irreversible. Citizens couldn't change overnight. Many had grown up in poverty, lived from simple farming. Then, suddenly, from compensation for their lands they received 'more money that they ever dreamed about' (*meiyou mengdaoguo hui you zheme duo qian*). In the light of the perceived backwardness, ad hoc urban planning, and even the strange sense of lacking history, municipalisation and its renewed emphasis on urban planning found an ally in the locals' desire to improve prevailing social and economic conditions. Interviews first conducted in spring 2011 among several soon-to-be resettled families living in the outskirts of Kangbashi later showed how an initial scepticism towards the whole resettlement ordeal was quickly overshadowed by ideas of convenience, and, particularly the 'new life' that compensation funds enabled. The 'sweet taste of dividends', mentioned by the young Mr Liu in the introduction was key to the lives of many of those that were evicted and relocated.

As many families had undergone one or even several turns of relocation, many were looking to invest in something. Direct investment in extractive industries required more capital and was a less simple matter, with the strict mining policies that had been implemented to restructure and consolidate mining operations. As a consequence, two investment channels in particular absorbed the capital: real estate and a surge in non-bank lending at high interests. As Mr Qiu later described, with the funds received from compensation there was really no other way, '[they] can't keep the money in their pockets forever'. What was the use of it there? Real estate, Mr Qiu stressed, was fundamental to locals' wealth and to how they would procure a sense of security:

On average, every person in Ordos will have one or two apartments. They rely on these to make more money. Chinese believe that apartments provide a sanctuary for life, to settle down [anshen liming]. They believe apartments are really important, so nobody would mind owning more property. Apartments, buildings... This is something that could never lose value [bu hui bianzhi de]. Acquiring homes is a kind of hedging [fangzi shi baozhi de yi de dongxi].

The immense value attributed to property, not only as a place to settle down but also as something that would secure life itself was central to the massive investment in real estate. ‘Ordos’ speed’ (*eerduosi sudu*) was a concept that most often would be used to describe Ordos’ leap into an urban modernity, but was also the most palpable expression for locals to convey Ordos’ pace of demolition, construction and sales. Besides being essential to official development discourse, forceful ideas of leaping beyond present conditions and the indisputable benefits of real estate impelled the large majority of local households, across class and ethnicity, to invest in property. Another meaning of the term that interlocutors would sometimes allude to was the speed by which money circulated in Ordos, more often than not through informal flows of credit. Parallel to property investment, families’ savings would flow into the flourishing market for non-bank loans. In the post-reform years, informal channels of credit supply resurfaced to fuel many small and medium sized enterprises, making up for the relative difficulty non-state enterprises faced in gaining access to capital (Li and Hsu 2009; Tsai 2002). Hence, as the growth gained momentum in Ordos, private capital flowed at an ever-greater pace through such social networks allowing ‘middlemen’ and ‘shadow banks’ (*qianshuang/qianku*) to profit off the high interest rates that characterised many of such informal credit arrangements. Informal finance is prone to flow more strongly into industries with high and quick returns such as extractive industries and real estate: and being the two main pillars of the Ordos economy, non-bank finance quickly gained force in the boom years opening opportunities for lending intermediaries as in the case of Mr Qiu’s father.

In light of the massive growth that followed in the wake of municipalisation, fortunes did come as they were summoned, although more accurately through the way accumulations made in the resource sector were redistributed through high-level land compensation. The compliance with development discourse and new measures of urban planning seemed partly

to build on a perceived absence of local development. Statements like, ‘here there was no history before’ or the common refrain of moving at ‘Ordos’ speed’, exemplified how such vernacular urgency might materialise among citizens themselves. As noted above, this was not a condition particular to Ordos, but a key issue in many inland territories attempting to ‘catch up’ (Lu 2006; Li 2006; Wu 2007: 14). Discussing the politics of developmental ‘lateness’ in another Chinese inland city, Kunming, Li Zhang notes three distinct features of this lateness: a sense of urgency to catch up, a radical approach to the restructuring of the environment, and a lack of strong, organised civic resistance (2006: 463). Li Zhang argues that it is the combination of a perceived ‘lateness’ combined with strong pro-growth coalitions consisting of real estate developers and local governments that best defines the nature of contemporary Chinese urban redevelopment (Li 2006: 462). While such coalitions seemed equally central in Ordos, what seemed to be different was how the sense of ‘lateness’ was manifest beyond pro-growth coalitions; a sentiment widely iterated in citizens’ accounts of growing up in the backwaters of development.

Then what about ethnic minorities for whom leaving behind the prior administrative designation league (*meng*) could easily be interpreted as losing a sense of territorial autonomy? Considering the recent upsurge in violent conflicts in the autonomous regions of China, the IMAR has seen little full-blown conflict in comparison, even in spite of the large influx of Han Chinese into the region and the disappearing ethnic administrative units. Bulag notes how this presents us with the question of how, in spite of the large-scale changes that occurred as an effect of China’s central state policies, ethnic Mongols, a people otherwise infamous for their wolf-like fierceness, were so easily tamed into the current state of ‘peacefulness’ and ‘sheepishness’ (Bulag 2004: 84). In his recent work Bulag explains this compliance by an emerging ‘politics of friendship’, a particular modality of inter-ethnic co-existence that, although it formally supports the constitution of China as a multi-ethnic state, effectively casts minorities as inherently non-territorial and non-political entities (Bulag 2010: 56).⁴⁴ Cities, I argue, play an ambiguous role vis-à-vis Bulag’s lament about the notable

⁴⁴ In 2011 a few instances of ethnic turmoil did occur in the wider region. These however, did not escalate into full-fledged conflict. In mid-May (2011) a Han Chinese driver of a truck had run over and killed an ethnic Mongolian herdsman, who allegedly had opposed the devastation of grassland territory with the intensification of extractive industries. Rumours spread that the driver, faced with the accusation, offered a ridiculously low compensation for the Mongol’s life. Such notices spread throughout ethnic networks and shortly after, ethnic Mongols took to the streets of Hohhot in protest. Despite the strong feelings of ethnic solidarity and the obvious

lack of resistance to the expansion of the Han Chinese-dominated territorial system: while they constitute the main site for the general influx of Han Chinese immigrants and for the consolidation of central government power through the proliferation of new administrative units in Inner Mongolia, vast and maybe especially vacant urban spaces foster powerful imaginaries of economic opportunity and social mobility for both ethnic Han Chinese and ethnic Mongols. Cities are not ethnic *per se*, at least not the prospects of securing a part of the profits and affluent life brought about by the boom for oneself and one's family. Vacant urban space, including ongoing construction, held no ethnic preferences in terms of future residents or investors. Despite the initial scepticism expressed by ethnic minorities or households before resettlement, many quickly adapted to the new, convenient, lifestyles offered by a boomtown economy. Beyond the new politics of inter-ethnic intimacy and friendship, the particular process of urbanisation in Ordos seemed to pre-empt conflicts that have been widely documented in other minority regions.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the years of rapid urban and economic growth from the time of municipalisation. Drawing inspiration from critiques of high modernist schemes, the chapter showed how rational urban planning, auspicious dates, and state-ordained discourses were orchestrated to disseminate ideas of successful frontier urbanisation. This served, with more or less success, to legitimise a series of large-scale transformations and schemes. The promise of improvement and transcendence however, was simultaneously accompanied by the municipality's opportunistic pull to expand the urban territory coupled with the authoritarian means of settling disputes over land and resettlement. Through its commitment to urbanise, and by means of the municipal government's particular strategy of redistributing resource rents as generous relocation compensation, Ordos expanded both vertically and horizontally – quick and foul.

Next, the chapter brought attention to two shortcomings of applying a high modernist

anxieties related to state surveillance that I heard from partakers in the Hohhot events, the case itself seems to have been contained, and those deemed responsible were brought to justice. Around that time I experienced a larger degree of critical awareness and solidarity among several of my ethnic Mongolian interlocutors, one even describing the situation in Inner Mongolia as a 'dry box of matches, ready to inflame'. Despite such comments, in Ordos, I never experienced any kind of ethnically motivated revolts any other action taken towards inciting ethnic conflict or opposing the basic workings of quotidian urban life in Ordos.

critique to make sense of Ordos. First, in ‘State – seeing like a Company’ – I pointed to the discrepancy between levels of state, and the problem of inferring ideology from development discourse or the built environment. The new financing platforms and muddled forms of public and private partnerships problematized the direct equivalence between ideological tenets and the built environment. Ordos Municipal government projected the image of being a model frontier in perfect alignment with central state policies, while simultaneously dodging centrally-stipulated regulations that could inhibit local growth. Second, in ‘Catching Up’ it was argued that the notion of compliance falls short in explaining local reactions to the state schemes. Citizens, it seemed, were not embedded in state projects of urban expansion for ideological reasons, nor for reasons of compliant demeanour, i.e. failing to resist. Many seemed to comply with and follow development, while simultaneously being indifferent towards much of the official ‘parole’, development discourse, and civilising campaigns. A widespread sense of what I have termed vernacular urgency was central to the way development was not only complied with, but as will become clearer in the subsequent chapters, also co-opted. Adjacent to the officially planned leap, a congruent leap occurred within non-state regulated domains of finance. As was illustrated by the young underground banker and his family, these emerging forms of entrepreneurship, alongside the relocation packages, produced a large group of potential homeowners and prospective investors with sizeable sums overnight. Sums that, as several interlocutors stressed, seemed unreal at first, yet to which one could quickly adapt. The particular policies of relocation in Ordos generated the basis for an optimistic attachment, invoking powerful imaginaries of social mobility for both majority and minority populations. Not simply as an indication that Ordos was finally catching up with China’s coastal regions, or ridding itself of its marginality, but as several resettled interlocutors would point out – essentially as a life changer.



Even Eden, you know, ain't all built

Martin Chuzzlewit

CHAPTER 2

UNFINISHING BUILDINGS

ORDOS 100 is a development in Inner Mongolia that you might have heard of. It consist [sic] of one hundred 1000sqm villas designed by 100 hip architects in 100 days, selected by Herzog & de Meuron over a master plan developed and curated by Ai Wei Wei (FAKE Design). If during modernism, architectural experimentation was practiced through large housing projects, we now find it in curated projects such as this, on countries with a raising -or at least before the crisis- economy. The project was split into two-phases, of 28 and 72 houses respectively. In ArchDaily we are going to feature the projected villas each week, and hopefully we manage to document all #100.⁴⁵

At a time when housing markets across the West are contracting and American architects' billings are at their lowest point in 12 years, according to the American Institute of Architects, Mr Cai (pronounced sigh) was offering his guests a rare chance to build big — and paying them, improbably, in wads of cash. [...] everywhere the architects travelled [in Ordos], their parade of gold-colored Mercedes buses had police escorts, which served no purpose other than to emphasize something that was obvious from the presence of numerous public officials at the Holiday Inn [architects' designated hotel during stay]: that Mr Cai has government support for the ORDOS 100 project' (Bernstein 2008)

During its initial years of development Kangbashi became well known for its large-scale urban projects, with the ORDOS 100 being merely one of many. Not many years ago, few would have considered Inner Mongolia to be an epicentre for state-of-the-art architecture. But as the excerpts above illustrate, with the attention it gained – spreading across the virtual

⁴⁵ <http://www.archdaily.com/22039/ad-round-up-ordos-100-part-i/> (last accessed on May 5, 2014).

realm of architectural blogs, art discussion forums, and urban design magazines – ORDOS 100 quickly became a popular topic, drawing attention to not only the ambitious cultural and creative industry zone that would make a suitable surrounding for ORDOS 100, but also to the wider context of Ordos’ spectacular boom and urban aspirations. The broader creative industry zone was one of the new industry zones planned for the expanding district developments. This chapter unfolds the project that was initially meant to be the empirical focus for the entire doctoral study. Yet, as the part on methodology suggested, it simply failed to materialise, at least in the way that I had imagined.

Ethnography that deals with architecture or design tends, if not for practical reasons, to focus on projects and designs that actually materialise.⁴⁶ Yet, intrigued by why so many meticulously planned projects in Ordos proved to be such volatile endeavours, this chapter follows the trajectory of a project that fails to materialise – while doing so. From this it asks: **how was the official leap co-opted and what values shaped the social life of prestigious real estate projects in Ordos?** To make this investigation of architecture that is not-yet-there I draw much inspiration from Anna Tsing’s notion of ‘economy of appearances’ (2000), that deals with the question of how something – in Tsing’s case a fraudulent mining discovery in Indonesia’s years of spectacular growth – can attain an immense value by making an investment appear credible. Moving against the grain of mainstream economic arguments about universal boom to bust crisis cycles, Tsing investigates how the plausibility of the gold discovery drew upon myths of earlier adventurous discoveries invoking images of dark impenetrable jungles and hidden treasures in a wild west-like ‘regional frontier culture’ (Tsing 2000: 121, 133). The imaginaries of unimaginable wealth caused investors to discard any evidence that would suggest such a discovery to be unlikely. Tsing’s analysis shows how the unreal discovery quickly produced connections between widely different agents that cut across global and local scales, connections that would yield immense effects on the local environment, casting aside any existing traits of local culture, or rights to land (Ibid: 132). So by addressing the ORDOS 100 Desert Villa Project as an instance of conjuring up a value by the invocation of certain imaginaries that perforate speculative real estate I give less

⁴⁶ Valuable research on the topic does exist, and has been useful for the analysis in the chapter. Much of this is dedicated to ‘architectural fictions’ as 3-D renditions, digital projections and other instances of simulacra, more so than to actual buildings or architecture (see Herzog 2013; Morrison and Skjulstad 2010; Baudrillard 1994). In the context of hyped architectural designs, value production is often conjured up from the buzz, and works through expectations rather than tangible assets (Martin 2011).

importance to the project's architectural dimensions. This shift of emphasis, however, provides more ethnographic detail to the prevailing forms of complicity and collusion of pro-growth coalitions engaged in landmark projects, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. Despite its local specificity in the context of Ordos' economic growth and lax regulation, it is argued that far from being a single standing case of speculative land development, the case is instructive for a more general trend in Chinese urban development where flagship developments such as ORDOS 100 become benchmarks for local officials' political careers while, at the same time, political buzzwords are adapted by entrepreneurs and developers to gain access to land. Complying with initial designs or plans is of minor importance while, as one interviewee phrased it, 'it's about building empty containers or space [...] in the future they can be anything'.... if building anything at all. In this context, real estate projects are conditioned by changing political demands and developers' strategies to adapt to these. Under this light, the intersection of corporate and official interests in real estate does not always imply stable growth coalitions; and, as a second effect the analysis will suggest how value might be generated from *not* finishing projects, adding a degree of volatility to the practices of planning itself.

To make this argument the first part – 'Stakeholders and Coinciding Interests' – treats how the ORDOS 100 project catered to the official ambitions in pre-crisis times and likewise how government officials drew force from the aura of creative cluster developments. Next in 'Empty Containers of Space', the chapter scales up from the ORDOS 100 case to include broader observations from professionals working in the Chinese property development industry. This helps shed light on how projects might be valuable, even when they do not follow initial plans or remain incomplete. Drawing on Tsing (2000) and by taking a short historical detour around US frontier urbanism, the final part of the chapter foregrounds the importance of the imagined or virtual aspects of real estate in the art of conjuring up value from what is essentially not there.

Stakeholders and Coinciding Interests

Upon my first arrival in March 2011, I found the ORDOS 100 Project listed in a small bilingual (English and Chinese) booklet that circulated in Kangbashi during 2011. The municipal government distributed the booklet as a quick guide to the region's main tourist sites and focal points of investment. It included information on local ecology, culture, development, and industries. And in it, 42 out of the 100 villa models were displayed in small

colourful renditions. While most of the booklet's other listed cultural venues were easy to locate: the Library, the Museum, Culture and Art Centre, and the Grand Theatre, finding the ORDOS 100 project proved to be a surprisingly strenuous task. Given the wide range of attention and the mere spectacle of the project, it was hard to believe that nobody seemed to know the location of 198 hectares of its surrounding culture and creative industries park or something as conspicuous as '100 billionaire villas' (de Muynck 2009). One would assume that it had still to be in the end phase of the construction and thus was not launched yet. Several days of searching proved fruitless and the visit was postponed until a later opportunity.

This opportunity came in June 2011 along with Baatar (pseudonym), an employee in the local department of the Ministry for National Land and Resources who I had become acquainted with. Baatar had heard mention of a privately-owned museum (Ordos New Art Museum)⁴⁷ located at a scenic location at the very periphery of Kangbashi. Setting out to find the Museum eventually led to the location of the Jiang Yuan Cultural and Creative Industry Zone. Located on a stretch of barren land on the northeastern fringe of Kangbashi, the 198 hectares designated for culture and creativity was laid out, neatly enclosed by one of the few natural lakes in Ordos. Upon arrival it dawned on me why I had had such difficulties in locating the site. Apart from the museum and several of Ai Weiwei's artists' studios, no other buildings were finished. The only building undergoing actual construction was located in front of the museum, labelled with the term 'Art Hotel' (*yishu jiudian*). The hundred villas were reduced to five rough and shell-like structures, and had no construction going on. Most of the ambitious culture and creativity zone thus remained nothing but barren landscape with only a few paved lines moving through the dunes of sand. Employees in the museum were mostly art students, who could use the desolate area to study, but had little conception of the prospects of the villas or the ambitious park. In response to the many questions about what would become of the villas or the wider zone, employees would verify the prospects of the development by pointing to a large wooden model that was displayed inside Mr Cai's (i.e. the financier's) museum. The model laid out the whole 198 acres of creativity zone, including the *creatively* designed housing, music halls, art museum, schools, sites for consumption etc. The

⁴⁷ The Ordos New Art Museum (*erduosi xin meishuguan*) was constructed in 2006–7 and was designed by DnA Architects for the Jiang Yuan Water Engineering Co. Ltd.

timeframe for the construction phases as well as the whereabouts of the financier, presumably Mr Cai Jiang, remained elusive to everyone I encountered at the site during 2011. Moreover, due to his imprisonment in 2011, the curator, Mr Ai Weiwei, was also unavailable to assist. From my repeated visits and extended stays throughout 2011, the whole site appeared forgotten or somehow neglected. Rarely was much was going on: a few shifts of employees in Mr Cai's museum and, on occasion, a new work crew would once again arrive attempting to engage with the design of the Art Hotel. During one visit, four construction workers did some minor work on one of the five villa shells. The difficulty of retrieving the site as well the halted development prompted the question of what underlying reasons could account for the discrepancy between initial plans and the zone's prevailing emptiness during summer 2011. From the mere presence of discussion forums on designs of the project, the developer managed to gain immense publicity. Yet what was also obvious from merely the name of the project – ORDOS 100 – was that it catered to the official ambitions for the new municipality's urban development. The following examines how spectacular projects such as ORDOS 100 trade into the ambitions of the local administration by inscribing themselves in the broader trends of state-of-the-art urbanisation, as stipulated by the central state.



Figure 2. Overall design of the Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone (designed by China Architecture & Design Research Group in 2007).

Creative Land Grabs

In 2007, entrepreneur and financier Mr Cai Jiang contracted China Architecture and Design Research Group (CADREG)⁴⁸ to carry out the overall design (fig. 2.) for a creative cluster development zone. The zone was eloquently framed to project Ordos as a pioneer municipality within modern architecture, creativity, and sustainable urban development – all themes that coincided well with the recent national emphasis on creativity as a component for sustainable growth (cf. Keane 2013). A 2009 press release announcing the inauguration of the “Ordos Prize of Architecture” would lift the veil on the zone’s most spectacular components, including an overview of its building phases. According to the press release, the creativity zone was designed to include numerous cultural venues, theatres, studios, offices, apartments and villas, all designed by acclaimed Chinese and international architects.⁴⁹ The “Ordos Prize of Architecture” was to be the very first Asian architectural prize, set up to honour and praise upcoming Asian architects. The founding director was renowned Chinese architect Ma Qingyun. The zone’s larger development was backed by an alleged initial investment of 600 million USD by Mr Cai’s own development company, yet was dependent on attracting further investment. From the press release it follows that the process of construction was divided into three phases: the first phase began in 2007 with the Ordos Art Museum and high-end artist studios. The second phase would include the abovementioned villas, a cultural industry education base, a creativity incubation zone, commercial and residential buildings – all expected to be well underway by 2009. The final phase included schools, kindergartens, a waterfront park, playgrounds, and additional residential and commercial buildings. The ORDOS 100 Desert Villa Project was launched in 2007–8 as the architectural flagship of the larger Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone. With the purpose of designing each of the one hundred unique villas, one hundred architects and design groups from 27 different

⁴⁸ China Architecture Design Research Group (CADREG) is one of China’s largest and most productive architectural companies and acts as one of China’s state-owned local design institutes. CADREG’s most central tasks include: architecture, design and consultation; urban and town planning; municipal engineering comprehensive design; urban gas and industrial gas design; sewage and garbage disposal; road and bridge design; building intelligence and systems design; building standardization design; landscape design; project supervision; project general contracting; residential projects study; research works concerning building standardisation, architectural history (CADREG homepage).

⁴⁹ Jury members counted several international leading architects including Rem Koolhaas as the head of the jury. Since 2011/12, however neither the website nor people responsible for the prize have been available. For the original website’s description of the Ordos Prize and the overall planning, see Appendix I. This document is no longer available online.

countries were selected by Swiss Herzog & de Meuron, the architectural firm behind the prestigious Olympic Bird's Nest construction. ORDOS 100 was further planned and curated by renowned artist Ai Weiwei on behalf of Mr Cai, a business tycoon who had made his fortune from dairy products, now turned patron of the arts. A native of Ordos' neighbouring city of Baotou, Mr Cai was engulfed in an air of mystery, mostly as a consequence of his continuous absence from his own development site. A New York Times reporter described him as follows: 'At 40, he knows something about the good life he is promoting: he travels by Harley-Davidson or chauffeured Mercedes-Benz, has a mansion in Baotou as well as homes in Beijing and Shanghai, collects contemporary art and is seldom seen without a Cuban cigar' (Bernstein 2008). Moreover, with the escalation of the buzz, several rumours surfaced about the almost fire sale-like conditions in which billionaire buyers worldwide would pre-order a villa from Mr Cai. Media worldwide attests to such stories, conjuring up imageries of Ordos' unparalleled growth, new wealth and limitless opportunities. This is very similar to the scale of conjuring in the case treated by Tsing (2000). Despite critical reflections about the project's long-term sustainability or the ethical quandaries of building such a 'Babel for billionaires' (de Muynck 2009), rarely did anyone question the feasibility of the project itself. Architectural reviews and design magazines ran numerous illustrations where the group of international architects would stroll around in the empty dunes of sand, imagining futuristic designs. Headlines like, 'Pushing architecture's outer limits' (Bernstein 2008) or 'Architecture's new Frontiers'⁵⁰ echoed similar mysteries and fantasies as those brought about by the 'regional frontier culture' that Tsing describes succinctly: 'here [in a regional frontier setting] mystery can flourish, and unexpected discoveries can be made. Unimagined riches can be found because the layout of wealth and poverty is unsettled, un-imagined. Impossible promises cannot be ignored. In this landscape, the economy of appearances seems so real that it must be true.' (Tsing 2000: 141).

Mr Cai's candid interest in the arts was widely recognised by his employees who insistently held Mr Cai's personal interest in the arts as sign of his 'good intentions', i.e. being cultural rather than financial. The whole deal, explicitly linking the wider city and its sudden wealth with creative industries, was tailored to suit various purposes: Mr Cai's ambitious plan

⁵⁰ <http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/all-about-alumni/ordos-region-architecture-inner-mongolia-cai-jiang-herzog-and-de-meuron/> (last accessed on March 17, 2014).

successfully attracted the attention of the international media, practitioners within architecture and planning, and maybe most importantly the municipal government's attention, as they were responsible for the allocation of the 198 hectares of land needed for the wider zone. The ORDOS 100 development initially gained a great deal of recognition within official circles, even to the extent that the Ordos' municipal government agreed to co-sponsor the Ordos Prize. This recognition was also illustrated by the initial excerpt from the New York Times, stressing the notable official presence in the early stages of the project: 'everywhere the architects travelled, their parade of gold-coloured Mercedes buses had police escorts, which served no purpose other than to emphasize something that was obvious from the presence of numerous public officials at the Holiday Inn: that Mr Cai has government support for the ORDOS 100 project.' Already back in 2006, the Ordos municipal government announced its ambition to act as Inner Mongolia's pivot for cultural industries within film, and traditional and contemporary arts, Web design, fashion etc. Deputy Mayor Yang Gongyan of the Ordos Municipal Government envisioned Ordos as next in an exceptional line-up of model cities, now with culture and creativity playing a central role:

In the 1980s we looked at Shenzhen as a model for urban development, in the 1990s we looked at Shanghai and Pudong and it is my hope that in the coming 20 years when people look for a new model they will look at the development of Ordos. (Yang in Ulfstjerne and de Muijnck 2012: 67)

The official stand was thus to encourage entrepreneurs like Mr Cai Jiang, to invest considerably in the development, to help attract further investment and brand the city. In the corridors, local officials referred to the group of international architects as 'the messengers',⁵¹ those who would help to spread the word of Ordos' tremendous growth, and draw attention to its purportedly cosmopolitan and creative environment. In an interview with China Urban Magazine, deputy mayor Yang Gongyan described Mr Cai's creative and cultural zone as 'a world class architecture museum that's also a place to live and work', one that aims to 'open the door to the world for Ordos [...] Of course every city wants to be the best. [...] We want

⁵¹ I want to thank Bert de Muijnck for bringing this to my attention. Bert has provided key insights into ORDOS 100 through his engagement with curators, planners, and architects during the initial phases of conceptual design and on location events (see de Muijnck 2009).

people to come here not just for business, but to relax, go shopping. We want to attract more creative talents, create a space where people can work, work creatively, and live comfortably'.⁵² Clearly, officials in Ordos eyed an opportunity where the city's reputation could gain from association with Mr Cai's project and, more broadly, the recent buzz of creative industries.

Creativity on the Bottom-line

Before creative clusters had proved successful in attracting investment and raising the value of land, few municipalities looked upon the new creative drive as anything but a waste (Zheng 2010). In the following years, creative clusters became a model that could be implemented at the local level, with the main concern being generation of tax revenues and real estate. Beyond boosting tax and real estate-generated revenue, the symbolic display of these high profile projects can be seen as part of an emerging tendency where second and third tier cities in China attempt to leapfrog the progressive stages of urban development, pushing forward a wholesale transformation from an underdeveloped nowhere to becoming *the* place to live, consume, and invest (cf. Wu 2007: 1–19). Of this trend, geographer David Harvey notes: 'Investment in consumption spectacles, the selling of images of places, competition over the definition of cultural and symbolic capital, the revival of vernacular tradition associated with places as a consumer attraction, all become conflated in inter-place competition' (1996: 298). A central way that local officials in Chinese municipal governments gain recognition in such competitive environments is through high profile urban projects. As previously illustrated by Ordos' aim to launch itself as a 'model city' with its emphasis on being green, civilised, prosperous, creative, hygienic, liveable etc., high profile urban projects are but one component in a wider set of more or less formally recognised upgrades. In recent years China has experienced an upsurge in terms with the prefix *creative*: - cluster – class – industry - economy. In China, the *creativity on the bottom-line* logic became an important component of national policymaking in 2007, proclaiming it would transform China into an innovative nation by 2020.⁵³ Setting creativity on the national agenda quickly generated a variety of new government slogans propagating: 'innovative nation', 'soft power', and 'independent

⁵² <http://postalex.blogspot.dk/> (last accessed on October 10, 2013).

⁵³ At the CCP's 17th national congress in 2007 Hu Jintao expressed China's aim to become an innovative nation as a central tenet of the national development strategy (See Hu Jintao in Keane 2013: 31).

innovation' (Keane 2011: 16–17). The discourse did not only exist on the level of national policy implementation, but also quickly spread across the wider spectrum of business rhetoric, urban planning policies, real estate vernacular, and amongst the creative practitioners themselves. Upon closer inspection this generated incentives for local governments like Ordos' municipal government to engage in the development of creative clusters. Professor You-tian Hsing describes how local leaders increasingly regard themselves as 'city promoters', inclined to boost the value of land:

Mayors don suits and embark on road shows to promote real estate projects in their cities, and compete with one another to hire advertising gurus for help in developing "urban strategic development plans" aimed at improving the image of their cities and boosting their property values (Hsing 2010: 9).

Since the 1990s the construction of ever more ambitious landmark projects has been a key component of local governments in their struggle to surpass each other. Moreover, from the perspective of individual leaders, similar incentives exist. In order to move upwards in the administrative hierarchy, local cadres and mayors need to show tangible proof of growth, usually measured by criteria such as five-star hotels, creative industries, luxury shopping malls, plans for sustainability, green projects, science and development parks etc. (Hsing 2008: 60). Creative industries and cultural clusters are but one of several possible ways for local governments to attract business and investment. Nevertheless, high profile and landmark projects are central for political ambition and ascendance. This brings local government officials into a close relation with property developers like Mr Cai who buy into the openings of the most recent policy offers in a rapidly changing landscape of new urban buzzwords. Beyond local state leaders' quest for political ascendance, the following looks closer at how the ORDOS 100 development was perceived on site, and from the vantage points of professionals who were engaged in the project.

Building Billionaire Villas or Botanical Gardens

Besides the slow progress of the 'Art Hotel', throughout summer 2011 there was little activity. The initial plans for the entire 198 acres of land, the overall construction, appeared to be persistently halted. Next to Mr Cai's private museum, Ai Weiwei had commissioned the construction of a maze of artist studios (a copy of his Beijing-based studios in the Caochangdi

Art District). Nevertheless, no artists had arrived yet, and the vast majority of studios were vacant. A few employees resided in the studio, mostly engineers and people responsible for the overall planning and supervision. One employee who worked from inside Ai Weiwei's artist compound was Xiao Bai, a young man who formed part of the steering group for all the construction that was underway. Xiao Bai had been employed at the building site since the development first started. He could clearly recollect the two occasions where they had received the international architects on the site. Although he only mastered a few words of English he had enjoyed meeting people from all over: Portugal, Mexico, the US, Chile, India, Israel, Switzerland, Indonesia and many more. The days were hectic with little sleep, lively discussion, and excess drinking. Of the designs themselves, Xiao Bai and his colleagues thought them more strange and artistic than liveable, at least for a Chinese person they underlined. Who could live in a house with 100 different rooms, or one modelled as a large dune, let alone in one that is completely transparent?⁵⁴

One afternoon I joined Xiao Bai inside Ai Weiwei's artists' studios. His main office was located inside a spacious bunkerlike structure where sounds would resonate. Along the walls were 100 military storage cabinets that contained each of the complete villa designs. In the middle of the room a large table was covered with detailed maps of the topographical features of the entire area, engineer drawings, and a computer. The west wall contained a visual overview of the entire collection of villas. Together examining the many designs, I asked whether they would be built. He wasn't sure. Facing the virtual villas, I raised the issue of the national policy that had implemented a ban on allotment of land to villa construction. In June 2006, the central government announced a package of policies to cool down the overheated market. The policies included raising mortgage down payments from 20% to 30% on units larger than 90 square metres; and requiring that 70% of all houses be smaller than 90 square metres. Also the ban on allotment of land to villa construction that was implemented already in 2003 was to be more strictly implemented (Jiang Z. 2006).⁵⁵ To my surprise, Xiao Bai pointed out that what we were actually looking at were not villas at all. Confused by his

⁵⁴ Other designs were devoted to hedonism and indulgence in pleasure; some drew inspiration from a *Panopticon*-like design, some from what they imagined to be local cultural designs like yurts or traditional Mongolian cave dwellings.

⁵⁵ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-06/01/content_605504.htm (last accessed on October 22, 2013). Jiang (2006) further provides evidence of similar instances of rhetorical shape-shifting through which municipal governments and officials still enrich themselves by allowing luxury villa construction.

response I rephrased my question: ‘In the case the developer will proceed with the construction what will they do with the government’s policy to curb the construction of villas?’ He pointed to the villas and explained: ‘these are not villas, they are botanical gardens or maybe even zoological gardens’. I insisted: ‘but they are villas. He nodded, and continued:

Still, they can easily become multi-purpose buildings [duoyong jianzhu], or something like a public architectural exhibition [...] There is always a way to get around it. All you really need is a piece of paper stating that they are this or that kind of construction, something in line with regulations, just don’t mention luxury villas.

Alluding to collusion in the real estate development sector and the local proclivity to completely discard central state regulations, Xiao Bai later explained his statement by reference to a famous Chinese idiom, ‘here the mountains are high and the emperor far away’ (*shangao huangdi yuan*). In Beijing, I met with Yu Jie; an architect from CADREG,⁵⁶ who were initially contracted to design the master plan for the entire Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone. She gave her take on why villas could suddenly turn into botanical gardens by looking at the case in its broader context. The above illustration of the Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone appeared in a 100-page book designed by CADREG in the initial phase of conceptual design. The booklet starts out with a historical outline of the region. To emphasise the creative component it included photos and designs from other international architectural developments, science and creative zones. The booklet was also complete with descriptions of cultural, economic, and geographical conditions in Ordos: facts about local weather conditions were considered in relation to the careful choice of architectural design and construction materials. The booklet drew attention to the many

⁵⁶ CADREG is listed as a State-Owned Enterprise although smaller units seem to be more independent and project based. Local design institutes are responsible for changing sketch and conceptual design into construction design, and complying with existing laws and building regulations. Before the 1990s every design institute was state-owned and held a monopoly over construction – commissioned by central government’s logistics and planning. In the last two decades these institutes have undergone large changes: to cope with changing market demands, these institutes deployed new strategies to become more flexible and cater to the private sphere. Some were fully privatised and others partially. One such strategy included making smaller, project-based, teams, working with a number of independent units under the larger state-owned LDI. For more information see: <http://www.culturalexchange-cn.nl/mapping-china/architecture/architecture-practice-china/state-owned-local-design-institutes-ldi>

ecological as well cultural advantages of the project. As the whole creative buzz had yet to gain force by 2007, the team had never undertaken similar projects. Therefore, Yu Jie explained, they had to find models and inspiration in other creative zones abroad. Despite its verisimilitude and the comprehensiveness of calculations, the overall conceptual design for the district, and the booklet, was produced within a month. Upon its conclusion, the client, Mr Cai would present it to representatives in the local administration to get access to the large plot of land, and with the recent national emphasis on creative clustering this would most likely be well subsidised by government. With the conceptual plan in itself, Yu Jie explained how the value of the land parcel had risen several times, even before any construction was undertaken.⁵⁷ Despite acknowledging her faith in Mr Cai's sincere interest in creative zones, Yu Jie explained how most zoning strategies are often misleading, 'they say words like creativity or culture, but if you look at what is really built, only a minor part is dedicated these uses. Most of it will probably become residential or commercial space – if it will become anything at all'. Yu Jie refrained from making any predictions about the zone, but showed little surprise when she was presented with recent photos of current state of the zone, clearly illustrating how none of their initial plans including designs or development stages had yet materialised. Common to such diversions or rhetorical shape-shifting is the strategy of shuffling words to suit policy demands in a capital-intensive industry. As Yu Jie disclosed, a key driver behind such endeavours thus lies in real estate, land value appraisals, and not necessarily an interest in the creative outcome. Rather than the actual pursuit of promoting the creativity that the central state policies advocate, such cases of rhetorical shape-shifting seem to be indications of an emerging tendency of more *creative* land grabs. To summarise, we have so far accounted for coinciding interest between property developers and local government, and pointed to on-the-ground strategies applied to ensure profit despite changes in regulatory orders, something that might only be possible with a lenient local state. From the support and engagement that ORDOS 100 initially received from local officials, it seemed that the valuable buzz of the project was given priority ahead of any attempts to sanction or prevent construction that was clearly a transgression of central state building policy. Rhetorical shape-shifting might therefore equally apply to officials in Ordos' municipal

⁵⁷ Yu Jie based her assessment on a change in a matrix that indexed the allowed construction density on the land parcel.

government enabling erratic or ad hoc enforcement of regulations for the sake of growth; clearly trading into the central state's creativity agenda, while simultaneously ignoring land-use designation such as the ban on allotment of land for villa construction. The following scales out from the ORDOS 100 case and by looking beyond creative permutations on the level of rhetoric, it argues that the rapidly changing regulatory landscapes and speed of the industry have brought about changes in building design and construction: both in terms of the quality of materials, and also by building in ways that maintain an increased capacity for a complete reorientation of projects.

Empty Containers of Space

The speed and scale of the Chinese property development sector attract many international architects to China: some on a short-term basis as in the case of ORDOS 100 while others commit themselves to long-term employment. By 2008, the financial crisis had left many architects stranded with no or few projects to engage in. Projects similar to that of Mr Cai thus emerged at a time when opportunities for architects were thin on the ground. Moreover the appeal was even stronger as architects, before actually working in China, were often mesmerised by the thought of working in an environment with few, if any, creative restrictions (van de Water 2012); projects like ORDOS 100 laid out few guidelines or restrictions on design (de Muynck 2008).⁵⁸ Yet despite this appeal, several interviews with international and Chinese architects who have years of experience working in the Chinese property development industry suggested how, in praxis, few projects proceed as planned and often with radical changes along the way. Henri van Hove, a Dutch architect who worked alongside Ai Weiwei and participated in the initial conceptual design phase of the ORDOS 100, explained:

The different phases of conceptual design, practical design, project overview etc. are all mixed up. Not linear at all. The client has much more power and influence in the question of design than in Europe [...] it's like a negotiation that's going on. That keeps going. Like a continuous construction, and I am sure these villa plans have been changing all the time. First the government changes it, then somebody

⁵⁸ <http://www.artforum.com.cn/words/596#> (last accessed on March 12, 2014)

else changes it, then the neighbour changes it, and then when the people actually move in, they change it again. Some of these alterations are crucial. Some that you can't just change... have to apply to the government (Henri Van Hove, Beijing 2011)

The different phases are not clearly separated, with each professional solely responsible for his or her own area of expertise. Every part of the process appears flexible and open to changes – either related to changes in national policies or changes in the market, or simply to satisfy the clients. Another component that affects the design and quality of construction is the velocity of the industry, an opinion commonly shared by interviewed architects and others employed within the property development industry. One of these is John van de Water⁵⁹ who has worked as an architect in China through the last decade. John drew me a diagram to explain his take on the Chinese building sector. The diagram was a simple curve marking the lifespan of a generic building. The horizontal axis designated the building's *lifetime* with the vertical lines progressing in a ten-year span. Architects, John explained, often calculate one generation to every ten years. In China most construction is built to last twenty years, i.e. two generations, and will then most likely be torn down before that. In high growth areas such as Ordos Municipality, buildings rarely last twenty years. Most buildings that were built 5–6 years six ago are commonly described as 'old' by the population, and were often already set for demolition. Much construction in Europe, John went on to explain, is built to last 80 years, and instead of being demolished it is usually renovated or modernised. As a consequence, the short calculated lifetime of a building in China doesn't require top quality material. Due to pressures within the industry, architects tend to be cut off early in the process. In the phase where the Local Design Institute is responsible for changing the conceptual design into established national standards for construction, a cost-benefit analysis is likely to be conducted. Such cost-benefit analyses, interviewees explained, would result in the use of much cheaper materials and components than those suggested by the architect. As several of the interviewed architects complained, this often meant cutting off the architect from the phases of construction in order to minimise costs. This could also result in completely

⁵⁹ At the time of our meeting John Van de Water was looking to undertake several projects in the Kangbashi New District. Projects, John emphasised, that would not end up like the ORDOS 100.

different designs. One architect mentioned how a client had doubled the rent space of a building design by adding an extra level between each floor, something that was surely not advised by the Local Design Institute. Judging from these statements the intensity and speed that characterise the Chinese property development industry, and maybe even more so in high growth frontier regions, generated bad quality construction and would dictate more flexibility in terms of altering the direction of the project. Looking at how developers and entrepreneurs build in a market characterised by sudden policy changes, John van de Water drew attention to another feature of the Chinese building euphoria. Developers use a certain typology to secure their profits in the ever-changing political climate and shifting policies:

Most of the projects that are being built look like office projects or hotel projects. But when you look inside they are all smaller units, like 50 m² units. 40–90 m². Then you can buy two or put them together. Or just buy them as investment. Most of them are sold as investment projects. Seven or eight years ago most of the projects that were realized were like villas, or large typologies, huge apartments. Then, from one day to the other, they say that now we don't want villas, seventy per cent of projects that are realised should have apartments of 90 m² or less. That means the market was changing from large typologies to smaller typologies (John Van de Water, Beijing 2011).

As indicated in John's statement, building smaller typologies is a way to accommodate and adapt to rapid changes, but it is also a way for a broader clientele to be able to buy them like small shares. Large-scale changes occur on the level of entire buildings, and imminent changes are pre-empted already in the design process. From his experience, John listed what changes were deemed less complicated within the industry and which ones needed more extensive work and investment: for example, from office to residential is an easy change. So is hotel to residential. More difficult changes would be changing a factory into a standard Chinese office building. However, as John pointed out, it happens, nevertheless. And often with a complete discard for transgressing land-use designations. Whether the end result will match the initial plan is not so important: 'it's more about building empty containers of space now, as an integral part of the Chinese model. In the future they can be anything', John explained.

Building typologies with an eye for potential change, or building what John called ‘empty containers of space’ do, to some extent, echo broader international architectural strategies. For instance, a generic ‘shell and core’ strategy combines a unique shell, i.e. design visible from the outside with a bland core of easily sellable and alterable typologies to accommodate fluctuations in demand (Martin 2011: 75). The Ordos case, however, takes this a step further, towards a total inversion of contingency and plan. Contingency becomes the rule, while the plan or blueprint mostly serves to acquire land, and subsidies. Yet this alone does not account for the delay in construction of the ORDOS 100 project. Taking a closer look at such practices they might also be taken to index a new mode of planning and new modalities of valuation. As actual construction was deferred, the space that was initially designed for a creative industry zone, remained open to substantial changes in the direction of the project, or, as will become obvious from the following, simply catered to profit from reselling the rights to develop on the parcel.

Economy of Appearances

Most of my designs are never built (Architect Daan Roggeveen, interview 2011).

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To start developing this kind of area you have to persuade the government that you are good at your work and you are going to make something beautiful. So from the beginning you have to show them images of what it is going to be like, although there is no proper information about the site. You don't know yet, but you already have to show these images. So basically you get this book, which is like a 120 page presentation of the area [...] mainly it looks finished because somebody just copy-pasted it from somewhere. The only thing that is important is that you can show here the villas will be, there is going to be administrative buildings, here is going to be a shopping mall, over there will be houses.

⁶⁰ Interview conducted in Shanghai, 2011. Daan Roggeveen is a Shanghai-based architect who has recently been undertaking more in-depth analysis about China’s metropolises. He was also contracted for designing projects in the initial phases of the Jiang Yuan Cultural and Creativity Industry Zone; projects that were never commenced and never proceeded from conceptual design to construction.

Something like this. That's the only thing that is important. And they just get that park [...] it's all about the relation to the authorities. (Henri van Hoeve,⁶¹ interview 2011)

Henri who had participated in developing the overall frame for the ORDOS 100 project stressed how Mr Ai Weiwei, his employer at the time, would continuously stress that they should only take part in the initial phases of the project and seemed reluctant to have any part in the actual construction or the tedious work of transforming 100 unique villa designs into not only feasible structures, but also buildable according to Chinese construction standards. The CADREG architect Yu Jie provided one reason for Ai Weiwei's preference. During the interview she noted how they, besides making the booklet for the overall design of the creative zone, were also responsible for changing every villa construction into buildable units, in accordance with local building legislation and standards. This process proved highly tedious: one man was responsible for the entire 100 villas. After working full time for six months he finally succumbed and decided to quit his position in CADREG, despite almost having finished. In the project's initial phases, Ai Weiwei directed a documentary (Ai 2012) about the ORDOS 100 project. In one sequence Ai Weiwei clarifies what he deemed the project's most important characteristic:

[It's not about] one person designing a villa. You become part of this large movement. This movement is about communicating. Exchange of ideas, knowledge and many experiences are much stronger. So we are not interested in just producing architecture. We are more interested in human conceptual exchange. That's much more important especially today. The old is not so interesting – because we are talking about a possibility rather than a fixed solid product.

Beyond the project's yields in terms of 'intellectual exchange', Ai Weiwei's emphasis on possibility rather than 'a fixed solid product' adds a particularly volatile and speculative nature to the project. The imagined and potential qualities of it resonate well with Tsing's idea

⁶¹ Henri explained that already in the ORDOS 100 project's early stages, some of the architects expressed doubts about whether the project would materialise. This compelled several to do 3D images of their designs, for the sake of their portfolios.

of conjuring up value – a conjuring that, as Tsing notes, cuts across fields as diverse as extractive industries, financial investments, and speculative real estate (Tsing 2000). From the irregular authority and erratic forms of urbanisation that broadly characterised urban development in Ordos during its boom it further resonated with accounts that depict earlier cases of speculative enterprise in frontier developments.

The production of certain alluring imaginaries or tropes as part of a sales pitch is no new phenomenon at the intersection between real estate development and cases of overnight or instant cities' speculative hype. Similar instances are widely recorded in geographical accounts of pioneer settlements, boomtowns, and instant cities along the US urban frontier throughout the 18th and 19th century (Reps 1965; Barth 1975; Yablon 2009). These cases show how corporate enterprises were liable to adapt visual measures to go with the selling of lots in pioneer cities. In his *tour de force* account of urban planning patterns in America, historian John Reps treats the capitalist drive inherent in much of the planning schemes. Even communities driven by strict moral and Christian codes of conduct, Reps notes, would keep a keen eye out for 'financial profits along with the presumed benefits to mind and spirit' (Reps 1965: 349). Speculators and prospectors would themselves design the new towns. Blueprints would include all the trimmings: squares, broad avenues, wharves, public squares, monuments etc. The speculator would think up a suitable name for the city that would be plastered up everywhere as town promotion or 'town jobbing'. In reality, the city so beautifully laid out on paper was often nothing but a mere mirage – a sales pitch to accumulate capital from the small lots on the virtual streets and plots of land that only rarely existed:

[T]he promoters advanced extravagant claims of buildings already existing or to be constructed shortly. The New Babylons of Kansas Territory [...] were usually represented as having one or more railroads, a university, churches, parks, exchanges, and the like. In fact New Babylon [...] was rarely more than a shack of tents and often consisted solely of an expanse of rolling prairie. Few persons bothered to visit the site of these cities before buying a lot or share. [...] [I]t was not a swindle, but a mania. The speculators were quite as insane as the rest (Richardson in Reps 1965: 364).

Schemes themselves were not always intended, as Reps notes, but might be understood as a logical component of a wider madness (Reps 1965: 359). Or as a case of Tsing's 'art of conjuring' (2000: 126), we have seen how spectators imagined the 'wads of cash' that architects were purportedly paid; essentially a form of valuation that directs the gaze towards prospects, while less attentive to the downsides of development, e.g. the transgressions of land use designations or abuse of regulatory gaps (cf. Tsing 2000: 133). The cases of both Tsing and Reps attest to the alluring power of images and myths in the inventive promotion of something that is essentially not-yet-there,⁶² in Rep's case supposedly in the midst of rapid urbanisation. The cities of the 18th and 19th century US urban frontier capture aspects of the dynamics that underlie the real estate-driven urbanism that also seemed to characterise Ordos in its boom. Considering how the images of bold architectural achievements proliferate on the Internet, one could even identify similar traits of 'developers' madness'. CADREG's conceptual design of the overall development (above) with its green lawns, seagulls drifting around in the air above the creative cluster, complete with local information, to make investments credible helped to conjure up the value of the plot – despite construction being indefinitely unfinished. A similar tendency was found in the locally-distributed place-making material such as the bilingual promotional booklet depicting 42 colourful models of villas that no one seemed to know of, and didn't really exist at all. Here, the production of plans, models and designs is therefore better understood as being indications of potential value rather than promises of a firmly set trajectory. This brings to mind Baudrillard's reflections about simulation:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by model of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map (Baudrillard 1994: 1).

⁶² As Sartre (2004) proposes, the human faculty of imagination thrives on absence whereas perception relies of something that is there. In this light, the frontier as something that is undiscovered and mysterious yielded efficient fantasies.

Jean Baudrillard (1994) opens his book on the simulacrum by returning to Jorge Luis Borges' fable in which a Cartographers' Guild, in their attempt to represent an empire at its most accurate, end up setting out a map so detailed that it would not only cover the entire Empire, but would eventually become the reason for its very demise. The fable, with its allegory to simulation raises the question of how a territory relates to the map, or in other words how reality relates to representation or the unreal. In his use of the concept of simulacrum, Baudrillard takes us from Borges' case of simulation (of something real) to a condition in which the original is lost, where only the copy exists. To this purpose we're less concerned with Baudrillard's preoccupation with the loss of a real signifier in the postmodern condition, but more with the conditions in which a map or representation of a given territory precedes the territory. In Borges' account, the territory precedes the map and the cartographic attempt to cover the exact dimensions of the real, in turn, reproduces it in an exact copy. As Baudrillard suggests, there has been a reversal in which the map precedes the territory. Reviewing the process of the Jiang Yuan Culture and Creative Industry Zone, the myth of a territory and its reverberations in the media preceded the project's materialisation. Even rendered it less important, as suggested by Mr Ai Weiwei. In light of the ORDOS 100 project's further trajectory, it represented nothing but a mere potentiality, a possible direction aimed at obtaining rights to speculate in land, rather than actually producing what was laid out in the plans. As illustrated above, this did not imply that unfinished construction or simply the imaginary construction could not generate value. As Charles Dickens experienced on his travels to the US boomtowns, and later through his protagonist, Chuzzlewit, '*even Eden, you know, ain't all built*',⁶³ yet it did nevertheless absorb investments. Even in its absence.

The large quantity of projects that never see the light of day seem to exemplify the unreal quality of real estate. Essentially an economy that profits from not finishing projects, but simply from reselling user rights to potential construction, a phenomenon several interlocutors referred to as a common case of land speculation, '*chaodi*', literally stir-frying land.

The Value of Unfinishing Buildings

⁶³ In Charles Dickens's novel, "The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit", the protagonist ventures across the Atlantic to seek his fortunes, lured by the prospects of 19th century boom cities in USA. Upon one of his quests Chuzzlewit is tricked into buying a land lot in Eden [i.e. Cairo, US], a 'paper city' that is detailed by planners' and speculators comprehensive maps, but far from resembles the desolate Eden that Dickens's protagonist encounters upon arrival (Dickens in Yablon, 2009: 75-80).

On a later occasion I was invited to spend a weekend in Mr Ai Weiwei's artist studios at the ORDOS 100 construction site. As no artist had come to occupy the space, mostly higher ranked engineers resided in the spacious art dormitories. The workforce that laboured on the Art Hotel was accommodated in simple on-site temporary dormitories. Xiao Bai brought me along the only paved path of road in the zone to the Art Hotel workers canteen. During the lunch conversation Xiao Bai discussed terms of employment and standards of provision with a local worker. The name of a new developer consistently came up in the conversation. Inquiring about this developer's role in the overall development, Xiao Bai explained how there had been a change of ownership. Giving his account of the shift, Xiao Bai seemed little preoccupied or surprised. Mr Cai Jiang was no longer his employer. As it turned out, Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone no longer belonged to Jiang Yuan Group but had been resold to another developer, a local business tycoon from Ordos, Liu Manshi.⁶⁴ Xiao Bai sketched a map of Kangbashi, in which he located the creativity zone that he referred to as his 'work unit', on the map. Here he divided the entire 198 hectare plot into one large and one small section:

Manshi and Mr Cai now have a kind of agreement. Take this piece of land. Before it was all his [Mr Cai's], but since 2010 in April or May, the Manshi Group bought a large share. In the future maybe the entire plot will belong to Manshi. In the beginning the small one keeps a small share, like 10%. Afterwards, maybe the entire plot will change hands and be under Manshi's name. [...] Then plans are likely to change once again [chongxin gaibian guihua]. Up until now they haven't made new plans, still thinking about how to do it, how to develop the plot. It's up to Manshi to decide now, maybe he won't follow the plan, maybe he will build residential dwellings, maybe large hotels, maybe do some kind of business, that's also possible. In Ordos this phenomenon is very common. Manshi might develop and manage the plot himself but it's also possible that he will resell everything: this floor here in front of you [pointing at the Art Hotel's construction site] might

⁶⁴ Liu Manshi was locally known as a success story from Ordos. The story told of a common peasant who managed to set up a huge empire that came to include coal industry, real estate, travel businesses, shopping malls etc. Yet, due to his background none of the workers working at the building site believed that Liu Manshi would have any interest in constructing cultural industry zones.

be installed today but be dismantled again tomorrow. This is very common here [feichang pubian].

According to Xiao Bai the shift included 90% of the entire plot, i.e. the land-use rights to develop on the land that also included the entire collection of plans, designs, documents and licenses (and several employees, including himself). The Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone was therefore resold, before its completion. Only the few structures that were finished at the time of the sale still belong to Mr Cai. The architectural groups who were responsible for the designs of the ORDOS 100 villas, and even the wider zone, received no news of the transfer of rights. Consequently, few of the architects seemed to know that their designs had been sold to another developer that would now be responsible for carrying them out. Reflecting upon the further effects of these shifts Xiao Bai continued:

[Rhetorically posing as developer] If this plot doesn't make me money then I won't develop it. If I do this or that project, it's for the sake of profit. With everything starting over it's likely that everything will result in some chaos. Although some shifts include approved designs, material, workforce, some decide to start over again. If you plan from scratch you need to think of basic engineering like water, electricity, and so on. That will be a huge cost. But they [developers] hope only to pay small costs; at least not big [...] these changes are rarely in accordance with national conditions [bu fuhe guoqing]. But after a secret permission [bianxiang yunxu] the place [the Jiang Yuan Creativity and Culture Zone] might become a residential area, or something else. In these times there is no way of saying [hengliang]. You say this is residential area, but it isn't; say these are villas, but at the same time they are not villas; say these are offices, but then again they might not be.

The chaos that Xiao Bai inferred from the turbulent conditions in which plots change owners and completely new projects might or might not emerge illustrates several characteristics of speculative land development under periods of growth. The strategic set-up of Mr Cai's Creativity Industry Zone resonated with several of the above key features of the US boomtown urbanism. Considering the nature and timing of Mr Cai's development project it

appeared he wisely traded into several things simultaneously: the new national emphasis on creativity, real estate ventures in high-growth areas, the internet hype produced by global creative networks' capacity to spread information, and the buzz that revolves around famous architects and artists. As Yu Jie argued above, the key incentive behind many purportedly 'creative' or 'green' development projects lies in real estate and does not necessarily reflect a sincere interest in any sustainable or creative outcome. This becomes even more evident when one considers the abundant cases of projects that share a similar fate to that of ORDOS 100 and the creative industry zone, as interviewees would regularly attest to. Most of these comprise radical shifts where land is sold and resold in the process between design and construction. Consequently, utterly different projects might emerge as land-use rights are transferred into the hands of new developers, if ever. In an evocative paragraph, historian Gunther Barth treats the commencement and rapidly ensuing decline of the 'instant cities' of San Francisco and Denver:

The concern for opportunity, stimulated by the dazzling promise and the blatant insecurity of the cities, curbed the effectiveness of government. In the absence of success, only the future mattered. It held out the promise of the completion of the cities as the ultimate source of personal prosperity. A past did not exist, and the present was continually rendered obsolete by changes that sustained the development of the cities until the urban explosions spent themselves and the cities' uniqueness vanished (Barth 1975: xxiv).

In the passage, Barth argues how the kind of instant city urbanism that he juxtaposes with the temporal and cultural orders of ordinary cities,⁶⁵ relied on prospects and promises; on the ways that personal prosperity became entwined in the wider trajectory of the city. This, Barth underlines, did not imply a sense of belonging and collective care for the city, but rather the opposite: as most citizens were pioneers and looking for quick profits, it posed challenges to local order (Barth 1975: 128). As one effect, Barth notes, much of what was created served the moment and thus quickly vanished or 'fell into disuse when the moment passed'

⁶⁵ Barth likens instant cities to 'transplants' whereas ordinary cities, rather, resemble trees that 'grew haltingly, matured slowly, and decayed imperceptibly' (1975: xxii). In the case of high growth urbanism, even the decay proves 'untimely', as many projects were simply left unfinished before completion (cf. Yablon 2009).

(1975: xxiii, xxiv). Coming back to the question raised in the introduction, not finishing projects can prove valuable, or profitable, at least. One associate from inside Mr Cai's closest circle that I became acquainted with during fieldwork, stated that Mr Cai presumably had 'abandoned' the whole project with an estimated 200 million RMB profit. Whether this can be explained by an initial vile intention of hucksterism, or simply as a consequence of Ordos' chaotic real estate conditions is unclear. Maybe Mr Cai simply caught on to the impending crisis in due time and sought to get out before the bubble burst. In August 2012 Xiao Bai resigned from his job at Manshi Jituan and returned to Hohhot. On the phone he explained that all construction in the zone had paused indefinitely. Manshi Group had experienced notable setbacks in its other main industries: tourism, commerce, coal and real estate. The Art Hotel had also ceased construction. In light of the crisis, Xiao Bai saw no point staying in Ordos.

Conclusion

In his analysis of the initial phases of the ORDOS 100 Desert Villa Project, Bert de Muynck opened his article with a line from the English Patient: 'It's funny . . . The desert's a big place, but nothing really ever gets lost there'. In hindsight, the logic of the sentence was almost reversed. Due to the extensive footage, photos and models accessible on the Internet and inside the bunker office, the desert was familiar and not big at all. Only, the many virtual renditions of modern structures, populated by artists and billionaires in the sand dunes-cum-creative space were not only lost, they were never really there - a proper mirage, only conspicuously present by its absence. The hype conjured up from urban design magazines and creative networks fostered imaginations that, whether critical or optimistic, nevertheless assumed that the zone and the villas existed, or at least, would be built. The 'wads of cash' that commentators had imagined would be paid to the selection of architecture and design groups was itself an iteration of the almost mythological assumption about how a boomtown economy would naturally produce an abundance of things, of wealth – an assumption that would not likely consider the economy of unfinished construction. *Unfinishing buildings*, this chapter has shown, carried a potential to momentarily align a set of diverse agents and interests: central state directives for urban planning, growth ambitions for cadres in local governments, and property developers' quests for profit and wealth. By examining the social life of prestigious real estate projects in Ordos, this chapter provides more detail on the collusion between officials and high-end property developers. Despite its spectacular

characteristics, statements from inside China's property development sector suggested that the case represented a broader trend where buzzwords and high-profile projects simultaneously trade into the political ambitions of local officials while also offering entrepreneurs and developers loopholes to gain easy access to land.

Ordos Municipality has been ridiculed worldwide for being emblematic of China's growing real estate bubble. Kangbashi is particularly widely lampooned as a 'modern ghost-town' – a flawed development scheme in an overheated Chinese economy. But the question of whether it is or isn't a bubble does not fully account for the change from villas to botanical garden – nor for the flexibility in property developers' strategies that encompass and calculate changes into the design itself, as exemplified in the trend of 'building empty containers of space' – pre-emptive strategies that help adapt to radical changes in markets or regulatory landscapes. As an instantiation of what I term un-real estate, 'empty containers of space' may most of all be characterised by a potential for adaptation; containers that can be tailored to accommodate the changing scenery of regulatory landscapes. Therefore, simply to regard the redirection of real estate projects such as the Jiang Yuan Culture and Creativity Industry Zone, or even projects on the scale of the whole Ordos growth region – as merely flawed schemes due to the gap between initial goals and outcomes reflects an outdated reference point ... or in the words of Xiao Bai as he gazed upon the virtual building site in Ordos: 'these are not villas, they are botanical gardens or maybe even zoological gardens'.



Fantasy expands darkness into exaggerated possibilities –

Georg Simmel

CHAPTER 3

THE IRON BUBBLE

Ordos Municipality 2011, July 3rd. Lunchtime was approaching in Kangbashi. Baatar, an employee at the local branch of the National Bureau for Land and Resources (*guotu ziyuanbu*) since more than twenty years, guided me across the parking lot towards his new Toyota Land Cruiser. Outside the bureau's newly-constructed office building, parking slots fell short of accommodating the many brand new vehicles. Although civil servants in China are not among the high-income groups, the type of vehicles presented an altogether different image. Large SUVs as well as new 'fast cars' (*paoche*) such as Mercedes, Audis, BMWs and finally, the civil servants' most revered vehicle, Toyota Land Cruisers (Prado Lexus, white) were neatly placed outside the guarded entrance of the building. After a brief stop by his office, Baatar now headed off to lunch. For the most part, Baatar's secretary saw to his office tasks. This way most affairs could be handled from the cell phone in his car, allowing Baatar time to attend to his own and to his family's investments, spend time with family, friends, sing, go fishing, and make proper arrangements for his future family residence in the new district. On the way, we picked up two of Baatar's friends whose worksites had recently been relocated to Kangbashi; one was employed at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the other in the New Office for Electricity and Power. All of these buildings were recent offshoots of Ordos' new administrative centre, forming a small part of the cultural, educational and administrative core of Kangbashi. After cruising through the epicentre of the new town, the small group of civil servants settled on a Mongolian style restaurant. Walls were filled with Chinggis Khan portraits; paraphernalia of grassland imaginaries, wooden tables and benches – all of which contrasted with the immense structures of glass and concrete displayed in the modern architectural style on the outside. Baatar found the small wooden seats too hard and the noise of other guests unbearable in the dining hall and made arrangements for us on the second floor in a private dining and resting suite. Baatar and his two friends informally greeted other of the restaurant's guests, suggesting a kind of regularity of lunch visits here. Most seats in the restaurant were already taken. The thriving restaurant and regularity of clientele countered all

the ghost town media reports with their wide angle-lens shots of empty avenues. Most of the guests were civil servants who would spend a little extra on lunch in restaurants rather than the various work unit canteen provisions.

Instead of chairs we comfortably rested on a long ornamented platform inside a large rectangular room. First, traditional Mongolian butter tea arrived in a decorated bronze pot with hot coals underneath. Then an impressive array of traditional dishes followed, accompanied by beer and Chinese *baijiu* (liquor distilled from sorghum). Immersed in the meat-rich local cuisine the three civil servants shared their impressions of Ordos' development. Already familiar with my research objectives and general interest in urban development in Ordos, Baatar insisted that I should write something nice about Ordos. 'For once', he stressed, 'someone should write something nice'. He was fed up with the fraudulent ghost town reports, all the rubbish talk of a bubble economy. Like the majority of civil servants, Baatar had yet to move to the new district, but had already acquired property there for half of the market price. Subsidised property in Kangbashi was one way that the municipal government attempted to attract residents to the new area. Being knowledgeable about most property developments in Ordos qua his profession as a senior officer in the local department of the National Bureau for Land and Resources, Baatar strongly refuted what he referred to as 'the bubble theory' (*paomolun*). During summer of 2011, this was by far the most common position among most locals I encountered. Displaying a strong sense of optimism, Bataar explained that the wealth and opportunities of a 'developing zone' (*kaifaqu*) would surely attract people. 'Eventually', Bataar continued, 'the nice surroundings of the new district will be fully populated'. While I took notice of the request to write something nice, Bataar's closest friend, Xiao Hu teasingly added, 'yes, please do write something nice about Ordos. Something like – here, underneath every square metre you can find a ton of coal at least, several m³ of natural gas, precious minerals and on top of all that – a lot of filthy corruption [*fubai*]'. Local development optimism was often coupled with an acknowledgment of filth and corruption on top: being the many fraudulent development schemes, nebulous forms of collusion, endemic corruption, and the consistent exploitation of 'regulatory loopholes' (*luodong*) that accompanied rapid growth. During fieldwork in 2011, civil servants displayed many similarly ambivalent positions. It was the co-existence of locals' acknowledgement of the filth alongside this pronounced optimism that prompted me to examine how these contradictory sentiments were reconciled or played out in everyday practices and discourse.

Following the daily routines of a selected group of civil servants whose worksites were recently relocated from the old administration in Dongsheng District to the new administrative centre in Kangbashi the chapter asks, **what made this group so adamant about the idea that prices would continue to escalate and that wealth would subsist, even in the face of ‘bubble theories’ and ‘ghost town’ allegations?**

The chapter argues that schemes of modernist urbanisation in Ordos, rather than solely being perceived as a result of the schematic and ordering state gaze, thrived on irregularities, inconsistent planning, and the intimacy of a community that fed off the bubble. To make this argument, the first part – ‘From the Iron Rice Bowl to the Iron Bubble’ expands on the broad appeal of modernised property as both a future family dwelling, investment, index of upwards mobility, and as a site endowed with a strong sense of security. The millenarian faith in local property values was intimately linked with the material restructuring of the physical environment and popular imaginings of Ordos’ almost limitless resource wealth. To examine the practices and ambivalent positions common among Ordos’ civil servants, the chapter’s second part – ‘Community of the Bubble’ – draws on Hans Steinmüller’s concept of ‘complicity’ (2010),⁶⁶ to show how a sense of intimacy could emanate from locals’ engagement in and vernacular about practices that are readily condemned or considered outright immoral. Finally, the chapter seeks to unravel why interlocutors would ask me to ‘write something nice’ by examining what could, and what could not be pronounced – that which was somehow concealed, yet obvious to most (cf. Taussig 1999). Sharing something that could not easily be pronounced, the chapter proposes, was central to the intimacies on which the schemes rested.

From the Iron Rice Bowl to the Iron Bubble

As one of the quintessential tasks of establishing the new district, it needed a population. As noted in the first chapter, tax advantages and subsidised housing were some of the main strategies to attract businesses and citizens. Moving the more prominent of Ordos’ middle and secondary schools into the new district also created strong incentives for citizens who were

⁶⁶ Steinmüller’s ‘communities of complicity’ derives from his use of Herzfeld’s notion of ‘cultural intimacy’ (2005b). Herzfeld coins the concept to designate aspects of a community that defines itself according to a set of values that are generally considered an embarrassment while, at the same time, constituting a site of commonality for those who share them.

not state functionaries to move along with the administration. Finally, for employees in the municipal government, worksites were moved into Kangbashi one after the other while civil servants were offered subsidised housing in the new district; an offer few could resist. As most civil servants already had a home, these subsidised homes were surplus homes. Although sales were common, few moved there. Estimates vary tremendously. According to local sources and pioneer occupants around 6,000 households lived there by summer 2011.⁶⁷ As an effect of the brisk sales and the firm belief that development would take off in the new district, property prices escalated rapidly. This was paralleled with an escalation of personal aspirations, and family plans that were refashioned against the backdrop of Ordos' tremendous growth. As Baatar noted on one of his morning commutes to his work unit in Kangbashi, 'before, Ordos was simply seen as a frontier administration [*bianzheng*], an impoverished region [*pinkun diqu*]. [...] Now with the development and high relocation fees, people can live life!' Baatar belonged to the larger group of civil servant households that were yet to move and therefore still resided in the old district of Dongsheng. Consequently, he had to commute between Kangbashi and Dongsheng on a daily basis. I often joined Baatar in Dongsheng at around 7.30. We would stop for a quick breakfast, and drive along the newly-built express roads to Kangbashi.⁶⁸ Daily congestion in morning traffic suggested that many civil servants had similar routines, and attested to the extent to which middle-income families could now afford vehicles.⁶⁹ On several occasions we were stalled due to traffic accidents. Private cars were not common until recently and many locals drove without a proper licence. Baatar explained, 'people here are not used to driving, a few years ago in Ordos there were three ways to get a licence: doing the actual course and passing a test, the way of the RMB, and the way of social relations [*guanxi*]. I belong to the latter group but have picked up the

⁶⁷ Estimates from the municipal government were much higher and in the proximity of 30,000, one official working in the district argued that the district had attracted at least 60,000 long-term residents. Population count, of course, depends how absentee owners are defined.

⁶⁸ On some occasions Baatar's wife would accompany us to her worksite at Dongsheng's western fringe where she worked as a teacher; on other occasions Baatar would pick up his girlfriend in Dongsheng who worked as a cadre in the Municipal Government's new headquarters in Kangbashi; and some days, both, although never at the same time. Baatar considered himself a family man and though he cherished the time with his girlfriend he did not see divorce as an option. Baatar's girlfriend was also married, and with kids. Interlocutors in Ordos often disclosed how marriage is the pre-occupation and decision for the wider family, and thus also, if broken, equally a bad thing for the reputation of the entire family. From interlocutors' accounts, extramarital relations seemed to proliferate in the pre-crisis period. New measures of wealth and additional income allowed many couples to rent entire apartments or occupy hotel rooms by the month for extra-marital encounters.

⁶⁹ With 54 cars per 100 citizens, by 2011 Ordos had China's highest rate of car ownership in prefectures across China. <http://www.newschinamag.com/magazine/the-coal-curse> (last accessed June 11, 2014).

skills along the way', he added playfully, as to reassure me. Car types were measures of new wealth. It seemed, however, that enforcement of regulations was inconsistent and lacking behind the mounting mass of new drivers.

Development Optimism

One hot afternoon Baatar found the temperature inside his office unbearable and he decided to bring me to see the location he had chosen for his future dwelling. We rarely spent much time in Baatar's office. He mostly conducted his work from his cell phone, and on inspections to examine and approve of projects (*shenpi*): 'I have to do with everything that relates to land development; be that above land as in new real estate project or below ground as in resource extraction; in and outside the urban boundaries. [...] Yet on many days I just make 2–3 calls, then I have done most of the day's work, unless the boss calls upon me.'⁷⁰ From his office we drove south towards Kangbashi's large artificial lake. Five hundred metres of life-size bronze horses are set up along the wide stone promenade that runs parallel to what locals boast to be the highest fountain in Asia. We made a stop at an avenue that runs from east to west, beneath the local administration. The avenue is eight-lanes wide with an additional two around larger crossings. Alluding to the general scarcity of traffic inside the new district, I ironically asked whether he thought eight lanes were enough. Baatar failed to acknowledge my irony. Given the traffic that would one day occupy these streets he always thought that particular avenue too narrow to 'satisfy demand' (*bu manzu xuqiu*). It could easily become congested. 'Kangbashi is a process, and not a bubble. [...] It will be a great place in five years. Next year already we will see large changes.' The development, as Baatar saw it, would successfully attract prominent national businesses by providing favourable terms of land use and taxation conditions, and even throw in stakes in the local resource industry. Moreover, the Ordos population would quickly grow, following Baatar's predictions: 'the number of long-term local residents will soon be outnumbered three or even four times by incoming residents.' Despite differing opinions regarding the initial decision to locate the new administration nearly 30 kms drive away from the majority of the population, there existed little, if any, pronounced doubt in regard to Kangbashi's future. As will become apparent next, civil

⁷⁰ The Ministry of Land and Resources was established in 1998. The main task of the ministry is to oversee planning and management of land, particularly questions regarding quotas for land conversions and transfers of land-use rights (Ren 2013: 61; Hsing 2010: 51).

servants like Baatar considered Kangbashi a sound place for investment. Yet beyond a mere financial asset, some property investments were backed by intentions to relocate and benefit from the new district: by many perceived as more ordered, secure, and liveable. But what had helped crystallise this widespread perception? The positive outlook on the new district's 'good environment' was not only shared among civil servants but also widely uttered from a broad cross section of the population, that did not necessarily have economic interest vested in the new area's property values.⁷¹

As one way that the Ordos Municipal Government would lure future residents to populate the new district, civil servants were offered particularly generous prices on living residences in the new district. In most cases, residences were sold at less than 50% of the market valuation. The type of residential unit offered was allocated according to the rank, status, and position of the civil servant in question. Higher-ranking officials were offered subsidised villas in neatly designed and far more lush compounds, smaller terraced houses and Europeanised suburban residential styles were appointed to other medium-level officials. However, everyone employed in the local government would receive his or her 'advantage' in the new district. Even retired civil servants would have newly-constructed apartments on the fringe of the expanding district. As Baatar pointed out, while driving through the district, the development was no longer strictly government-driven, far from it. Much property in Kangbashi quickly started to attract non-civil servants as private property developers had flocked to Kangbashi in the last couple of years, following the lead of the local administration.

We passed by the subsidised home that Baatar's work unit had 'offered' him in 2007. When he took over the property, it was worth between 3-4000 RMB per m² on the market and now it was worth even more than 10,000 RMB. Baatar had 'controlled' (*kongzhi*) his subsidised home for four years already but hadn't renovated it yet. Most newly constructed homes come with but the most basic amenities when purchased and need to undergo extensive renovation before one can settle in. Now, however, Baatar had plans to resell it so he could afford to buy one that he believed better suited the family's needs, one that was not yet built but whose construction would soon be undertaken. He explained how he had studied most

⁷¹ Kangbashi was widely visited by citizens from Ordos' other urban areas. The stretch of leisure space in front of the manmade reservoir was particularly popular in the evening time for its family activities, movies, fairs for children, fun parks, and spectacular fountain.

designs, zoning designations, and the overall urban plan for the Kangbashi New Area, and how through his occupation, he knew of most new real estate developments. This gave him not only insight into what will happen, but more importantly he expressed how it gave him an advantage in regard to evaluating and acquiring property. We returned along the eight-lane avenue flanking Kangbashi's manmade lake, heading west. Nearby a park, a construction site was veiled in large real estate adverts. Construction had yet to begin. Baatar knew the developer personally and had examined the blueprints and schedules for construction. Giving me a virtual tour, Baatar brought me through the entire 140 m² of not-yet existing space. He envisioned his family's future dwelling site, and had a well thought-out plan:

'Maybe it will be on the eighth floor, not too high, not too low. I consider the location and design in accordance with Fengshui [traditional Chinese practice of geomancy]. This, and my knowledge of the district's planning, will ensure a good future for my family there. You need to consider location and surroundings [fengjing], and not only size. It has to have a view. In front of it there will be large parcels of unoccupied land. These trees you see there can't be moved, nobody can develop there as this parcel is for greening [lvhua tudi]. This is the closest you will get to the lake, while also being close to the best school, no more than 1 km.'

Baatar had even arranged a similar pre-order purchase of a home for his parents in the vicinity. Baatar planned to resettle immediately before his boy had reached the age for middle school so he could attend and live near to the best one. Close by, several family members had bought property. 'Look!' Baatar pointed to the air above the nascent building site. 'In the future you will have a large gate here, and over there, a small path that will lead down to the green areas where I can easily go. Within a few minutes I can pass through the green park and be at the foot of the lake, unpacking my fishing gear. There will surely be fish there at some point'. Fishing and hunting were Baatar's greatest leisure pastimes, besides entertaining and singing. He grew up close to what is now Kangbashi when it was nothing but a small village. Most was just 'wasteland' (*huangdi*) at that time. Although Baatar appreciated much of what development had brought, he still recalled Yeke-juu league with a slight nostalgia, juxtaposing the preoccupations, speed, and hassle of urban life with memories from his childhood and upbringing.

From Baatar's perspective, property buys in the new district were thus more than mere speculation. Families' futures were deeply enmeshed in the success and viability of the new districts in more than one sense: as investment, but also as a work and living site. Such homes gave state employees a small 'advantage' (*youhui*) as a token of appreciation, as Baatar later framed it. Despite national regulations that inhibit early resales or subleasing of government-subsidised housing for civil servants (cf. Shin 2007: 181), Ordos' municipal administration proved less prone to enforce such regulations. At the height of the real estate frenzy, the large majority of buyers did not have legitimate papers for their new homes that in most cases were nothing but models and digital projections. Nevertheless, Baatar's imaginings of his future dwelling site rendered not-yet-constructed real estate as inherently real.

Next, we follow Baatar and several co-workers throughout a quasi-banquet-like lunch, and examine in more depth the background to these perceptions of security and development optimism.

The Banquet

July 2011. Another lunchbreak in Kangbashi. Baatar brought me to join a larger group of his colleagues, all employees of the local department of the Ministry for Land and Resources. Food there was luxurious, abundant, and preferred above their canteen provision. At some point before the crisis most meals were refashioned in banquet style, although without quite the same degree of etiquette, formality, or social entrepreneurial agendas that are otherwise customary for banqueting in contemporary China (Yang 1994). The emergence of spontaneous afternoon banquets was but one manifestation of the new wealth and pre-crisis lifestyle in Ordos. Expensive *baijiu*, soft drinks, tea and beer arrived in large quantities. Consumption of alcohol, particularly among men, paid little regard to either afternoon work or driving, although informants were aware of the dire consequences for civil servants caught drunk driving.⁷² Toasts were always lengthy, poetic, and uttered standing up, often accompanied by songs in both Mongolian and Mandarin. Toasts in larger gatherings were usually expressed with a banquet formality that, participants explained, pay homage to Ordos'

⁷² As did several other middle-aged males I encountered in Ordos, Baatar suffered from type-2 diabetes, something Baatar understands as a consequence of locals' consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, meat, and a general lack of exercise. Although he works to get in shape, mountain biking and working out at his work unit, still Baatar underlines, 'drinking and eating is not something you can easily avoid, even if you wanted, or even for reasons of health. It's part our local culture'.

long and proud drinking culture.

Formal introductions were made, polite and with compliments paid to each other. Next to me is Tegusi, a young ethnic Mongol employed for several years in the Land and Resource Department. Tegusi was a keen soccer player and a devotee of most sports. Taking much pride in his ethnic cultural heritage he felt most at home in his ‘mother tongue’ (*muyu*), i.e. Mongolian. Three years back he married an ethnic Mongolian woman who was employed as a lawyer in Dongsheng District courthouse. Tegusi’s father used to work as a civil servant in the earlier administration, and pushed for Tegusi to seek a similar path. His wife and he still resided in their family home in Dongsheng. Tegusi therefore joined the Kangbashi commuters, but had to put in more time at the office, as he was not yet as senior as Baatar. Two years ago Tegusi and his wife acquired a government-subsidised home in Kangbashi and had recently purchased a new BMW, to make commuting less tiring. They had plans to move to Kangbashi and were in the process of renovating the new home. In between the toasts and songs we debated Ordos’ development. Despite the strict codes of formality that otherwise characterise banquet etiquette, Tegusi came across as more informal in his ways and allowed for more casual conversation. He appreciated many of the improvements that had taken place over the decade of growth. Citizens generally spoke of the development in positive terms, terms that were often elaborated through allusions to new patterns of consumption and a widespread acknowledgement of simply having more money. Many locals, however, conveyed scepticism towards the tendency for grand and monumental construction, i.e. spectacular yet largely insignificant upgrades of the visible environment seen from the vantage point of most residents I encountered. As we talked, Tegusi disclosed his general view that high-ranking government officials were a kind of low quality, nouveau riche developers, but that Ordos nevertheless would move ahead at a brisk pace. In terms of urban design, the Kangbashi New Area stood out with its many spectacular buildings. Yet, Tegusi expressed, few locals took much pride in these, and most expressed how such developments were fashioned to boost officials’ chances of ascendance, as a kind of ‘prestige projects’ (*zhengji gongcheng*), also referred to by some as ‘face projects’ (*mianzi gongcheng*). Tegusi added that, similarly to the general population who had acquired idle wealth, the government was equally giddy to show off its newly acquired wealth: ‘people who are relocated often buy a nice car, an apartment, a fancy watch or take friends to nice restaurants. The local government can’t do that. For them to show off they have to make new districts, crazy

architecture. They are no different than the rest of us'. To the question of a potential economic bubble or the possibility of any impending real estate crisis, Tegusi explained: 'if Ordos' economy is a bubble, at least, it's an iron bubble [*tie zuo de paomo*]. One that can't burst!' Tegusi was the only local I encountered during 2011 who, despite the somewhat extraordinary nature of his bubble, at least, admitted to the possible existence of one.

The widespread optimism regarding property was intimately linked with the common perception that Ordos' abundant resource wealth could sustain development several generations ahead. A commonly heard refrain among interlocutors during Ordos' boom years was: '*yang – mei – tu – qi*', a four-phrase idiom meaning to 'feel proud and elated', often after having been faced with derision. In its vernacular edition the idiom maintained the same pronunciation yet, by altering the characters, it came out as: 'cashmere wool – coal – rare earths – natural gas': an expression that pointed to Ordos' rich resources and the way locals had trumped the derision. As Baatar explained, 'if following a rational [*heli*] pace of extraction in Ordos, we would be able to sustain growth for somewhere in between 60 and 120 years. As long as it is done scientifically [*kexue*], and is not being exploited without limitations, two or even three generations of our descendants will be able to enjoy these resources.'⁷³ Although most interlocutors acknowledged that Ordos really didn't have many attractions besides its abundant resources, real estate prices were still only expected to rise. And, looking back, property prices had only gone up. Since 2001, real estate prices had seen more than an eight-fold increase (Sheng 2012). Property investment was not only safe but, as many argued, given the general rise of property prices in China since the late 1990s, could even be considered a careful investment. With Ordos' high-level compensation, real estate frenzy, and the local administration's tendency to boost rather than restrict local property speculation, central state efforts to curb speculation had little sway in Ordos. Almost everyone I encountered would claim that families, on average, had four homes and everyone present at the lunch table would attest to that. Even in spite of humble income levels. The 'iron bubble'

⁷³ This number was however set a little lower by a high-ranking employee responsible for mining security who had been employed in the Ordos coal industry since 1986. On my visit to Shenhua Group's state-of-the-art longwall mine of Shendong in summer 2011, he argued that it mainly depended on the centrally stipulated quotas for extraction, but at the current pace he assessed that it would last 50 years, at least. Visiting the Shendong mine included a 10 km minibus drive through a tunnel until reaching 355 metres underground. As most of the work is automated only a few workers oversaw the activities inside. Besides being the largest coal producer in the world, Shenhua's Shendong mining complex's longwall shearer was the world's largest and the mine boasted one of the most advanced operating systems.

was an oxymoron that acknowledged the excess construction of spectacular, commercial, and residential space, yet nevertheless attested to the idea that property had an intrinsic value that could only ascend, especially when backed by a resource rich municipality.

Real Estate – Coordinates to Urban Life

Real estate advertisements made for the city's most visible milieu: images would always attest to luxury and emulate cities commonly associated with global wealth and power. The majority of advertisements would have a VIP telephone number listed, and English translation, despite the citizens' lack of foreign languages proficiency. 'Many buyers can barely read', sales associates explained, alluding to the sort of overnight wealth for which Ordos had become infamous. Sales agents were often migrants from areas outside Ordos and would therefore, in conversation with other outsiders, be prone to fall into more stereotypical narrations of local citizens' perceived lack of education and new wealth. Two employees responsible for sales in the 'Great City Real Estate' (*guo yue cheng*) helped me understand the most common sales strategies that agents employed in sales rhetoric, booklets and visual images. Most important was to give the buyer a sense of money. In their experience, buyers rarely took much notice of the cultural connotations of real estate material: when faced with a monument in Paris or famous place names, these were rarely appreciated for historical or cultural values, but estimated in terms of power and wealth. New developments and presales were always keenly attended. Besides the images that coated large parts of the urban environment and the ubiquitous conversations about new projects, real estate-related activities had become an integral part of socialising in Ordos. Attending promotional activities and touring real estate showrooms was a common practice among civil servants as well as people working in the private sector. Participation was not simply with an eye to buy, but often just to socialise or merely to enjoy the expensive spirits or food that accompanied openings of new real estate ventures. Great City advertisement included models, pamphlets, an eight minute-long promotional video, and wall size advertisements that encapsulated the construction site along the pavement, announcing: 'Paris started from the Triumph Arch, and so will the Great City'. A colourful booklet depicted a globe on which five cities with each of their landmark designs were drawn out: London (Big Ben); New York (Statue of Liberty); Beijing (Rem Koolhaas' CCTV Headquarters); Dubai (Burj Al Arab Luxury Hotel); Paris (Arc de Triomphe); and 'our' (i.e. Great City complex in Ordos), an ambitious comparison. Below a VIP phone number, the board summarised the contents of the construction: 'Great

Office – Great Marriot Hotel – Great Executive Mansion – Great Italian Shopping Street – Great Apartment’. The foreground displayed a smiling young Western couple. Behind the couple, high-rises with shiny glass panes and a colourful mall stretched up with glimmering adverts: Gucci, Christian Dior, Chanel. With the ravaging speed of both urban redevelopment and expansionist schemes, the vast surfaces that were supposed to guard construction sites from citizens and vice-versa provided businesses and the local government with plentiful space to promote new fashions, display political campaign slogans, and point to new (civilised) standards of the times. Reflecting upon the meshwork of visual horizons of New York’s massive surfaces and advertisement space, visual anthropologist Andrew Irving writes:

The perspectival horizons formed by the city’s buildings continuously offer a series of extended surfaces, and straight edges that enable New Yorkers to look far into the distance, much like a Euclidian drawing or one of Canaletto’s paintings. A frame of receding perspectives and diminishing angles continually guides the eye toward a vanishing point on the horizon: a point distant in time and space, mathematically known in advance, subject to scientific reason, embedded in perspectival painting but lined by commercial advertising (Irving 2011: 21).

Perspectival horizons in Ordos’ new glass coated buildings and advertisement space carried a distinct mix of commercial and ideological underpinnings inflating ideological values with commercial ones. As to many of the architectural renderings themselves, these further resonated on a personal register. Morrison and Skjulstad coined the term ‘unreal estate’ in their work with marketing strategies for urban residential areas. Their work shows how the digital projection of property acts as a mediation through which people immerse themselves in the not-yet built spaces (Morrison and Skjulstad 2010: 190,197). The marketing technique of use of generic people and places, along with a particular visual perspective, generates a sense that *this* could be you, or that this home might become yours. Despite differences in techniques the life-size renderings that clothed most Ordos streets provided a sense of

standing next to the people (often Caucasian)⁷⁴ gazing at Louis Vuitton shops, at cafes among shopping malls, in green parks overlooking children playing violins, in the middle of the street getting into a new, high-spec Mercedes. That construction had not yet finished or was simply virtual were no hindrance. On the contrary. As Mathijs Pelkmans observes in the context of urban redevelopment schemes in post-Soviet Ajaria (Georgia), vacancies can help mask the un-evenness of development and ‘progress’ (Pelkmans 2006: 211). The luxurious vacancies in Ordos offered aspiring urban dwellers a sense that these spaces could be occupied by anyone. They were open for possession. And, with the high-level compensation, and the money made from flipping property titles to homes until end of 2011, this was not entirely make-believe. Even not-yet-built real estate had become a reference point, or served as a standard for manoeuvring in more than one sense. When asking for directions in Ordos’ urban districts, residents often listed the names of property developers’ projects, often developers that were already well known from the coal industry, infrastructure developments and other businesses. Besides the obvious branding advantages, these, often not-yet-built projects had become coordinates for moving around in the city.

In her extensive research on real estate and middle class living in post-reform era Kunming, Li Zhang points to the following progression in consumer preferences: first from an emphasis on the materiality of housing; then prioritising considerations of the surroundings to a large extent manifested in the broad appeal of community greenery, as this was largely absent before reform; finally, there was a surge in what Li Zhang refers to as ‘*linian*’, i.e. cultural ideas and new concepts of living (Li 2010: 79, 83). In other words, a shift occurred from considerations regarding the material conditions and surroundings toward a greater deal of abstraction. An abstraction, Li Zhang observes, that has to be coupled with an ability ‘to harness consumer desires through concrete and tangible cultural forms that reroute consumers’ attention away from mere abstraction’ (Ibid: 81). In Ordos, rerouting potential

⁷⁴ While much analysis attributes the high frequency of euro-western forms and imagery to couple modern and ‘foreign flavour’ (*yangqi*) as a sales strategy (Li 2010: 84; Wu 2007: 6), I mainly attribute the prevalence of Caucasian people on the renditions to the fact that many renditions were simply copy-pasted from other online advertisements altered slightly to fit the profile. On some occasions, Western characters and images would be displayed reversed in a sloppy-copy fashion, which might suggest a quick process, lack of experience, bad English proficiency levels, and an acknowledgement that the phrases themselves are less important than the image of wealth. The brands are still easily recognised, even when reversed. In this light, the high number of Caucasians on virtual display might equally be an unintended consequence, although it could also be argued that the wholesale change to urban VIP citizen included a change of physical traits.

buyers' attention away from abstraction paradoxically often occurred through images of currency. Advertisement images displayed hard currency, as in large dollar signs that rose above urban skylines. In another, a tornado of gold coins tore through an urban area leaving only a pure stream of money in its wake; a less subtle reminder of the profits accumulated by evictions and high compensation.⁷⁵ Images as these attested to the cargo cult-like visions of a wealth that had magically had been conjured up from the ground and into the households. Yet, besides acting as coordinates to the values and standards of urban life in multiple ways, maybe most important was real estate's function of providing families with a sense of security.

A Hedge against Bad Times

The social significance of Tegusi's 'iron bubble' shares an affinity with another Chinese iron metaphor, the 'Iron Rice Bowl' (*tie fan wan*); shorthand for the extraordinary welfare benefits and lifelong job security that was characteristic of China's era of planned economy and, for many employees in state-owned enterprises, existed years into reform. In the era of reform, the poor efficiency and performance of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) were criticised by way of the 'Iron Rice Bowl' which awarded even bad and unproductive labourers with job security while creating no incentives for greater productivity among employees. Within one single generation, employees in China's state-owned enterprises and collectively-owned enterprises who were earlier guaranteed lifelong benefits and permanent employment, and even stable and reasonable wages compared to market-based employment, were suddenly undergoing radical changes, facing more precarious working conditions, managerial reforms, disputes over contracts resulting in several occurrences of social unrest (Chan 1997: 94). Many perceived the making of the 1995 National Labour Law as the essential blow that smashed the Iron Rice Bowl. The law allowed short-term employment as a way to get rid of the economic burden of providing lifelong care for unproductive employees. The law was supposedly passed to ensure certain rights and standards of workers, though the contractual relation had adverse effects and facilitated the massive layoffs of SOE employees during the late 1990s (Kuruville, Gallagher and Lee 2011: 3-6). Despite obvious differences between the two metaphorical iron *bodies*, the 'iron bubble' allowed citizens a similar sense of lifelong

⁷⁵ This billboard was observed and documented by Max Woodworth.

security – resilience, albeit now in the face of more precarious and fluctuating labour markets. As Mr Qiu, the young underground banker had expressed, apartments served to hedge against uncertainty. It was a safeguard in the eyes of most Chinese. A substantial quantity of homes bought in the heyday of the boom, i.e. from 2006–2011, was essentially crafted as a store of value for many households. For civil servants, government subsidised homes were in many cases conceived as savings accounts, with tremendous yields when resold. In Ordos, it was also the most visible index of a wealth that had eluded many local citizens who grew up in the backwaters of development, proof that Ordos was no longer ‘without history’. Beyond the obvious contradiction in terms, the ‘iron bubble’ was more than simply inflated real estate prices in the local perception. Despite its somewhat illicit character, including unlicensed presales and the fact that state employees on most levels would supplement income by illegally subleasing or even flipping homes that were not supposed to enter the market, I did not come across mention of this in terms of transgression; it rather marked access to wealth along with family security.

In the above I have shown how real estate provided citizens with coordinates to orient themselves in the city in a variety of ways: as a standard for the fashions and prevailing values of the times, as a locus for future horizons of urban life, as an index of status and upwards mobility, and finally as a way to hedge against bad times. As implied by the young underground banker as well as manifest in the ‘iron bubble’ metaphor, real estate could not lose its value and Ordos’ rich resource reserves would only continue to attract buyers.

Community of the Bubble

In what follows I examine more closely the relation between development optimism and the ambiguities that surrounded legal transgression. From this I look more closely at ‘the filth’ on top and how it was dealt with among interlocutors. While flipping homes, illegal subleases or other small ‘advantages’ that came with state functionaries’ authority were not framed as direct transgressions, other activities did invite critical comments among interlocutors. Yet, inconsistencies and variations in interlocutors’ opinions attested to an open field of negotiations rather than a clear set of boundaries between legal and illegal. After briefly reviewing the predominant type and scope of transgression vis-à-vis the development optimism, the final part offers a view on why some things could be critiqued while others couldn’t.

At a later point, Baatar drew out the contours of his and several other of his friends’

monthly earnings as it looked before the bubble burst.⁷⁶ Due to his seniority and position in the local department for the Ministry of Land and Resources, Baatar received 6000 RMB in monthly salary. In Ordos it was not uncommon for civil servants to have secondary incomes from some private business endeavours, something that in principle is illegal. Civil servants who ‘moonlight’ in the private sphere complementing their state salaries was not a phenomenon unique to Ordos, but one that had become an increasingly common choice among civil servants who are tempted to ‘jump in the sea’ (*xiahai*), i.e. engage with the opportunities offered by the market economy (cf. Osburg 2013: 7; Wank 1999). In Ordos civil servants enriching themselves through such opportunities happened with great regularity, and appeared largely to be the rule rather than the exception. Baatar’s close friend, Dalai, was employed as a senior musician composer at Kangbashi’s Culture Department, yet he had started a small ‘minority bar’ in Dongsheng District where he would work most evenings and nights. In 2011 this made him an ‘extra income’ (*wailai gongzi*) of between 40–60,000 RMB. Although not everyone had extra jobs, almost every civil servant I encountered had invested considerably in *gaolidai* (high interest loans): Baatar had started to invest in the *gaolidai* since 2006. Although his initial investments were minor, they had accumulated since then and by 2011 the monthly dividends from these brought him more than four times his official salary. In addition, his position as a senior employee in the local branch of the Land and Resource Ministry allowed him other benefits, the scope of which he did not wish to describe in greater detail. He did agree to talk of these transactions in more general terms as a key ingredient in a wide array of occupations. These transactions only rarely occurred as direct cash payments but were often made in the form of smaller tokens like tickets to events, consumer credit cards for new department stores, credit coupons for supermarkets etc. Telephones and tablets were also common. The ‘red envelopes’ (*hong bao*) that imply giving something to somebody in return for a favour or an advantage, were rarely labelled as corruption, but as something integral to the workings of society. Baatar explained that at his boy’s school every teacher would commonly receive ‘red envelopes’ twice a year. The scope of the tokens would be proportionate to the social and economic standing of parents. ‘It’s simple. Every parent wants

⁷⁶ Data for this part was compiled from various interviews, particularly one of the last interviews I conducted with Baatar in 2013. At that point, my knowledge of Ordos, civil servants’ conditions, and the peculiarities of the post-crisis economy, and the closer ties to interlocutors allowed for more detailed descriptions on the bribes and ‘advantages’ that were common ways of sustaining the new lifestyles before the crisis.

the teacher to look after his or her child. And they fear for whatever repercussion if they fail to pay. We can't avoid it. It's even worse with the medical system,' Baatar added. In spite of such lamentation, Baatar held that a development zone like Ordos provided 'ample opportunities for everyone'. As we shall see next, this was particularly true for the property development sector that oversaw much unlicensed construction, and as will be argued, thrived in an atmosphere of opportunistic deregulation.

Build First – Ask Later

From the time of municipalisation on, Ordos' aim to instigate 'leapfrog development' resulted in the expansion of the city into Ordos' surrounding farmland and 'wasteland' (*huangdi, huangsha*).⁷⁷ In the Municipalities Statistical Yearbook, Ordos' urban area grew from 83 km² in 2002 to 238 km² in 2010. Yet according to several of the officers working actively with land expansion, licenses, and real estate development, this number was a grave underestimate. As the majority of projects had sought less formalised ways of approval for projects or simply had commenced with the intention of applying later, much of what was built fell outside the statistical purview. Officers from the Municipality's branch of the Land and Resource Ministry would guess at a two or even three-fold increase over the yearbooks' estimates. Inside the city, transgressions of building legislation were also common. Buildings would expand onto sidewalks and stipulated space between residential high-rise buildings was often completely disregarded. Construction seemed to mushroom in an ad hoc manner, at high speed. Common forms of transgression included failure to apply for construction, obtain building licenses, or have designs approved by local building authorities. At the height of the boom Ordos' many new real estate sales venues organised lavish promotional activities where they sold preliminary titles to apartments that had yet to be properly approved, and in many cases, where construction had not yet started. And, as sales associates would argue with palpable reason, projects would often sell out before construction had finished. Many real estate developers would organise large social events with an eye to pre-sales, often before proper licences for construction were in order. In the vast majority of cases, presales property titles were not legally valid documents.

In 2011 violations of land-use designations were not only endemic; they had even

⁷⁷ In his extensive research on land policies in north-western China, Peter Ho observes how the category of wasteland is misleading as the so-called wasteland is often used by peasants for animal grazing (Ho 2003).

given it a name in Ordos. Baatar explained how such transgressions were referred to with reference to an old war strategy saying: ‘execute the criminal first, and report to the emperor later’ (*xianzhan houzhou*), or as it came out in Ordos: ‘build first, ask later’. During more personal encounters, with close family, or alongside a few trusted friends, employees at the National Department for Land and Resources were more outspoken about the nature of local development from the insights gained by working specifically with land and development. Both Baatar and Tegusi brought me for long drives along urban fringes, between districts, pointing to the abundance of illegal development projects that flourished on agricultural land. Developments, they pointed out, that had been initiated with complete disregard for the process of land conversion. Being the main responsibility of the officers, there was no lack of evidence as to the scale of transgression. Officers would point out that some developers were likely to apply later, but as they pushed to commence projects and make headway during the construction season developers often dodged or circumvented bureaucratic procedures. Approximately four months of the year the weather conditions in Ordos are not suitable for construction. Yet this hardly explained the scope of transgression. Different forms of gift or the simple *donation* of luxury residential apartments to local high officials would facilitate the process through which land that was, in principle, not urban land and construction thus not permitted, would suddenly see ferocious development. In the larger cases, the task of officers in the municipal department for land and resources proved exceptionally difficult as they, as locals, needed to mediate between high officials in local district governments who are often rewarded generously by developers and the central state laying out the general measures for regulation. In some cases projects were allowed to proceed unhindered by regulation, whereas other cases would result in intra-state clashes, although these would commonly emerge in the aftermath of the crisis. Although Baatar and Tegusi were mostly open about these transgressions, as it was hardly a secret to anyone, some ongoing cases that stretched high up nevertheless called for more discretion on my behalf. These were often large, high-end residential areas, initiated by some of China’s more powerful developers being attracted to Ordos.

Although I was asked not to disclose names, numbers or sources about particular cases, the ramifications of one case in particular had spread throughout the media in 2012 and were widely known among the broader population. Rumours of local fraud, bribery and high-level corruption reached the central government, which allegedly forced the municipal

government to take action, find culprits, mete out, measure, and deliver punishment. The protagonist of the case was the Guangzhou-based developer Star River Group (*Xinghewan jituan*), a developer that had had great success in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, all high-end developments. The project was initiated in 2010, and judging from its progress between 2011 and 2012 it had developed fast. Located along the main artery of commuting between Dongsheng and Kangbashi everyone could follow the progressive construction of 1,900 units of luxury apartments that, in addition to a golf course and shopping facilities, was planned to cover approximately 7.5 km² of land. In the course of several visits Baatar and Tegusi explained how the developer had only applied for a small part of the parcel. Eventually this led to tensions between the Municipality's Department for National Land and Resources and the Dongsheng District Government. The majority of the land was never properly applied for, yet construction was already far advanced. As news of the overheated property market in Ordos reached central level government, a closer investigation of the development of the Star River Group case was set in motion. The investigation concluded, which was hardly surprising to locals, that construction had been initiated without proper papers. Land acquisition had happened through informal channels and construction had been initiated on land that was designated for agriculture as well as intended for affordable housing. Disciplinary measures fell upon seven higher officials at different departments at the Dongsheng District level government, including the Dongsheng District Secretary for Land and Resources. In addition, the vice president of the Star River Group was facing accusations of bribes and illegal occupation of agricultural land.⁷⁸ In the *Xinghewan* case, the rampant violations of building legislation on agricultural land were widely displayed and few, if any, regulations were enforced until a certain point where the municipal government changed from being permissive to suddenly enforcing regulations. Transgressions of this sort in China have largely been conceived as one of the effects of a fragmented state apparatus, where policies that are stipulated at the centre become malleable to the interests of local powerholders, in turn, influencing the efficiency of such policies and creating cleavages within different levels of the administration (cf. Ma 2005; Hsing 2010: 34, 211; Lieberthal

⁷⁸ <http://www.p5w.net/news/cjxw/201212/t4636718.htm>; (last accessed on March 3, 2014).
<http://news.sohu.com/20120725/n349022183.shtml> (last accessed on May 18, 2014),

and Oksenberg 1988; Mertha 2009).⁷⁹ The clash between departments on municipal level and district level officials attested to frictions between administrative divisions and levels within the state itself. While the ‘Ministry of Land and Resources’ administers the bureaus that oversee land management and farmland preservation, urban planning bureaus respond to municipal leaders and often push for growth and land conversions. Both institutions dispose of the authority to convert land, but conflicts in their respective mandates often result in regulatory inconsistencies (Hsing 2010: 51). While urban planning did in fact make significant changes in the built environment, planning was therefore simultaneously coupled with an equally unplanned proclivity for an unregulated sprawl of illegal construction. The attachment to local development, it seemed, did not blind interlocutors to the level of transgression. Yet, as suggested above, transgressions were dealt with in a multitude of ways, and as we shall see next, transgressions were, despite being condemned from within the state apparatus itself, also a constituent of a community of the bubble.

Intimacies of Transgression

As noted by Herzfeld, it is not uncommon to find critiques of the state among civil servants as implied in his use of the term ‘buck-passing’ (Herzfeld 1992), a practice whereby responsibility is passed and blame placed elsewhere. In Ordos I encountered many examples of buck-passing: ‘it’s different on top among officials with real power. We just get by’; ‘the local government are the real mafia’; ‘China’s Communist Party is corrupt, the more you get inside [the CCP] the more you learn this. But if you want to move up, it’s the way for us [civil servants].’ From such statements it became clear that ‘buck-passing’ in Ordos was common, even to the extent of a complete dissociation from the locus of power. Something that even occurred among mid and higher-level officials who would often refer to the government as something external, and themselves as external to power.⁸⁰ From accounts among some ethnic

⁷⁹ In 2009 Andrew Mertha proposed a 2.0 edition of ‘fragmented authoritarianism’ that, Mertha argues, ‘has remained the most durable heuristic through which to study Chinese politics. It asserts that policy made at the centre becomes increasingly malleable to the parochial organizational and political goals of various vertical agencies and spatial regions charged with enforcing that policy. Outcomes are shaped by the incorporation of interests of the implementation agencies into the policy itself. Fragmented authoritarianism thus explains the policy arena as being governed by incremental change via bureaucratic bargaining.’ (Mertha 2009: 996).

Mertha’s edition 2.0 broadens the framework to include other emerging stakeholders and changes in the process of policymaking. He particularly draws out the importance of media, activists, NGOs, and disgruntled officials.

⁸⁰ As one interlocutor argued, this could also be partly attributable to the way the local government was differentiated from that of other local departments of state, referring to the *tiao-kuai* power matrix, in which state

Mongolian civil servants, malpractices of government were attributed an ethnic dimension. Dishonesty and power abuse were more likely to happen at the hands of Han Chinese. Ethnic Mongols considered themselves as less disposed to such acts. When mentioned, this was uttered solely among ethnic Mongolians and I was often warned not to directly pursue minority questions. Such criticisms, however, were mostly generalised and I experienced little if any visible differences between civil servants from different ethnic groups. Some more reflective accounts would not locate blame at the handful of powerful elite on the top, but rather at a systemic level. One lawyer in the Dongsheng District Court expressed: ‘it’s a system. You can’t do away with corruption by launching a campaign. It’s not about a few people, it’s about the practice of an entire generation.’ On several occasions these critiques would surface, and more often than not these echoed more mainstream critiques and public representations of corruption in contemporary China.

Could the co-existence between development optimism and acknowledgement of the filth be explained by reference to ‘organisational involution’ that attributes corruption within the organisation to the growing discrepancy between ideology of the party and the social reality of cadres’ practices? (Lü 2000: 22-25). In his extensive research on cadres and corruption, Xiaobo Lü writes: ‘The involutory change of a post-revolutionary regime results in a neotraditionalism characterized by informal modes of operation, cellular institutions, personalistic networks, a ritualistic ethos, and corruption of non-economic forms’ (Ibid: 23). In this reading the regime becomes inherently patrimonial instead of developing itself into a modern, rational, and regulatory bureaucratic regime. Personalistic ties are reinforced while losing their ideological content. Instead of producing rational forms or, conversely, politically dedicated cadres, Lü argues how such a system produces ‘disillusioned, status-conscious, and undisciplined cadres’ (Ibid. 23). Despite Xiaobo Lü and others’ rich ethnographic accounts of corruption in post-reform China, common among many of these is the proclivity to identify the re-emergence or even strengthening of patrimonial or clientelist ties as a failure of the modern, bureaucratic, and transparent state to materialise properly; a proclivity that tends to assume state and civil society (*minjian*) as two distinct

power is organised along horizontal lines (i.e. meaning territorial local and regional level governments) and vertically organised state departments, such as central level government agencies like that of the local branches of the Ministry for Land and Resources, the military, etc. (cf. Hsing 2010: 34). As noted, considerable conflicts arise from this power matrix, particularly pertaining to land development and intra-state contentions.

entities, entangled in the *wrong* ways (for a critique, see Steinmüller 2010: 541).

Looking at the case of rural construction in Hubei Province's Bashan community, Hans Steinmüller addresses various phenomena such as gambling, traditional beliefs (*li*), and discourses about corruption that all invoke a slight embarrassment when viewed from *outside*. Despite condemnation in official discourse and being widely lampooned in media, these phenomena function as to produce 'cultural intimacies' (Herzfeld in Steinmüller 2013: 23). One instantiation of this intimacy is gambling. Officially and in the media more broadly, gambling is generally condemned as unproductive, immoral or thought of as a 'relic of peasant traditionalism'. Yet, as Steinmüller argues, gambling activities produce an intimacy between partakers, as these are continuously engaged in the active negotiation between official representation and 'inside knowledge' (2013: 195, 196). Such practices, negotiations and ways to talk about phenomena that are deemed immoral, Steinmüller argues, are important markers for sociality and will often include ambiguous or ironic statements on the behalf of participants: 'The embarrassed or ironic ways that such things are said indicate a shared understanding of local mechanisms of power' (Ibid: 219). Coining the term 'community of complicity', Steinmüller points to the fact that these markers for sociality extend beyond high and low status, beyond official and private sector employment; whether it applies to shared yet unpronounced understandings of how power works, to people who apply principles of geomancy, or to the excessive celebrations that can accompany funerals, these have in common that they are widely denounced while central to practices in the everyday lives of people (Ibid: 219). Now, returning to the ambiguities that surrounded practices of bribery and corruption among interlocutors in Ordos and how these were perceived, ridiculed, or legitimised, we see how a similar sense of intimacy emerges. Interlocutors' partaking in activities that could include embezzlement or bribery in Ordos, I argue following Steinmüller, are not simply indications of state failure or indications that the official development discourse was nothing but a mask veiling the underlying clientelism or neo-traditional ties. By way of the 'community of complicity' instead, the pragmatism might not necessarily be taken as a veil, but essentially an indication that people not only exist by, but even define community boundaries from ambiguous domains of discourse and practice. In Ordos, some cases of corruption or bribery were reconciled in the context of an economic growth 'that provides ample opportunities for everyone'. Yet in some instances, larger cases of fraud elicited criticism on the part of interlocutors, attributed to systemic faults, the low quality of

local leaders etc. At other times, the endemic corruption in Ordos became the object of ridicule and ironic statements. As the initial dialogue suggests, state employees like Xiao Hu and Baatar could shift between development optimism and ironic statements about corruption and filth in a way that attested to the dynamics of moral boundary making. Instead of attributing local forms of corruption and informal ways of taking part in Ordos' growth as an instantiation of irregularities in the periphery of states, or what has been termed 'organisation involution', I have argued that these ambiguities were essentially productive and attested to a dynamic process of moving and negotiating moral boundaries. The moral ambiguities surrounding practices and rhetoric found among state functionaries in Ordos are therefore partly attributable to these processes of negotiating and moving moral boundaries according to the particular context.

The Bubble was Forever, Until it was No More

While corruption, opportunism, and the everyday taking advantage of 'regulatory loopholes' (*luodong*) could be expressed in manifold ways, other things were silenced or simply ignored, i.e. deliberately not known. Unlike such topics as corruption, what could not be uttered was the existence of a bubble economy, or inflated real estate prices. Even more unexpected were some civil servants' retrospective accounts of the crisis. Although many would, similar to Baatar, declare the 'bubble theory' as slander or as outsiders' misconception of the local economy, several post-crisis statements from the same group of interlocutors paradoxically suggested that not all were completely surprised when the bubble did burst. In Alexei Yurchak's book on the last Soviet Generation (2005) he condenses a similar paradox into the title of his book, "Everything was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation". How was one to understand a generation that firmly believed that communism was neverending, yet showed little surprise as it collapsed? The paradox exists, Yurchak argues, as public ideology was formalised to the extent of mere repetition of 'performative utterances' (Yurchak 2005: 19). This instilled the population with the sense of a strong unchangeable state, while at the same time, the formalisation of discourse through these same utterances engendered new and creative ways to engage with the system: opening up for citizens to inscribe their own meanings into the rigid state discourses, sometimes in line with the overall goals of the state and sometimes against these – although these performative or discursive stances were rarely clearly pronounced either/or. As one example of this, Yurchak describes a group of youngsters who were defined by 'being *vnye*', a designation that

indicated a position that was neither against nor for the system. The group engaged in spontaneous events in between what was deemed meaningful and absurd like, for instance, unfocused fights with no logical adversaries (Ibid: 288). In the conclusion to his book Yurchak writes: ‘For years the system managed to inhabit incommensurable positions: it was everlasting and steadily declining, full of vigor and bleakness, dedicated to high ideals and devoid of them. None of these positions was a mask.’ (Ibid: 283).

In spite of the span between faith in a neverending Soviet system and the millennial faith that property prices would only ascend in resource-rich Ordos, the contradictory nature of everyday lives in the last Soviet generation captures part of the ambiguity that I encountered among the group of civil servants whom I followed in their public as well as private affairs. The last Soviet generations’ mass participation in state rituals and reproduction of discourse was essentially also what served to internally displace the system itself. The tendency to ignore the impending bursting of an overheated real estate market was, even among agents with particular knowledge of the scope of transgression and speculations, consistent to the point that it seemed contradictory, or a paradox at least. While Yurchak’s paradox does reflect some of the dynamics of upholding the surface of an impending bubble in rhetoric and practice, while also actively contributing to its collapse, Yurchak’s paradox is less useful in capturing the intimacies that emerged from safeguarding it in what I have here termed a complicit community of the bubble. Any rumours of ghost towns or bubble economy allegations would mainly result in an affirmation that outsiders knew nothing of the local conditions. When asked what would keep buyers’ attention lined up, I was often answered with repetitive and normative assumptions about the intrinsic value of modernised property, and the endless reserves of coal Ordos had just started to plunge into.

Yet the question remains: did interlocutors secretly conspire to keep up appearances until the eventual collapse of the market? Was their optimism merely a charade concealing a deeper secret that Ordos had essentially gone off the track in its construction frenzy? Truth is often assumed to be that which is concealed and hidden beneath the surface. Yet what if, Michael Taussig asks, ‘the truth is not so much the secret as a *public secret* [...] *knowing what not to know?*’ (1999: 2). Something that is widely known, yet not pronounced. Following Taussig’s intervention, the very key to sociality can thus be seen as the illusions we share, the intimacy of sharing something that must not be evoked, what I have here referred to as a community of the bubble. For ‘without such shared secrets any and all social institutions –

workplace, marketplace, state and family – would founder’ (Ibid: 7). Despite being inflated or kept alive by a myriad of less sanctioned forms of collusion between developers and officials it did nevertheless afford most households a sense of security, or even welfare.

Conclusion

To draw out the initial course of the social life of temporary wealth this chapter has sought to delineate the contours of a community that was defined by the tenacious nature of an ‘iron-bubble’ optimism, rather than the ideological development rhetoric of the local government. In 2011 the mass of unfinished construction, half-finished developments and urban vacancies were not perceived as empty, but potentially filled; or, at least, surely worth something. During the years of growth an unfettered optimism in the city’s resource base and thriving economy cemented the population’s faith that property prices would only go up. And for several years they did, doubling or even tripling in just a few years. Besides faith in the resource base of the Ordos economy, citizens were adamant in the belief in an ever-escalating growth curve as wealth was easily indexed from the environment, most often measured by luxury foreign vehicles and escalating m² prices of spacious, modern housing. Real estate not only indicated future profit, but as the case of Baatar illustrated, also served as dream homes for future lives. Moreover, large-scale improvements of the built environment, promises of affluence, and the perks of urban life in general created the basis for an affective attachment to the ongoing construction: an attachment that facilitated a certain local perception of the construction boom, and made real estate a mooring of emerging values. Regardless of social status, income, ethnicity and age, most people could quote the m² prices in several if not most of Ordos’ developments. Real estate, being the talk of the town, had become a standard measure of not only luxury, but also a standard for Ordos’ development in general and ways for newcomers to navigate in the city. The chapter’s second part has sought to address the ambiguity that I encountered among civil servants whose worksites had recently relocated to Kangbashi. This group, it seemed, trusted the city’s leap forward while being cognisant of the abuse of power and the regularity of transgressions.

Despite the seemingly contradictory nature of everyday practices among Ordos’ civil servants, what was beyond contention was the future development and prospects of Ordos. It seemed the local predilection for bribery, corruption, and filth could be dealt with in various ways. Other things, however, were not openly acknowledged, silenced or simply ignored. With regard to outsiders’ critical reports regarding the ‘ghost city’ or the ‘bubble theory’, the

general stance that this group of interlocutors held towards such slander seemed to convey another sense of community that outweighed the prevalence of local transgressions. Along with all its ambiguities and inconsistencies the 'iron bubble', as an instantiation of development optimism, did accentuate a community, a community of the bubble before it burst – a development in which many were complicit beyond mere rhetoric and irony.



*... it is not necessity but its contrary, "luxury",
that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems –*

Georges Bataille

CHAPTER 4

THE TOWER & THE TOWER

In July 2012, I returned to the Coal Tower, an office building in Ordos' Dongsheng District where I had spent considerable time among a group of young entrepreneurs a year earlier, the Litai Investment Group. My attempt to follow up on the young guys from Litai stands out in my notes and memory as an unmistakable sign that things had turned. As I entered the office building upon my first visit litter was scattered across the entrance hall. In the lobby a stale scent of vomit drew attention to one of the corners on the ground floor. A security guard was sleeping behind a glass pane in a shabby glass booth. The thin sheets of cardboard that covered the ceiling of the lobby were stained. On the walls I found official announcements from the local energy department announcing that the building would be cut off from power within a fortnight due to deferred payments. As doors were locked and no one in Litai's main offices at the third floor immediately answered my knocking, I went on up to the higher floors of the office building. Several of the floors appeared to have stopped in midway renovation. With the general absence of office staff or other occupants it was difficult to establish whether these office spaces were still in the process of renovation, or merely decaying so fast that it appeared so. Numerous rooms were crammed with construction materials and on the 6th floor a few disoriented workers had taken refuge among scattered bits and pieces. On the 7th floor most offices were vacant except for one meticulously furnished one. From the adverts and exhibition samples gathered in an ivory bookcase, the enterprise had specialised in selling an expensive Chinese *baijiu* brand (*Moutai*). Family pictures were still displayed on the pristine wooden work desk. On the table, next to the family idyll, stood a full, taxidermy wolf. The door was secured with a chain lock and on the floor was a stack of local newspapers, official notices, but mostly some of the real estate advertisements that were everywhere a year earlier. The office with its family portraits and office wildlife contrasted with the majority of other vacant workspaces, of which most bore almost no traces of personal lives. With the short timespan since they had been installed, meeting rooms appeared sterile, despite being fully furnished. Some floors still had offices running, although the employees I encountered were

not sure for how long they would endure. Almost every level of the building had countless notices announcing cheap subleases, often just written on a wall with a ball pen. Prices had dropped from a monthly m² price of 60 RMB to 20 RMB (9.8 – 3.3 USD) within a year. As no new businesses or entrepreneurs were occupying space, no real assessment of lease value existed. At the 18th floor there were no visible tenants. Toilet facilities were sealed off. Small piles of excrement were scattered across every parcel of 1-2 m² of the floorspace, accompanied by bits of used paper and cigarette stubs. A handwritten note on a wall said, ‘this dormitory is my home – sanitary conditions are the responsibility of everyone’ (*sushe shi wo jia, huanjing weisheng kao dajia*). Not simply confined to corners, most of the floor space had been transformed into a public lavatory. Although many of the tower’s vacant or not yet installed spaces were left unchanged, revisiting the Coal Tower revealed a stark contrast between the potential vacancies of a developing frontier and the progressive ruination of a partly evacuated building amid a local economy in decline.

Tracing transformations inside the Coal Tower from my early observations among Litai’s associates and forward into the time of economic decline, this chapter seeks to explain how the very same spaces that were perceived as solid sites of investment suddenly became places to defecate. Similar to how the bubble yielded effects in terms of generating affective attachments among civil servants, vacant space seemed to animate agency and instigate particular forms of occupation throughout both boom and bust. This chapter tentatively asks **whether, and in what ways, vacant space itself could be regarded as complicit with the nature of schemes and forms of occupancy inside Ordos’ new office spaces throughout boom and bust?** Newly erected office buildings, the chapter shows, conjured up dreams, aspirations, and relations that were prone to dissolve equally as fast as they had materialised. Drawing on Hetherington and Lee’s thought-provoking analysis of the role of ‘blank figures’ (2000) in the constitution of orders and disorders, I examine how urban vacancy in Ordos might take on similar qualities to these ‘blank figures’, drawing attention to the potentiality for places like the Coal Tower to instigate investments and set things in motion, shedding light on its potential for order as well as disorder.

The first part – ‘New Wealth in the Coal Tower, 2011’ – deals with the boomtown atmosphere to illustrate the capacity of newly-built office space to draw people from different backgrounds into new social configurations. Following the activities and routines of the Litai associates, I address the relation between the excess of urban vacancies and the prevailing

forms of occupancy I encountered among this group of interlocutors. The chapter's second half – 'Untimely Ruination in the Coal Tower' offers insights into the ruinous effects that the crisis had within social groups who had joined together as entrepreneurs in the booming economy. I do this partly by my attempt to locate and follow up on Litai's associates, but also from observations of more general changes in visible forms of occupation in the building. The Coal Tower was not completely abandoned and signs of new forms of dwelling and uses of space emerged. Despite my many visits and increasing familiarity with the Coal Tower and its inhabitants, the building continued to estrange me until my time of departure. And up to this point it continues to elude my attempts to grasp it. Whenever I felt that I had suddenly gained some kind of toehold I was almost certain to lose it upon my next visit. Traversing the various offices and floors of the building was disorienting as the marks and indications of one floor or office were starkly countered by the next.

New Wealth in the Coal Tower, 2011

My first visit to the Coal Tower was in summer 2011, almost exactly a year before the above description. Facing west, along the top end of an 18-T office building in the rapidly expanding Dongsheng district of Ordos Municipality, large yellow Chinese characters read *Meitan Dasha*, which literally means Coal Tower, or High-Rise. It was constructed a year before my arrival. Initially, a local developer had obtained the license to commence construction; yet even before the completion of the building's basic components, the developer resold the entire office building to three main investors. Each of the investors would either be responsible for basic renovation of the office space or, what proved to be the case, simply rent out the basic ground space to tenants, who would then put money into renovation, or further sublease smaller office plots. Each of the 18 floors offered 2000 m² of office space divided into smaller lots, usually leased by various enterprises. Inside the Coal Tower local businesses proliferated. Looking closer at one of these businesses the following outlines prevailing forms of occupying space by making a brief foray into Litai's organisation, terms of collaboration, and social encounters.

Litai Investment Group

In the beginning of 2011 the first three floors in the Coal Tower were purchased and subsequently occupied by two brothers, Mr Qian Yong and Mr Qian Hu, who were also the main shareholders of Litai. Litai itself was set up among a network of locals, some of whom

were introduced to Litai through friends, some who knew each other from college, and some that had known each other even as kids – all local guys in their late 20s or early 30s with a majority of Han Chinese. When I first encountered Litai in summer 2011, they numbered between 12–15 associates with varying assets in the company. Including office staff Litai had more than 20 employees. Mr Qian Yong was 29 in 2011 and held the largest share in the company. By nature, a quiet young man, casually dressed although wearing a pair of expensive glasses. Being an accountant by profession he acquired the majority of his wealth through his employment connections in a coalmine company, not far outside Dongsheng District. Buying and selling coal proved a successful endeavour for Mr Qian Yong and eventually led to sufficient profit to ‘expand’ (*kuoda*) his business into other niches. His associates in Litai estimated that he was approximating acquiring his first billion. Forming the core of Litai, the two brothers increasingly invested their funds into property, both in and outside Ordos, while simultaneously engaging in the legally greyish market for high-interest lending, the *gaolidai*. Coal resale, real estate and acting as a lending intermediary were by far the most central means of making profit for Litai. Nevertheless, Litai boasted an additional range of various businesses that included advertisement, a Thai restaurant, renovation, sand buggy auto rental, and event management. Later Litai’s activities expanded to include a small shop for French red wine import, microfinance lending, and a less authorised gambling venue. Associates only rarely had prior experience within these business niches, and for several of them, their engagement in Litai was a part-time occupation.

Litai’s associates would often refer to themselves as stakeholders (*gudong*), investors (*touzimen*) or entrepreneurs (*getihu*). As argued earlier, the opportunities offered by a boomtown economy encouraged many citizens to adapt a more lax attitude to conventional and secure forms of occupation. Therefore both funds and incentives existed for many to set up their own private business. Those in Litai who held positions as state functionaries would, by extending private loans to fellow associates, also become ‘stakeholders’ in the investment group. The category of stakeholder was flexible and could on some occasions include those responsible for establishing crucial links to some other party – often being official. Despite Litai’s somewhat opaque organisational structure, associates were mutually implicated through various kinds of loans. In some cases, lending in between the entrepreneurs of Litai included interest and was put down in writing, while in other cases, loans were extended without written agreements or interests. Friendly terms and colloquial dialogue between the

associates helped, at least partly, to conceal hierarchies. Yet most of Litai's entrepreneurs acted as tenants and thus rented the space for their small niche businesses. And although contracts were rarely explicit, as a general rule, Mr Qian Yong held a 60% share of all the niches. Due to the scope of his recently acquired wealth, Mr Qian Yong was considered to be the most successful and competent of the bunch. His friends and partners admired him, mostly for his riches and his collection of high-spec cars.

A widespread perception that dominated in the immediate post reform years associated entrepreneurs with low morality and they were often regarded with a slight disdain for doing transactions on the margins of legality (Osburg 2013: 6). Although entrepreneurs and their social standings gained more traction from the late 1980s, being an entrepreneur was also associated with the lure of obtaining quick and easy money, a practice that would spill into another term, that of the more derogative categorisation of *baofahu*, the new rich, popularly seen as lacking taste and quality (Ibid: 13). Moreover, entrepreneurs were often distinguished according to whether they came from the China's east, thus being more cosmopolitan and educated vs. China's interior provinces, depicted as more crude, and less sophisticated (Ibid: 8). Although Litai associates would commonly use the term *baofahu* teasingly about one another, one could often find a spiteful joy in being labelled a 'low quality person' (*meiyou suzhi de ren*), a wealthy one nevertheless, driving luxury cars and enjoying an affluent urban lifestyle.⁸¹ The last couple of years, rumours of fast development in 'China's Dubai' spread throughout the country, attracting a large migrating labour force to Ordos, many from other areas of Inner Mongolia and beyond. One associate explained that migrants from Dongbei, Shaanxi, and Sichuan province especially, provided services in everything from construction work, renovation, driving taxis, prostitution, and the restaurant business. The associate continued: 'most locals are lazy now. Ten to fifteen years ago we were the ones who had to migrate to other areas to do labour. Now, it's the other way around [...] locals don't do manual work any longer. They simply don't need it'. New wealth was not

⁸¹ This seemingly ambivalent position spurred several urban myths about the stereotypical traits of Ordos' citizens. One such story told of a wealthy coal tycoon who flew to Shanghai to gaze around the most luxurious car exhibitions. Upon entering, security personnel mistook him for a poor migrant worker due to his 'low quality' and rough appearance, and consequently asked him to leave. Annoyed by the hassle, the Ordos tycoon decided to purchase the most expensive vehicle only to drive it to the entrance of the exhibition and trash the car. Other myths accounted similar instances of 'pecuniary emulation' (Veblen 1994), or 'wasteful expenditure' (Bataille 1991).

a stigma among Litai associates, but was often expressed as a fair recompense after years of poverty.

In spite of popular stereotypes that revolve around private entrepreneurs in post-reform China, the Litai Investment Group was a far from uniform group. Some had obtained good education, one even abroad. Some came from rural backgrounds, while others had grown up in Dongsheng District. Besides their engagement in Litai as entrepreneurs, some held positions as civil servants, while others were employed in the private sector. Still others undertook more unlawful activities. Those who held positions as civil servants perceived their engagement in Litai as their ‘secondary occupation’ or ‘additional income’ (*wailai gongzi*), but also mostly, just as ‘fun’ (*wan*). In addition to the heterogeneity of the group, the flexible category of stakeholder and the muddy lending extended haphazardly between associates attested to the loose organisational structure. The general lack of work experience of the associates within Litai’s wide array of niche businesses not only revealed their ‘big nerve’ (*danzi da*), as they liked to call it, but also hinted at a widely-shared assumption that most ventures amid Ordos’ growth would yield profits, and that potentially everyone could simply tap into it.

‘Red Hot’ Sociality

‘He has got a large penis on his head ... thinks he’s better than the rest of us. Just because he can speak a little foreign language!’ Mr Li, the fellow with the alleged penis on his head, slapped the young man who uttered the insult across the face, responding in English: ‘you motherfucker! Do you understand that?’ - ‘No!’ The young man, known as Big Mouth among friends, yelled back, also in English. Both laugh and continued their lunch.

Amongst themselves most of Litai’s shareholders went by their nicknames, e.g. ‘Grandpa Li’ (*Li Daye*), Big Mouth (*da zui*), hotpot trashcan (*huoguo lajitong*), Litai’s accountant was often called half-half (*banban*) or sometimes half-dog (*ban gou*). Another was ‘A Fei’ (Cantonese nickname) also known as Jiang Zemin (former general secretary of the Communist Party). The 3rd floor of the Coal Tower accounted for Litai’s main office area. Rarely would any of Litai’s associates spend much time alone in their offices. Rather, they would group together in some of the larger offices for socialising. Unlike most offices, Mr Yong’s office was

luxurious: dark leather coated couches, chairs, and a wooden work desk with a shining Macintosh computer, all in large dimensions. Opposite the windows was a barrier constituted by a wall size aquarium with large, colourful fish. Through the aquarium one could glance into his big brother, Mr Qian Hu's, office. Mr Qian Hu turned out to be a 'big brother' (*da ge*) in more than one sense as he, until recently, held a prominent position within a regional band of thugs, known as the 'Mongol Army' (*menggujun*). Behind a door in the back of Mr Qian Yong's office was a neatly furnished room with a large bed, a bathroom, and closet. The extra quarters was used to accommodate his wife and two-year old daughter on their visits, or simply to rest. Apart from Mr Qian Yong and his brother's offices, additional office space displayed no wealth at all and rarely had any furniture or interior decoration besides the absolutely necessary: a computer, a few chairs or a bed, and a flat surface that could be used for playing cards, and sniffing *annajia*, the office drug of choice. In Ordos, '*annaka*' (安纳咖 locally pronounced *annajia*) comes in the form of a white substance formed into what looks as a golf-ball. A soldering iron that would be plugged into the office power supply was used to bring out a grey, dense smoke from the *annajia* that associates inhaled through rolled money bills.⁸² The office's provider of Litai's *annajia* consumption explained how veterinarians commonly used the drug (Benzoic acid sodium caffeine) in some more basic form to treat bacterial infections. At some point *annajia*'s energising effect became common among the coal freight drivers who drive excessively long hours with no rest. Since then, the use of the substance spread from the extractive industries and became popular among the wider population from poorly paid labour, to entrepreneurs, and civil servants. Together with Chinese Red Bull (*hongniu*), soft drinks, and cigarettes, *annajia* made up a considerable part of collective consumption at Litai. *Annajia* consumption mostly served to fuel gaming, and counter post-lunch fatigue, and was therefore less a means of working long hours. Commonly, activities centred on more leisure and less work. At particularly vibrant sessions of joint swearing, joking and gaming, the atmosphere was referred to a 'red-fire' or 'red-hot' (*honghuo*),⁸³ an expression that carried connotations of exuberance, sex, and the lively

⁸² http://finance.ce.cn/law/home/scroll/200801/08/t20080108_12783222.shtml (last accessed on November 10, 2013).

⁸³ In his account of gambling practices in a rural setting in China, Steinmüller observes similar forms of gaming sociality referred to as 'noisy and hot' (*renao, naore*). Besides being invoked within the context of gambling, these same concepts indicate ideal atmospheres of festivals, banquets, and market activities (Steinmüller

sociality that played out during Mah-jong or card games.

Immersed in the oversized leather furniture in Mr Qian Yong's office, the young guys often discussed the preceding night's computer games. Games like 'Dream of the Three Kingdoms' (*Meng sanguo*) and 'League of Legends' (*Yingxiong lianmeng*) were the most popular at the time. Despite differences in ambition among Litai's associates, most found time to partake in the joking, playing cards, computer games and Mah-jong. No matter the amounts, associates did not consider it 'gambling' (*du*), but as 'fun' (*wan*). As winnings were often redistributed through collective consumption, associates argued that you couldn't really lose or win so that it couldn't be considered gambling. They played Chinese style poker games as *San da yi* (three attack one) or *Dou dizhu* (struggle against the landlord). The winnings from card games that could easily amount to 5–10,000 Yuan could help subsidise evening banquets or KTV visits, or were simply re-inserted as stakes in Mah-jong games later in the evening. Conversation in the offices was distinctly unpolished, and mostly revolved around money, cars, women, gambling in Macau, KTV (karaoke), *gaolidai*, and heated debate about which one of them would be the most henpecked by their respective wives and girlfriends. Despite Litai's myriad ventures, leisure was hard to distinguish from work and distinctions between friends and stakeholders overlapped, or were, at least, not pronounced (cf. Osburg 2013: 21-22).⁸⁴

Expansion

Despite the laid back atmosphere in the office, investments did thrive and associates' aspirations to expand the scope of business seemed amplified amid the excess of vacancies. Providing one example of how vacant space incited investment in the context of Ordos' boom I briefly trace one entrepreneur's trajectory back from before Litai and onwards to capture the way occupation of new spaces resonated with the aspirations of interlocutors: in terms of new possibilities, and in terms of independence from the claims and expectations of family.

Mr Li (31) belonged to the more ambitious group of the lot and had consequently earned the honorary name of 'Grandpa Li' (*Li daye*) amongst the others. He studied in the UK

2013: 181). The sexual connotation of 'red-hot/fire' (*honghuo*) in Ordos was however the most common one I encountered.

⁸⁴ A similar observation was made by Osburg, as he traced networks of entrepreneurs across families, overlapping interests, intermingling forms of financial support, advice, and the mutually supportive uses of each others social networks (*guanxiwang*) (Osburg 2013: 21-22).

before he came back to Ordos in 2006, during the middle years of Ordos' tremendous growth. Mr Li is an ethnic Han and was born in Ordos. His family had lived here since his great grandfather migrated from Shaanxi during the late Qing Dynasty. His father who had attained a good position as a sub-manager in one of Ordos' most influential coal enterprises – The Inner Mongolia Yitai Coal Co. Ltd. – had decided to provide his son with some of the opportunities he himself had never had. Li was therefore sent to the UK at the age of 19, first doing an English language course in Cambridge and then on to get a degree in engineering and construction in London. During and after his degree, Mr Li undertook several part-time jobs while still in the UK: washing dishes at a local Chinese diner, cleaning, and his favourite - buying cheap second hand cars at auctions and selling them at high prices to fellow Chinese students coming abroad to study. 'They had no clue about prices in Britain. It was a good deal, everybody was happy!' Later, Mr Li started his own fast food restaurant but due to issues regarding unpaid tax, he was forced to close and his shop was auctioned off. Not long after, he came back to Ordos at the age of 25, aiming to join in the rapid development. Already at that time, he explained, opportunities in Ordos were much better than in the UK. And since then, he had kept himself busy in a myriad of small and large schemes 'to expand' (*kuoda*).⁸⁵ He mostly relied on income from his building insulation enterprise, having landed several middle size contracts for the local government, insulating residential high-rises for civil servants in a new expanding urban district. In addition, a large part of his more stable income came from subleasing commercial properties, and as everyone else, the *gaolidai*, although Mr Li stressed that high-interest loans was not a viable business strategy in the long run. Every month, Mr Li would pay a set 70,000 RMB on interest for obtained loans, but was making more than twice that amount through real estate sublease, building insulation contracts, and monthly dividends from interest bearing loans he had extended to others. Mr

⁸⁵ Other of Mr Li's projects and plans included: import of bits and pieces for the local resource industry; acquiring government subsidies and access to land plots by planning to commence scientific agricultural projects; import of ecological refrigerator plants (something he saw on the Internet); getting contracts for infrastructure developments in Xinjiang; acquiring a license for pawnshop practices (a common outlet for *gaolidai*) combined with insurance business. Finally, with the central government's 2013 'anti-corruption campaign' and its new effort to clamp down on embezzlement of public funds, Mr Li eyed an opportunity to provide private spaces for extravagant business meetings between local bosses and government officials. Hearing about the ORDOS 100 villa construction case, Mr Li immediately recognised the case as a common scam; one that he himself would attempt to embark on through his so-called 'agricultural project', planning a scientific agricultural project using experts in Beijing, although primarily intending to obtain government subsidised land.

Li's father had hopes his son would follow the father's path and connections through Yitai Coal Co. yet Li often expressed the need to be 'independent' (*duli*) from family connections and create something for himself. With the pace of things, he expected that in some 10–15 years he would have expanded business enough to list his own company, 'when you got money, you got power' (*you qian – you quan*), he assured me.

Opportunities presented by Ordos' boomtown economy boosted many citizens to new class standings. Although Mr Li would regard himself as a middle class citizen, his expenditure, scope of investments and conduct were hardly comparable to many other middle class lives outside of Ordos. Besides materialising as new horizons of opportunity, Ordos' growth also offered young men like Mr Li a certain freedom from the trodden paths of fathers. Despite his deep respect for his father's many accomplishments and lifetime engagement in Yitai Coal, Mr Li made great efforts to keep clear of asking any favours: both in terms of benefiting from his father's wide and influential network, but also in terms of raising funds for his business endeavours through close family. Although some scholars point out how the traditional role of kinship has become increasingly absorbed in the instrumentality of *guanxi* networks (Yan 2009: 90, 91), the young associates expressed a principle rule to keep family connections and business networks apart, when possible.⁸⁶ In 2010, Mr Li and several others joined the two brothers at the Litai Investment Group, that, with its slight phonetic resemblance to his father's worksite through many years – Yitai – would form a plateau from where Mr Li would soon launch his luxurious Thai restaurant, the Chang Mai.

From Rubble to Restaurant

In 2011 Mr Li's largest investment was the 2000 m² Thai restaurant. On many of our encounters he was busy choosing design, recruiting staff, renovating the large space needed for the restaurant, and exploring the set-up of other successful restaurants. Mr Li's Thai restaurant was set up as a joint collaboration with two friends including Mr Qian Yong, the largest shareholder in Litai and Mr Qiu, the young underground banker (introduced in chapter 1), who was only connected to Litai through a minor investment in the Thai Restaurant. Mr

⁸⁶ Family networks with their hierarchies and forms of indebtedness were less prevalent during the years of growth. Still, among associates in Litai there were cases where family networks were employed to make certain connections and get contracts or as shortcuts to business licenses.

Qiu, however, knew several of the other entrepreneurs in Litai from middle school and would regularly play online computer games with the others. Mr Qian Yong had agreed not to claim rent until Chang Mai was up and running well. Mr Li walked me through the second floor, where he was preparing to launch the restaurant within months. As we staggered through the rough concrete, workers were busy with basic renovation, plumbing, etc. Mr Li carefully explained all the plans of running a large Thai restaurant. He had recently visited Beijing's most successful Thai restaurant to borrow inspiration from its decoration and the menu, which he brought back for further scrutiny. The chef was to be brought in from Thailand if possible, and maybe even some of the staff. Amid the rubble and dust, Li perfectly described even the smallest details of the design, installations, and the whereabouts of everything. The entire 2000 m² of floor space was dedicated to the project. Several extra luxurious rooms with tea-party installations, TV-sets, Mah-jong tables, and Karaoke would occupy the spaces of the building's northbound side. And, towards the southern side a large open dining room. Close by the intended kitchen he would install a room for children and youngsters where they could play computer games and watch television offering their parents time to enjoy their meals. If we dwell upon Mr Li's invocation to 'expand', his rigorous and diverse plans, and from the way Chang Mai came to life from his minute depictions of design, materials, and considerations of the restaurant's various endowments we get a sense of the way vacant building space yielded imaginary works in the context of a seemingly expanding economy.

During summer of 2011, Ordos was rife with similar activities. Mr Li or Litai for that matter did not represent a unique case of entrepreneurship. Inside the lobby of the Coal Tower there was no overview of the listed companies, as various enterprises took over new floor space at a rate that would likely render the effort obsolete. In some cases, tenants occupied entire floors or, at least, had acquired entire floors in order to profit from subleasing, as the case of Litai might also suggest. As a consequence, some floors were luxurious and fully installed while other floors or offices were still to undergo basic renovation. In the summer of 2011 there were few 'real' vacancies in the building, although many were still under renovation or simply waiting to be subleased. The Coal Tower hosted several expensive brands of liquor outlets (European red wine import and Moutai, Chinese high-end *baijiu*), and several luxurious restaurants with adjacent rooms where customers could sing or workout. Yet the majority of leaseholders were local investment companies similar to Litai Investment Group. Formally these covered a variety of enterprises such as renovation, advertisement,

construction, real estate and so on. In reality though, as suggested by Litai's two brothers' business model, most would primarily make money from the buying and reselling of coal and would further be engaged in the *gaolidai*, acting as some form of lending intermediary. Several of the Coal Tower's enterprises, namely insurance companies, microcredit offices, and some investment companies were simply covers for non-bank lending operations. Due to the laxity of financial regulation and supervision in Ordos, these forms of entrepreneurship were endemic. The booming mass of small-time local property developers that aimed to profit from escalating real estate prices relied on the *gaolidai* for start-up credit. This provided incentives to expand existing business into financial intermediation.

Through my increasing familiarity with the everyday lives of Litai's associates the above portrait has sought to draw attention to the efficacy of vacant urban space, empty buildings and the predominant ways that these spaces were perceived and occupied, in turn describing the process in which interlocutors reconfigured their status and social relations against the backdrop of the evocative imaginaries spurred by a decade of growth. Even within families, younger generations felt a sudden liberty from the intergenerational dependencies enabling some youngsters like Mr Li to become 'Grandfather-like' figures among friends and fellow associates. New wealth manifested in ambitious attempts to expand business as well as in more exuberant 'red-hot' sociality, spending, and leisure. In Ordos, nevertheless, that which had been expanding so rapidly would soon contract equally fast, and the wealth that had appeared solid would prove ephemeral. Next, I return to the time of the chapter's opening vignette and my attempts to revisit the associates in Litai. Due to Litai's fragmentation and the progressive evacuation that occurred in the Coal Tower throughout 2012 and 2013, the methodological approach in the second part of the chapter takes a slightly different direction as it increasingly relies on observations of material conditions (cf. Buchli et al 2001; Armstrong 2010), while also tracing key informants from Litai to new destinations outside the Coal Tower.

Untimely Ruination in the Coal Tower

In my search for Litai's associates that sent me on a search throughout the building, I finally managed to reach Mr Li on his cell-phone. Despite deteriorating conditions of the Coal Tower Mr Li was now set up in an office on the second floor with his recently opened restaurant. Asking about his view on the changes that had occurred since last year, he explained that besides leaseholders' preoccupation with declining prices, basic maintenance was becoming a

problem. Although he was mostly unfamiliar with the circumstances above Litai's first three levels, Mr Li explained the bad conditions of the foyer as a general problem of lacking faith in the service provider: 'nobody really wants to pay. The last company that was responsible for maintenance collected fees from all of the leaseholders just left – with the maintenance fees.' After that, another building maintenance provider took over but simply lacked the funds to maintain the building, as the leaseholders were afraid that they, as their predecessors, would also take off. The scores of construction flaws that became apparent to the new occupants of places like the Coal Tower prompted critical reflections that linked the local capacity for speed with a tendency to dodge general building standards. On several of my visits to the Chang Mai, the electricity shut down, something that was not unusual in 2011 either. Mr Li assured me that he would be safe for power, though. Due to bad power circuits in the building and general problems with the energy grid in Dongsheng District he had acquired a powerful generator. Yet as the ventilation systems in the building lacked the capacity to absorb a 100WT diesel generator, thick diesel fumes occasionally accompanied the Thai cuisine. 'Ordos Speed gives priority to speed, not quality', Mr Li reasoned.

Mr Li opened the Chang Mai restaurant in spring 2012, but even after a few months of operation and advertising, the restaurant manager and around 30 employees at Chang Mai had attended few paying customers. In hindsight, most of Mr Li's plans had materialised and with Chang Mai's many colourful and golden ornaments, luxurious and exotic décor, Mah-jong rooms, and dark wood interior the restaurant stood in a stark contrast to the Coal Tower's tainted lobby. In the back of the restaurant, most of Chang Mai's employees were haphazardly accommodated in simple dormitory-like quarters, provided by Litai. Although Mr Li had worked hard to open the restaurant, and invested more than 7 million RMB (1.2 million USD) altogether, business was not going well. He pointed out that a large chunk of the local population used to live off the interests of the private loans and would often have an extra 30,000 RMB monthly to spend dining and wining, making the local restaurant business a profitable endeavour. With the crisis, however, as people no longer 'ate interests' (*chi lixi*) he rarely received costumers. In an attempt to keep things running, he had recently been forced to collateralise much of his family's property, and even his private residence. Credit was hard to come by and despite his efforts Mr Li doubted whether his endeavour would yield any significant profits. 'In these times', Li stated, 'only lawyers and mafia make good profit [...] any other kind of business will surely run at a deficit'. Several of Litai's additional niche

businesses on the 3rd floor had stopped and many of the associates could no longer afford to pay rent to Mr Qian Yong, adding to the mass of vacant office space.

Only a week earlier a large man and two of his companions had detained a young fellow in one of these new vacant offices. The large man was known as ‘Brother Fei’ (*fei ge*) among Litai’s staff and associates. During 2011 Brother Fei often visited Litai, but had no ‘real share’. Yet favours were sometimes exchanged between Brother Fei and the two main stakeholders in Litai. Brother Fei and two of his companions from Heilongjiang province therefore agreed to keep the young debtor there until he could find a way to pay his debts. Despite the fact that his debt was minor in comparison to the general measure of loans in Ordos during 2011, the young man was not allowed to eat, rest, or visit the restrooms during his stay at the Coal Tower. About 30 hours later the young man’s mother arrived in the office with enough money to bring her son home. Brother Fei’s ‘bring-in-debt company’ (*yaozhai gongsi*), took between 10% and 20% of the debt that they managed to bring in. On a later occasion, Brother Fei explained that his work, since the crisis, made him around 110,000 RMB (18,000 USD) a month. In 2012 abductions were often heard of and were referred to a common practice, even outside the specialised ‘bring-in-debt companies’ (cf. Woodworth 2013: 95).

The very same offices that were just recently perceived as easily convertible to cash through simple leaseholds no longer yielded profits, but had become sites of anxiety, debt, and rot. In several places, water dripped down on the floor through small tainted cardboard pieces in the spoiled ceiling. In other offices missing windows in rugged concrete walls opened horizons of countless construction sites and partly finished high-rises that stretched out towards the fringe of the district, yet that had suddenly stopped halfway. Most office towers that had proliferated in pre-crisis times never saw activities, but had simply grown into ruins before completion, reminiscent of what Nick Yablon (2009) terms ‘untimely ruins’, i.e. structures produced by rapid urbanisation that in light of their premature ruination became symbols of temporariness instead of signs that history was proceeding as planned.

Re-visiting Litai

Apart from my encounter with Brother Fei and his new profitable endeavour as debt collector, Mr Li assisted me to follow up on several of the associates that I had met a year earlier. Some, however, were indisposed as they had resigned their part in Litai and returned to occupations they had held prior to their Litai engagement. The underground banker, Mr Qiu, who often

came to visit friends in Litai and inspect the progress of the Chang Mai restaurant withdrew from the collaboration and only rarely frequented the tower. The lending business his father and he operated no longer yielded profits. Clients including both creditors and debtors were mostly close acquaintances and people familiar to them. Since 2011, his father had been tried to get them out of the business due to a hunch that the market would destabilise. Yet unable to withdraw, they were stuck in between creditors and debtors throughout 2012 and 2013. Faced with the increasing pressure from creditors, Mr Qiu took up some simple administrative job with an uncle of his in one of Ordos' more peripheral areas. When in town he kept to himself and preferred to stay at home with his wife and son. On a later occasion I visited Mr Qiu where he explained that it was far easier not spending money if one just stayed at home. He no longer wore luxury brands and his valuable Patek Philippe watch was no longer visible. He had however obtained a bicycle to exercise, while friends drove his BMW. Mr Qian Yong, the main stakeholder in Litai, would rarely spend time at the office and had encountered significant setbacks during the last year.

Most of Litai's investors had become insolvent or would simply withdraw from the association of friends that, at that time, appeared more fragmented. By midsummer 2012, Litai's office staff had been reduced to only a few employees. For the migrant labour force working conditions were no less precarious. In August 2012, the Chang Mai closed within less than six months of its opening. Mr Li saw no point in keeping it going and had no funds to do so. The thirty employees who lodged in the back of the Thai Restaurant had to find work and accommodation elsewhere after just a few months of employment. As a worksite, the Coal Tower provided little solace from the conjunctions of the economy. Employees were laid off and dispersed, in some cases they would have to settle for less than agreed as most employers faced liquidity problems. As employment opportunities were scarce in the aftermath of the crisis, employees most likely parted with colleagues and were left with no option than to leave Ordos.

On several occasions, some of the old friends still met at Litai, playing cards in some of the many vacant office spaces or in small luxurious Mah-jong rooms at the Chang Mai restaurant at the 2nd floor. The nature of the game was essentially unchanged although the male purses and stacks of 100 RMB bills had gone. On one of these occasions a few of Litai's associates gathered in Mr Li's managerial office from where he oversaw Chang Mai's operations. 1.5, or 10 RMB bills had taken the place of the 100 RMB bills that was the lowest

stake during 2011. Mr Liu Ziyue, one minor stakeholder of Litai during 2011, entered the room bruised with a swollen blue-blackish eye. Several stretches of stitches crossed a shaved patch on the side of his head. He sat amongst the others who paid no obvious attention to his condition. A year earlier Mr Liu Ziyue had an office at the 3rd floor, where he would primarily invest in the cashmere wool market. As the *gaolidai* circuits collapsed towards the end of 2011, many were left with substantial debts. Mr Liu Ziyue was subsequently forced to give up his new undertaking. His creditors, who were mostly friends and even kin, seized and sold his new Land Rover and several properties that he had acquired during the last couple of years. A former associate of his later explained that despite having had both car and property seized, Mr Liu Ziyue was far from debt-free, the associate estimated that Liu was still down by around 14 million RMB. Due to Mr Liu Ziyue's debt to one of the more successful friends in Litai he was further relieved of his business share, and due to rent deferral, later also of his office space. He watched as the others played, and occasionally smiled when jokes ran loud.

The distinction between close friends and acquaintances was accentuated along with the escalation of the crisis. Several disagreements regarding flawed investments and outstanding loans between associates in Litai divided the lot into smaller, more antagonistic groups. On most days the remaining entrepreneurs were occupied managing their losses, constantly making calls to debtors or debtors' families in attempt to retrieve loans. Frustrations occurred when somebody refused to answer. The less patient turned to alternative means of settling debts through the use of threats, abductions, or private debt collection providers such as Brother Fei. From interlocutors' accounts, the crisis seemed to bring about an inversion where credit among friends and associates was suddenly hard to obtain; and where the prior assumptions of the ease that one could spawn cash from simply occupying space or flipping leaseholds were suddenly challenged.

The Social Life of Emptying Buildings

Most associates in Litai seemed mostly unaware or showed little interest in the activities taking place in additional office spaces, something I also experienced among additional leaseholders that I encountered in the building. Entrepreneurs' and leasers' gaze was mostly confined to the particular office or floor. Another of the Coal Tower's more persistent characteristics that could be seen throughout both boom and bust was the distinctive absence of personal traces in the building. What was the role of space in this, and how did the perceptions of it change from being frugal sites of investment to a place for waning and

defecation?

As to why offices in the Coal Tower were rarely personalised, occupants generally explained that the decoration of office space was likely to happen only if sales or business depended on a display of wealth and power, as indicated by Mr Qian Yong's office or the liquor sales outlet. Another reason that Litai associates gave for the lack of decoration was that most of Litai's offices were simply subleases. 'I only lease it [the office], so renovating it nicely would be a waste of time, and money', was a common explanation associates would give for not making any efforts to invest in any kind of décor or even furniture. Given the speed in which renters would take over new space, and the way new projects would materialise, change or be diverted appeared to render actual spaces themselves or perceptions of these as secondary. I encountered the most vivid descriptions of spaces, décor, when projects were about to be undertaken, as in the case of the Chang Mai. But then again, these spaces were considered in relation to imagined profits and clients. As suggested in chapter 2, user rights for entire plots could quickly change ownership. But what became obvious from the common flipping of leaseholds in the Coal Tower, this was also something that played out on a smaller scale; a process that affected the way people engaged with the space: as something temporary, and in most cases, not one's own.

In his article, "Social life of empty buildings" Mathijs Pelkmans (2006) unravels the significance and popular perceptions of new, conspicuously empty urban construction in post-Soviet Ajaria, Georgia. Pelkmans writes: 'New buildings had overt imaginary qualities, which were important in the creation and continuation of dreams about a future of abundance and leisure' (Ibid: 208). Although popular perceptions differed and some were critical, and even in spite of early signs of material decay, new buildings were generally held to be a sign that things had turned for the better (Ibid: 199, 207). In some cases, construction itself seemed more important than the actual use of buildings; people were attached to these as embodiments of modernity that had finally found its way to Ajaria. A decade after Pelkmans made his observations, anthropologist Martin Frederiksen revisited Pelkmans' empty buildings that, in most cases, were still empty. In this later account, popular perceptions of these buildings seemed to have tilted to the more dim versions: whereas Pelkmans' interlocutors inferred progress and a yet unfilled but arriving better future from the vacancy, the later generation of Batumi youth perceived the buildings simply to be 'hollow'. The supposedly better future that was allocated by the state through its modernising schemes and

spectacular architecture somehow played out in a parallel universe, one that didn't include the group of Batumi youth. Scepticism toward new construction replaced hopefulness (Frederiksen 2013: 149-154). Reminiscent of how Batumi youth in post-Soviet Georgia perceived the still vacant buildings as hollow, and, as one remarked, best suited as a 'giant toilet' (Frederiksen 2012: 154), the expanding lavatory at the Coal Tower's 18th floor suggested that, for some at least, there was little affective attachment left. Although Pelkmans mainly dealt with the vacancies of more prestigious buildings that were to embody the modernising ambitions of the regional political elite, the oversupply of vacancies in Ordos seemed to yield similar effects and optimistic attachments – what I have described as a vernacular sense of urgency. Vacancies in the newly built mass of modern office buildings prompted investments and fantasies among a broader cross-section of society beyond those high-end financiers and officials behind prestigious 'face projects' such as ORDOS 100. Yet all the same, both large- and small-scale investors appeared to be lured into the vacant spaces. Yet this optimistic attachment proved not only brief, but from the way spaces suddenly attracted faeces rather than investment, attachment to actual spaces might not have been that profound. Or maybe more attached to the potentiality offered by vacancy than to spaces themselves. Something that, on a larger scale, was also apparent from developers' inclination to build 'empty containers of space'.

New Occupants

In spite of the temptation of understanding ongoing ruination as a singular and unambiguous process, some impressions and accounts from occupants made for a more muddled picture. The building even saw small occurrences of revival and reconstitution. In March 2013 a joint meeting took place where the residing tenants discussed problems of building maintenance of the common areas, assessed price reduction and potential strategies for sublease. Most of the building's leaseholders did not attend. During the meeting it was decided to sublease a small parcel of the lobby for a cheap annual rent. In the time after the decision the lobby underwent restoration from the successful sublease of 65 m² of ground space for a cigarette and liquor shop, leased at 40,000 RMB (6,560 USD) a year. Other small improvements in the building's condition were visible; mostly maintenance and repair of the common areas, primarily of storefronts at the ground level. In addition, the money was deployed to pay for another period of building security. Above, in some of the remaining floors the building displayed a more unambiguous decay: footmarks on walls, cigarette butts, empty bottles, food wrappings, and

excrement.

Despite the increasing number of empty dorms and offices, new forms of dwelling would emerge. At the very top floor a local family lived from selling black tea. Their home was nicely furnished. Their boy attended school. His friends would visit. Descending through escalators the family would necessarily pass the rot and faeces, but seemed to pay little heed to the otherwise palpable evidence of the building's progressive decay. At the 6th floor, other traces attested to the heterogeneous and differential process that accounts of *ruination* often suppress for the sake of clarity (Stoler 2008).⁸⁷ Towards the north facing side of the building, mostly vacant offices occupied the floor space. At the very southernmost end one could find a differently inhabited office space. My first visit was during ordinary work hours, yet no people were inside. Despite the same room specs and materials, occupants had installed a double bed complete with colourful linen. Another was installed in the other end of the about 80m² room. A framed wedding picture was placed above a simple device for storage of clothes. Around a corner, several large plants occupied one side of the office hallway. An electrical bike was parked next to these. Much was reminiscent of the physical arrangement of traditional courtyard-like residences. Large red carpets covered the otherwise sterile corridors. An open space with a small office of an around 25m² specification had been converted into what appeared as a family dining room. Instead of glass panes, washing lines were extended from one end to the other. Underneath were slippers, small plastic chairs, a table, and a simple stove for cooking. It turned out to be the living arrangements of a migrant community from Xian, Shaanxi. On several later occasions I met with a small family who had resided there for more than six months: a three-year old boy, his parents, and the boy's grandmother who was mostly responsible for seeing to the child while parents were working. They were merely one of the families that now lived in the Coal Tower. The families had an arrangement paying low rents for the office spaces that they now suitably converted into residential dwellings. A year earlier, a few migrant workers had found refuge amid scattered construction materials and trash. It was hard to recognise while tea was served from a large decorated wood table in one of the furnished offices. Almost half of the 6th floor was recast as what the families expressed

⁸⁷ Resisting the temptation of merely regarding ruination as still remnants or as genealogies of either catastrophe or redemption, Ann Laura Stoler provides a way to allow ruins and ruination to be perceived while in the making. Ruins and ruination might therefore serve us to recognise that they, in Stoler's words: 'are unfinished histories, not of victimized pasts but consequential histories that open to differential futures' (Stoler 2008: 195)

to be a reasonable environment for living.

While some were moving in, others were moving out. As no resolution had been found regarding the future use of Litai's offices, and with the increasingly tense atmosphere that had manifested between different groups of friends within the group, by August 2013, Mr Li and a few of his associates had moved their base including collective computer gaming, card and Mah-jong playing to the 9th floor in the 'Prosperous Cow Business Building' (*xinniu shangye dasha*), another of Dongsheng's new, yet largely vacant, office buildings. A friend of Mr Li had set up the place with two rooms, both simple quarters with no decoration: one smaller room included two tables for cards and Mah-jong, and a bed to rest on. The largest room that measured around 50 m² included 12 computers lined up in two rows, a television set, an additional bed, and a small refrigerator that contained the reserve supply of Red Bull, soft drinks, and ice coffees for long nights of gaming. Ashtrays were filled and in the corner a soldering iron was plugged into the power supply to provide for the *annajia* consumption. For the Litai associates that I had become familiar with, there were little or no noticeable sentimentality in leaving Litai's *old* office space. Places themselves were less important, several of the investors noticed in the process. Activities simply unfolded in new territories as in the 9th floor of 'Prosperous Cow Business Building'. In a sense, amid all the turbulence brought along with the crisis, the collective gaming marked a strange red thread of continuity: first in the poor Yeke-juu League growing up; then in the barren offices in the Coal Towers' not-yet renovated offices; a year later gaming in the sumptuous private spaces of the Chang Mai before finally ending up in another of Dongsheng District's mostly vacant office buildings. The game remained the same, the *annajia*, their jokes, and 'red-hot' sociality. Despite the ruinous effects of the crisis, observations among Litai associates in 2012 and 2013 did nevertheless give a less straightforward impression of the state of decline as such forms of sociality went on unhindered. And, as offices morphed into dwellings some spaces even showed signs of revitalisation.

Filling in the Blanks

In this last part I want to return to the hypothesis framed at the outset of the chapter to address two central implications of vacant spaces in Ordos more broadly, i.e. their role in processes of ordering and disordering. In their evocative analysis of the role of 'blank figures' in both constituting and reshuffling social orders, Hetherington and Lee (2000) lend us a way to engage with Ordos' oversupply of urban space. Firstly, related to the process of maintaining a

stasis or perceived order, Hetherington and Lee (2000) suggest that those things characterised by a 'lack of characteristics' can play a central role in maintaining social orders (Ibid: 175). As illustrated in the previous chapter, the mass of unfinished construction and urban vacancies generated an optimistic and economic attachment that compelled interlocutors to refute any signs of an overheated property sector or inflated prices. In this light, the vacancies, as instantiations of 'blank figures' were essential to maintain the surface of an impending bubble before it burst. Not so much space itself, but particularly vacant space in newly or soon-to-be built real estate.

Secondly, in regard to the process of disordering, the 'blank figure' played an equally important role that might more readily explain the processes that took place in the second part of the 'The Tower & The Tower'. Akin to the Joker in a card game 'blank figures' contain the potentiality to turn things around, make new constellations of power, and thus accelerate processes of dis- and re-ordering (Ibid: 176). In other words, a primacy is given to this kind of underdetermined vacancy as the ground from which new social orders emanate. To illustrate this point, the authors draw out the game of solitaire to underline a shift of attention from the hand that moves the pegs across the board to the significance of the blank space with no peg in it. In the game, it is argued, rather than a sole focus on the intentionality of a subject (be that a sovereign state, corporate agents, property developer etc.), it is the initial blank space that compels movement and thus sets things in motion (Ibid: 182). From this intervention, the authors argue that the underdetermined character of 'blank figure' can draw together and potentially reconfigure a line of stakeholders – basically actors from across official and private domains into new compositions. This shift of emphasis, I argue, helps to account for the fact that people from all strands of life engaged with these spaces, within a frame that can encompass strategic land grabs to the tactics of morphing space designed for one use into another. Beyond rendering citizens as compliant subjects to the local state's attempt to develop and urbanise or seen simply as yet another case of speculative 'manias' that are often given as reasons for financial bubbles (cf. Kindleberger and Alizer 2011), the shift from intentionality to 'blank figures' enables us to acknowledge the role of vacancy itself in a way that adds perspective to the excessive production of space for which Ordos had become so infamous. As illustrated by the case of Chang Mai, the oversupply of vacant office space paired with the years of conspicuous modernist urbanisation drew citizens into the vortex of a seemingly expanding economy. And, as illustrated by the new occupants in the tower, some

were also drawn into the voids that emerged as the local economy collapsed. The intervention of shifting the emphasis from agency to vacancy is indeed evocative but leaves us short of explaining why vacant space attracted rot as well as investment, and, from the ambiguous character of the building, almost simultaneously. Admittedly, blank figures might well contain the capacity to uphold certain powerful wholes or imaginaries by way of their under-determined quality, being potentially filled and valuable. And, blank figures also helped reconfigure elements in new constellations. Yet the way vacant or vacated office space was occupied seemed predicated on how occupants perceived them: as places one could choose to invest or defecate in.

In the chapter's title, I hint at China Miéville's fantasy-crime novel, "The City & the City" (2009). In the novel, Miéville depicts two cities that co-exist and even overlap in the same physical territory: one decaying and unruly, while the other an up-and-coming city-state power. To keep the two cities apart, citizens are trained to recognise the 'other city', its residents, and architecture, although without *seeing* it. The twin cities in Miéville's book essentially carry the same physical traits, yet are kept apart by the collective effort of citizens un-seeing what is actually there, a complicit vision that deliberately ignores facets of the city's real conditions. Not unlike the public secret, invoked in the previous chapter. Simply more predicated on the faculty of sight.⁸⁸ In the Coal Tower, the strange co-existence of boom and bust brought to mind Miéville's novel; the physical overlapping of separate two towers, one under construction and the other in decay. New residents' deliberate choice of un-seeing the waning and rot on the way down from the top floor, or Mr Li's drive to open a luxury Thai restaurant in an economy that was falling apart attested to a vision that many dwellers colluded in.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been twofold: to describe what kind of schemes and forms of occupancy unfolded inside Ordos' budding office spaces from boom to bust, and secondly, to

⁸⁸ In his intriguing work on Jakarta (2012), AbdouMaliq Simone evokes Miéville's novel to illuminate how deception is intrinsic not only to the city itself, but also to endurance in the city. Urban life, Simone reminds us, is not always what it seems, in turn asking, 'what kind of knowing is required to engage such deception?' (Simone 2012: 132-133). Or, as he later phrases it although in relation to the postcolonial city: 'To what extent is deception used heuristically in the myriad of tactics, complicities, accommodations, fascinations, conflicts, tricks, and evasions deployed the "majority" of residents to retain the postcolonial city as something "yet to be made"?' (Simone 2012: 133).

test the tentative idea of whether and how the excess spaces of the alleged ‘ghost town’ could be thought of as complicit to the way these schemes played out.

As to the latter, the above discussion has dealt with urban vacancies in Ordos through the lens of ‘blank figures’, examining the possible complicity of spaces and their dual potential to uphold certain orders, while also potential accelerators for change. To make sense of the many urban vacancies and their manifold meanings and uses throughout boom and bust, I tentatively argued that vacant space in Ordos – in a similar way to the ‘blank figure’ noted above, contained the potential for upholding certain imaginary ‘wholes’ (cf. Graeber 2001), but also facilitated processes of class ascendancy through a redistribution of power and wealth. The significance and effects of vacant space have also been emphasised in earlier chapters in the mentioning of ‘empty containers of space’ or the tendency to perceive as yet unbuilt real estate as a hedge against uncertainty. Occupants’ un-seeing the rot and decay, or the ambiguity of the ‘iron bubble’ metaphor, however, also implied the act of making a choice or decision as to what one chose to see. And, in light of the overall focus on scheming and forms of complicity, sight and deception are not necessarily incompatible.

As to the chapter’s focus on schemes and forms of occupation, the early accounts of everyday life inside the Coal Tower illustrated how an ordinary office building was tied into the social lives of occupants from the time before until the time after the crisis: before the crisis the Coal Tower existed as a space that conjured up dreams, investments and speculations across the board of public and private agents, inviting both more hardened entrepreneurs into the Coal Tower but also youngsters who would mostly pass the time there with friends. The particular nature of entrepreneurship and investments prompted me to consider how the escalating shifts of leaseholds moulded the way citizens occupied and engaged with built space. The opacity that characterised the general terms of Litai’s organisational structure, its financial basis, and heterogeneous terms of association suggested how Litai took form rather spontaneously as one possible effect of the opportunities offered by a rapidly growing economy and the optimism that was intimately linked to vacant space at the time. This was also apparent from Litai’s financial basis, in which credit extensions and lending relations were rarely formalised or based upon considerations of collateral; a condition that resonated with the general terms for interpersonal loans in Ordos’ years of tremendous growth.

In the *second* Tower, the office building came to represent a metaphoric as well as an

actual manifestation of occupants and associates' personal ruination. Sentiments expressed and accounts from occupants indicated how the change materialised as an inversion from earlier conditions: from a general feeling of moving at a high velocity to frequent statements about standing still, waiting; from associates' drive toward expansion to contraction in the scope of their respective businesses, and friends. Merely to characterise Ordos' oversupply of commercial space as a 'modern ghost town' brought about by a real estate glut or conditioned by the neoliberal condition doesn't take us far in understanding how the transformation was perceived and co-opted by the population. Neither do attempts to delineate places like the Coal Tower from an assumption of ruination as a social or material process that plays out equally for all. For the majority of occupants and employees who were now without secure income or site for lodging, the Coal Tower came out as a precarious and transient worksite. To Brother Fei and his 'debt collecting company' it served as a temporary office for settling others' accounts until his own aspiring office in a villa nearby had been properly renovated. For the Shaanxi migrants, the 6th floor was an elevated community, complete with plants, furniture, wedding pictures and different quarters for rest and consumption. An inversion of the otherwise depersonalised office space into living space. Finally, for the associates of Litai that I had the opportunity of following into their new socialising venue at the 'Prosperous Cow Business Building', there was a sense of continuity through their social activities and interaction.

Despite adding emphasis to the differential nature of ruination, the chapter has marked a turning point in the dissertation: from the intimacies and forms of complicity of boom and bubble to the adverse social and material effects of the decline. Delineating what was almost simultaneously emerging and decomposing, the social and material transformations in the Coal Tower have provided some sense of the temporary nature of the built environment in Ordos, the unreal state of real estate, and the wealth that was inferred from it.



You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, or anything that may be loaned as interest. You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land which you are about to enter to possess –

The Holy Bible, Deuteronomy 23: 19-20

CHAPTER 5

CITY OF LOANS

Two elderly women are sitting by the Mah-jong table chatting while they play amid half-finished buildings in Ordos. One asks the other: ‘did you hear that Kim Yong Il died last week’? Startled by the news, the other responds, ‘oh heaven, how terrible. Did you also lend him money’?

Joke circulating in Ordos, 2012

Baatar and Tegusi, the two officers employed in the local branch of the Ministry for Land and Resources, would entertain me with the above joke and similar *gaolidai* stories during summer 2012. The joke itself touched upon several things that in a somewhat sketchy way revealed something about popular perceptions in Ordos during 2012: firstly, when the crisis struck many buildings were left half-finished due to developers’ cash shortage; second, as the joke’s choice of protagonists suggests, not only young entrepreneurs or vile underground bankers participated in the *gaolidai*; finally, the joke, using the kind of local gallows humour that was characteristic among interlocutors during the decline, illustrated how from the end of 2011, deaths, and particularly suicides, became intimately linked with the problem of outstanding debt, often to ordinary citizens. In 2012, several articles and economic commentaries renamed Ordos, the ‘city of loans’ (*jiedai zhicheng*)⁸⁹ a name that came as a sequel to the prior ‘Modern Ghost Town’. Daily conversations and jokes about the *gaolidai* suggested that it was not a taboo topic, neither before nor after the crisis – and, as the crisis’ effects scaled out, so did the ways in which the phenomenon was perceived and dealt with locally. The *gaolidai* was, despite its characteristic feature of being non-bank regulated, not something that only flourished though non-official domains; it wasn’t limited to a certain social stratum; nor was it confined within any ethnic boundaries. The question that drives this chapter is: *what compelled the mass participation in gaolidai and how was this complicit in*

⁸⁹ <http://news.hexun.com/2012-06-14/142446065.html> (last accessed on August 11, 2013)

the escalation of the real estate boom? After briefly arguing why *gaolidai* needs to be seen in relation to the local property development industry, the first part – ‘The Financialisation of Everyday Life’ – hones in on the interpersonal level and portrays *gaolidai* practices by tracing the experiences of *gaolidai* participants through the city’s boom into its subsequent bust. This reveals some common traits about local lending practices and how these closely linked household economies with conjunctions in Ordos’ property development industry. The second part, ‘City of Loans’, deals with the question of what facilitated the scope of the *gaolidai* phenomenon in Ordos. The mass participation in informal financial schemes invites comparison with earlier incidents of informal credit collapse in China (Tsai 2002: 1-2; Li and Hsu 2009), as well as those that followed the collapse of socialism in countries like Romania and Albania (Verdery 1996; Musaraj 2011; Jarvis 1999). *Gaolidai*, the chapter shows, increasingly channelled private capital into the local sector for property development. This served to reconfigure the physical environment while also affecting how wealth was imagined and redistributed locally. Informal finance is commonly understood as existing in a sphere outside the regulatory ambit of the state. In the final part I expand on the notion of complicity I argue how specific perceptions of local authority effectively stimulated *gaolidai*-related transactions both before and after the crisis.

Although emic concepts as *minjian jiedai* (folk lending) and *gaolidai* were often used interchangeably in the local vernacular, I primarily apply the concept of *gaolidai*, as it implicates interest-bearing loans more readily than does that of folk lending. In Ordos, these encompassed a variety of different practices that included enterprises’ intra-lending, pyramid and Ponzi schemes, pawnshops, folk credit banks, underground money houses, middlemen, micro-credit lending, and, at its most nucleus state, inter-personal loans.

The Financialisation of Everyday Life

Despite its significance, the role of informal finance in Chinese urban growth regions remains relatively under-researched, particularly its role in urban construction. A few studies do, however, provide valuable insights for the following analysis (Tsai 2002; 2006; Li and Hsu 2009; Jiang 2009; Woodworth 2013; Yan 2009). I particularly draw upon Yan Yunxiang (2009) and Shuxia Jiang’s (2009) work on financial practices in a rural setting and Kellee Tsai’s (2002) work on the financial crisis that occurred in Wenzhou during the 1980s to gain a better understanding of the nature of the escalation of informal financial practices in Ordos. Academic work on what is often referred to as informal finance in China often falls into either

of two categories: on the one hand, such transactions are treated as a sort of grassroots development in which citizens and entrepreneurs boost the local economy by creating informal ways to gain access to credit and funds (Jiang 2009). On the other hand, informal economic activities, sometimes referred to as illegal and underground economy (Li 2009), are associated with fraudulent schemes, corruption and elements that, in turn, destabilise the political system. An oft-quoted assumption is that a structural asymmetry in relation to funds and formal credit is central to understand the revitalisation of informal finance in the post-Mao era (Tsai 2002). Usually small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) lack assets and collateral. Li and Hsu point out how contract enforcement in formal finance requires capital and thus edges out the less affluent that do not have means to provide collateral or meet income requirements (2009: 6). They therefore encountered a difficulty obtaining loans through more formalised and official credit systems, something that also seemed to apply to other post-socialist economies (see, for example, Højer 2012: 37). Alternatively, private entrepreneurs or smaller enterprises turn to the use of rotating savings and credit associations, underground banks, loan brokers, informal credit unions, and pawnbrokers. All of which play a critical role in assisting SMEs to start up and take advantage of business opportunities.

Mr Li helped examine this point by allowing me insights into bank transactions, lending networks, business strategies, and his wider network of peers. I would regularly experience how Mr Li's friends and co-entrepreneurs all complained about the lack of access to official funds, an argument that resonates well with the *raison d'être* for informal finance provided above. For private entrepreneurs, they argued, banks might as well have been empty. The market for non-bank finance helped fill that gap as they could mostly gain access to funds with no collateral, merely based on their peers, family, and social connections. Mr Li's central means of income was coating new buildings with insulation materials. In light of the difficulty and long time frame for obtaining loans through the formal banking system, Mr Li quickly raised three million RMB through the *gaolidai* to finance materials, initial wages, accommodation and food for workers. By comparison, in the time following the real estate collapse, informal credit was harder to come by. Mr Li would therefore spend considerable time applying for loans at various local banks, also drawing on personal ties with bank employees to obtain loans and speed up the process. Mr Li represented a general trend of funneling private capital into the property development sector and its adjacent industries. There were several reasons why the property development sector became the most obvious

outlet for *gaolidai* capital. With the tightening of demands and consolidation in the mining industry in the 2000s, most smaller collieries, who would otherwise have absorbed *gaolidai* credit, were forced to close. As we have seen in previous chapters, property development, on the other hand, enjoyed rather lax regulation. So, with the government's grand plans for urban expansion – transforming Ordos into a 'model city' – property development absorbed most *gaolidai* investments. One report estimates that as much 80% of capital invested in property came from the *gaolidai* networks (Li X. 2011). High returns in the sector attracted developers to build, often relying largely on the *gaolidai* for financing, thus having to take on the financial weight of paying high interests. Simultaneously, prospects of gaining yearly 30-60% interest on loans kept a ready supply of creditors. With the rapid escalation of property prices between 2005-2011, ever more developers were drawn into the industry, willing to take on even greater debts.

Money not only flowed from eviction compensation or private savings. Several interlocutors explained how pre-crisis times allowed more flexibility, even within the formal banking sector. Bank employees who were responsible for evaluating borrowers' financial conditions and investment objectives were sometimes awarded with gifts or money to facilitate a positive evaluation. In other cases, clients would successfully convince bankers to co-sponsor and gain from investments with high future yields. Li Zhang's analysis of real estate development in Kunming also points to connivance between banks and developers as developers' ability to mobilise more customers for the bank could make for better credit arrangements. For example, developers could launch promotional activities for the bank's mortgage loans among their prospective homebuyers (Li 2010: 63).⁹⁰ In Ordos, however, much of the formal credit ostensibly used in mortgage loans for cars, apartments, or even business set-ups would take another direction. Several interlocutors including employees at banks would, once they got access to low-interest bank loans, quickly invest the funds in *gaolidai*. In this way, *gaolidai* absorbed capital from family savings among private entrepreneurs as well as from civil servants, families' resettlement compensation funds, and as shown above, capital from the formal banking sector. According to the Ordos' bureau of statistics, the years of growth saw a steep increase of both registered property developers and

⁹⁰ Local banks work under the constraints of the central bank's set mortgage rate. They therefore increasingly rely on the provision of better services and advertising in order to be more competitive (Li Zhang 2010: 63).

lending intermediaries: developers that numbered no more than 7 by 2001 had risen to more than 400 by 2011 (Qin 2011); similarly, a variety of more or less sanctioned lending intermediaries saw a steep rise in numbers and had thus become a common business for young entrepreneurs in places like the Coal Tower. Many of these were simply covers for simple *gaolidai* practices that proliferated in places like the Coal Tower. To give an example, interviews with creditors and lending officers revealed how microcredit lending in Ordos had little in common with the rural initiatives that has mushroomed in developing countries. In Ordos, microcredit institutions loans were mushrooming, and interests were high, often set between 2-2.5% on a monthly basis. Research on Chinese non-banking finance suggests how the microfinance industry in general exists in a legally grey area with a lack of formal regulation (Du 2005). Beyond this legally grey status, in Ordos, these were often no more than covers for high-interest lending. Besides underground banks and other organisations that were unlikely to register, by 2010, Ordos' Bureau for Finance had registered 971 firms that were engaged in non-bank lending one way or the other: these included pawnshops and brokers, investment firms, insurance companies, micro-lending organisations – none of which had existed ten years earlier (Li X. 2011).⁹¹ Within the years of growth, the mobilisation of private capital fuelled the property sector, raised local levels of consumption, and provided private entrepreneurs with easily accessible funds to boost the local economy – and correspondingly the faith that property prices would only ascend.

As noted above, informal finance is often understood as a kind of grassroots solution to the scarcity of formal credit, at times even posited as an ingenuity that marginalised social groups use to survive in the face of bureaucratic constraints (Hart 1970; 1973).⁹² Despite the tendency to celebrate informal finance as a form of civic resistance or means to get by, *gaolidai* in Ordos proved to be a double edged sword. As the end of 2011 approached, *gaolidai* suddenly posed serious challenges to not only economy and regulation, but also to local issues of stability, security, and the rights of people who were badly affected by the

⁹¹ These included 36 pawnshops, 468 investment companies, 270 insurance companies, 197 trust funds and trading companies, and 87 microcredit companies. Together, these had registered funds above 34 billion RMB (Li X. 2011). See <http://www.yicai.com/news/2011/08/985640.html> (last accessed on May 10, 2014).

⁹² Initially, Keith Hart developed the concept of the informal sector, arguing how the informal sphere worked as an alternative economic arena existing parallel to more formal earnings and outside state regulation. Informal economy was thus what empowered large social groups, particularly in third-world cities, to make a living (1970; 1973).

crisis. By tracing partakers' experiences of lending, the following aims to shed light on the financialisation of everyday life by tracing out the quotidian nature of *gaolidai* for many households. This, I argue, helps explain what facilitated the progression from a kind of grassroots finance shouldering the ambitious developments to become the spindle of the crisis.

Grandma's Humvee

Upon one of my visits to the Coal Tower, Mr Li, partaking in a debate on what constitutes a powerful vehicle, mentioned how his old grandparents had recently acquired a yellow Humvee H3 that they had jammed into a narrow brick alley outside their small one-storey residential area in the old part of town. His grandmother who he took to be the main proprietor didn't have a driver's license. Imagining an elderly Chinese couple in a yellow Humvee H3 raised my curiosity about how that had come about, which prompted my initial visit to Mr Li's grandparents. Old Wang, Mr Li's grandfather, politely received us when we arrived at the entrance of his small shop. The Humvee was parked so the old couple could keep an eye on it without having to leave their shop. Given the social turmoil that surfaced as 2012 progressed, the Wang couple considered installing surveillance cameras. The small residential area where they lived, 'Building the East Residence' (*dong jian xiaoqu*), was one of the few left untouched by the extensive modernisation schemes that had swept across Ordos since the transformation from league to municipality. After decades of administrative work in the police force grandfather Wang started selling condoms and other effects to stimulate male morale, a small venture to complement his retirement pension. Amongst cardboard boxes of foreign and Chinese brand condoms, old Wang had installed a bed, a shabby couch, table, cigarettes, and in front of the bed, an old television broadcasting news in a deafening volume. Behind a metal shelf unit mostly carrying Chinese brand 'Gentle Cat' condoms, was another small room where the couple could rest and reside outside business hours. Although grandmother Wang had not yet arrived, old Wang, aware of my purpose, quickly started to explain about the Humvee. Although this was our first encounter, the openness, factual orientation, and careful account of the incident suggested that there was little apparent mystery, secrecy or taboo surrounding lending transactions in Ordos.

A few years ago, old Wang and his wife were evicted from their prior residence, as the space was needed for new urban infrastructure. Without spending much of the eviction compensation funds they decided to apply a dual strategy and split the funds into a joint

investment: part of it went into a small Kangbashi property together with another family, while the other part of the funds was invested in the *gaolidai*, following the advice of their daughter. In October 2011 old Wang and his wife extended a 1 million RMB (approx. 160,000 USD) loan to a friend of the family, Mr Hu, whose enterprise, as most other ventures in Ordos, was related to real estate and construction. As developers in Ordos largely relied on non-bank credit, the sums gained from compensation including existing family savings flowed into real estate development through the *gaolidai*. With the regularity of private lending practices, old Wang and his wife did nothing out of the ordinary when they extended the loan to Mr Hu for a monthly 2.5% interest rate. Apart from the lending receipts (*jietiao / tiaozhi*), partakers in Ordos' *gaolidai* rarely kept written or separate accounts of their lending transactions, i.e. unless they were engaged in large-scale lending as 'underground banking'. I also encountered cases where several million (RMB) worth of lending transactions took place without any written contract. As Litai associates as well as civil servants attested to, before the crisis, residents of Ordos would rarely rely on salaries or government wages but mostly live off the *gaolidai*, 'eating from interest', as they would often phrase it. Interest rates would never be compounded, but always fixed and after the agreed lending period the entire principal would be repaid. Time frames for the *gaolidai* would vary from a few weeks to more than a year. Depending on the project, time frame, contact, and risk willingness interests usually vary from a 2.5 to 5, some even as high as 10 point monthly rate. In comparison, the Wangs' deposit on one million set on a 2.5 monthly interest rate could even be considered a humble one.

But what characterised the Wangs' relationship to Mr Hu in terms of reciprocity? What generated Mr Hu's trustworthiness, which enabled him to gain access to millions worth of credit, with no formal security or collateral? The loan itself was not considered a gamble, but a careful consideration of Mr Hu's credibility, i.e. his personal relation to the Wang family, and maybe most importantly his connections to the local government. Grandfather Wang consistently pointed out the scope of their debtor's property development project, and especially his close collaboration with local government officials, something that was generally considered a personal asset as such social capital could quickly be converted into money by obtaining profitable business licenses, access to land, landing important contracts, etc. These were criteria that enabled Mr Hu to gain credit. Other general criteria that creditors stressed before the onset of the crisis entailed the degree of familiarity, commonplace of

origin, reputation, and potential debtors' brand of vehicle.⁹³ Nevertheless, after regular monthly payments of 25.000 RMB, the transfers suddenly stopped. The old couple slowly realised that the interest payments had seized due to their friend and debtor's presumed cash shortage. Despite their daughter's knowledge of the scope of Mr Hu's enterprise, his vast funds, and close co-operation with the municipal government, Mr Hu's development projects had stranded, and supposedly left him unable to pay interest, or return the principal to his many creditors. Mr Hu then decided to gather everyone who lent him money together at a meeting, none of whom were affiliated with the formal banking sector. I was told that this was an attempt to pre-empt the inconveniences of daily phone calls and visits from creditors, something that would cause great anxiety among the many debtors and their families in Ordos from 2012. As he explained his financial tight spot to his creditors, old Wang's wife suddenly felt faint and ill. In retrospect, her grandson, Mr Li, gathered that it was probably by the thought of losing not only several months of interest payments but also all of their entire life savings, and thus their sense of security in their old age; a point that grandfather Wang would also stress several times during our later conversations. Presumably concerned with the old woman's sudden turn Mr Hu had suggested that they could take his new car – the Humvee – as security until he was able to pay back the loan. Most of the other creditors would have to settle for property that would not meet the principal amount, and several even had to settle for nothing.

Old Wang took a piece of paper and meticulously wrote down the numbers, dates, and calculations. He was thorough and had obviously given it a lot of thought, and practice. He noted the average price of the vehicle from new, 1.580.000 RMB. Then its mileage and after a handful of manoeuvres on a small and simple electronic calculator he arrived at the current value of the vehicle, i.e. 1.268.000 – amounting to 80% of its original value. He compared the number with a similar calculation of the principle amount plus additional months of the 25.000 RMB of interest payments that they never received. After the calculation he paused and explained how they would even agree to forget about the interest payments, as long as they could get back the principal. In Wang's opinion, this way he would afford their debtor such largesse so they could finally square accounts without Mr Hu 'loosing face'. Although

⁹³ Not all were equally careful and several interlocutors described instances of small-scale fraud where complete strangers took advantage of locals' proclivity to extend credit with few questions asked. Often these were people from outside Ordos.

the car, in principle, would more than suffice to cover both the principle and interests, the local market for second hand cars had exploded throughout 2012, attracting entrepreneurs from other parts of the country who would take advantage of the sudden need for cash – something that had made second-hand car prices far more unpredictable. Yet another issue was at stake. ‘The car is a whole lot of trouble and headache’, old Wang explained. He took out a set of keys yet added that they still hadn’t acquired the ownership papers for the car. At first, their debtor, Mr Hu, said he was simply not able to locate them. Then, after months of waiting and regular inquiries Mr Hu had admitted that the car was actually levied to him as security from yet another guy who had run into similar cash flow problems. Mr Hu further explained that the case had even gone to court, and that was where they kept the registration papers and the extra set of keys. Despite the on-going lawsuit Mr Hu had nevertheless decided to sign a contract with the Wangs. The contract explicitly stated the transfer of the Humvee to them, upon no payment, yet omitted a final date for the return of the principle. Old Wang once again stressed that this was a question of ‘giving face’ (*gei mianzi*) to their debtor. Mr Li, on the other hand, reasoned that it was a fatal mistake his grandparents had made, probably in hope of simply getting their money back, not needing to go through the hassle of the second-hand car market. Being that the car’s real owner was not even clear, the yellow Humvee proved to be a considerable vehicle for concern rather than leisure.

Until the time of the crisis, Ordos was infamous for its measure of luxury cars with the automobile almost becoming a totem for the city (Ulfstjerne and de Muynck 2012).⁹⁴ From 2012, however, most of the high-end luxury cars were stashed away as cars, alongside property, had turned into the most common object for debt repayment. As the Humvee illustrated, cars, instead of promissory notes, flowed through an array of owners in between legal state institutions and the *gaolidai* circuits and did almost create an economy of its own, only paralleled by real estate property that was also seized, transferred, and traded on a massive scale. In a humorous tone, locals would point out how before the crisis people would cue up outside luxurious hotels, karaoke venues, and pricy restaurants while after the crisis the restaurants would be empty and people would instead cue up at registration offices for

⁹⁴ Car cultures permeate Ordos in multiple ways: as a symbol of the city’s speed and force, as an indicator of personality and status, as a long term business strategy, as an element of design in the city with park benches, bus stops, and sculptures formed as cars. For a discussion of car cultures in Ordos, see Ulfstjerne and de Muynck 2012.

vehicles and housing property (*cheguanju, fangguangju*) alluding to the regularity in which such assets changed hands. Such regularity was a clear indication that lending was far from a peripheral phenomenon, which was also apparent from the quotidian nature of lending, its visibility and importance attributed to dividends by interlocutors. To further elucidate this point and frame it in terms of morality in transactions, the following contextualises several aspects of the above case by drawing on other accounts of informal finance in China, and more broadly.

Moral Constraints

Informal finance is by no means a distinctly urban phenomenon in China. Research estimates show that more than 75% debt in rural families originates from non-official sources (Jiang 2009: 14). Often children's education and the purchase of high priced consumers goods are financed through non-bank loans that are essential to living standards of poor households. It is estimated that private lending amounted to around 140 billion RMB in the overall rural economy in 2000, accounting for about 68.8% of the total loans with almost half of these being interest-bearing loans (Jiang 2009: 15). Shuxia Jiang identifies several characteristics of informal lending in a rural setting: convenience, flexibility, low information and supervision costs, and finally strong moral constraints:

Rural informal finance is based on regional, occupational, and familial relationships, which rules out asymmetric information [...] Although it lacks legal protection and formal regulations, with moral constraints, the informal financial system is still effective in recovering loans (Jiang 2009: 14).

Accounts from rural areas' practices of usury and lending attests to the existence of certain moral constraints in terms of the degree and visibility by which interest can be claimed (Jiang 2009; Yan 2009). In one of Yan Yunxiang's rich accounts of the residents in the Xiajia Village, he explores a local accountant's (and money lender) careful considerations of 'how to be a calculative yet nice person' (2009: 183). The old accountant's recorded transactions showed that he was engaged in money lending. Some transactions were termed *taiqian*, i.e. loans with interest, whereas others were labelled as *jieqian*, loans with no interest. Both of these, Yunxiang observes, rely on mutual trust and a certain degree of familiarity between lenders and borrowers, who would often be mutually engaged in other paid transactions or

gift-exchanges (2009: 200). And, in the case that the distance between the parties would be deemed too long, the transaction would require a middleman who, in Yunxiang's terms 'is responsible for shortening the social distance and guaranteeing the repayment of the loan' (2009: 200, 201). Moneylending was the 4th business in the accountant's household, albeit the one that was treated with the greatest secrecy as it could most easily compromise the balance between being a moral and an immoral person. For this reason, a separate book was used to record the loans, but by making it clear to Yunxiang that asking for that secret book would be a bad idea, the scope of the lending remained elusive. In some aspects, participants in Ordos' *gaolidai* would attest to similarities between Ordos and the forms of rural based lending described by Jiang Shuxia and Yan Yunxiang; in terms of familiarity between participants, speed and the convenience of transactions as opposed to banks, and also in regard to the issue of locality based networks. As implied already, many were prone to extend credit to someone originating from the same locality. Yet, along the way, principles became more lax and also displayed a shift in terms of how interest rates and practices of usury were perceived.

The high interest rates that characterised Ordos' *gaolidai* highlight some essential locality-specific differences in terms of morality. Contrary to the moral aversion that often surrounds moneylenders, pawnshops, and speculative financial practices in general (cf. Graeber 2011; Højer 2012: 5), and as seen above, other instances of Chinese non-bank regulated finance, high-interests rates between friends and family were not perceived as immoral in Ordos. On the contrary, if one was making money from a loan granted by a friend it would be deemed immoral *not* paying him interests – and this way 'sharing the profit'. Before the crisis, the *gaolidai* was assumed to be beneficial to everyone and high interest rates had a broad appeal. Rarely anyone would complain about relatives or friends demanding high interest rates, if they were willing to grant you a loan. And they generally were. In the time before the crisis, claiming collateral for a loan was even considered 'unseemly' (Woodworth 2013: 85). In Ordos, perceptions of immorality were rather directed at people who would hold on to funds, thus not extending loans when asked. This way, several partakers in the *gaolidai* reasoned, money would be stuck and kept out of circulation. The same logic was reiterated after the onset of the crisis, where interlocutors understood the crisis as a consequence of 'money, not moving' (*qian bu dong*). The local emphasis on keeping the cash in circulation, and 'sharing the profit' put a tremendous pressure on conditions and time frames for

repayment, especially as creditors were often debtors at the same time. This was illustrated by Mr Hu who himself had granted a loan to someone who were unable to repay, sending the Hummer into its' initial orbit of shifting ownerships. Even Mr Li's own credit was strained as the municipal government deferred the payment for his contract in the Kangbashi New Area insulating several high-rise clusters.

When considering Yan Yunxiang's Xiajia Village lending case we see how Ordos' *gaolidai* practices differed on still other points. Old Wang's sound calculations, his careful notes, and his widely pedagogical way of explaining the *proper* nature of the case were illustrative of the almost tactile everydayness of the *gaolidai*. Not something one would question as being either good or bad or something that would pose a danger to one's moral standing, it was merely there. Not only pertaining to the realm of financial speculation but integral to family planning, as something that should 'secure their old age'. *Gaolidai* in Ordos became crafted as both short and long-term techniques for capital accumulation: firstly, it served as an extra income for employees working in the private as well as public sphere, whose monthly consumer patterns would rely almost entirely of the 'eating of interests'. In several cases this meant that one's primary occupation would be rendered obsolete in terms of income. In cases like that of the Wangs, the *gaolidai* was considered a sound locus for family or life savings. In this way, alongside property investment the *gaolidai* served an analogue purpose to that of more formalised life savings in a bank or even a pension plan. In their case acting more as an inter-generational savings account, one that would be passed down to the heirs as monthly support gained from the interests, and upon the expected return of the principle, eventually as inheritance. Yan Yunxiang's case makes an interesting counterpoint to the practices you would find in Ordos as *gaolidai* at some point before the crisis, had become so widespread that it needed not be treated with the same degree of secrecy. Despite *gaolidai*'s usual associations with shadows and grey-blackish nuances (cf. Li 2009) it had become visible to the extent that locals would talk of 'mass lending' (*quanmin fangdai*). In other words, *gaolidai* was reconfigured as a central system of wealth and income redistribution in Ordos, and not simply as a means to cover expenses related to children's education, ritual occasions, or upgrades of household facilities as was mostly the case in many rural accounts.

Mass Lending

From the above we see how *gaolidai* lending and the oversupply of real estate implicate each

other as mutually constitutive; as property development was a logical outlet for private capital it spurred a heavy capital flow into the real estate sector. Yet, with the increasingly high interest rates and rapid timeframes for repayment, both *gaolidai* and real estate development would take on more fictitious character. This part treats ‘mass lending’ in Ordos by examining how *gaolidai* helped reshuffle values that would institute changes in social networks.

With the intensification of the *gaolidai* in the time before the crisis promissory notes circulated at even greater pace and scope, and by circulating upwards as debt promises for high interests returns, these could – and did – expand beyond the actual extent and circulation of material cash. Although high-end hotels and restaurants flourished in the time before the crisis, in Ordos, the value of circulation depended less on a productive economy and expenditure. Despite local attempts to establish lavish arcades for consumption, most expensive consumer goods were imported from the larger cities of China or abroad. Money spent on expensive consumer goods, thus did not circulate. What did circulate, however, was money as debt, making it more akin to the escalations that occurred in Wenzhou in the wake of reform and opening policies while also comparable to the mass participation in the pyramid schemes that surfaced in post-socialist Romania and Albania (Verdery 1996; Jarvis 1999; Musaraj 2011).

Escalations

In 2011, interlocutors in Ordos consistently held Wenzhou as the main case of extensive private and unregulated lending and non-state entrepreneurship. On several occasions, citizens from Wenzhou were referred to as the ‘Chinese Jews’, due the widespread perception that they possessed the slyest wit in terms of financial business models and profit making. Wenzhou, located in the Zhejiang Province in Southern China experienced a similar trajectory throughout the 1980s and might therefore provide some essential insights into the escalating dynamics that eventually brought about the crisis. In her book, “Back Alley Banking – Private entrepreneurs in China” (2002), Kellee Tsai makes an analysis of Wenzhou’s credit crisis and social instability during the 1980s. During the mid 80s Wenzhou’s economy was booming, often sustained by various forms of non-state credit systems including rotating credit associations, money-houses, brokers, pawnshops etc. Estimates gathered that around 95% of Wenzhou’s capital flows in the years between 83-85 took place outside the ambit of formal state institutions (Tsai 2002: 124-5). Despite the wit usually associated with Wenzhou, credit

systems in Wenzhou were not stable, but underwent certain transformations and have continued to attract the attention of central government until the present day. As the Wenzhou schemes eventually collapsed, social order suffered and resulted in vandalism, violence, abductions, murders of organisers' family members, and a broad line of bankruptcies (Ibid: 139). Tsai describes a change in the nature of the practices where 'rotating credit associations' turned into pyramid schemes:

Unlike chenghui and juhui, which depended on reciprocity among hui members to provide a bureaucracy-free means of savings mobilisation and credit delivery, taihui and paihui - literally "escalating association" and "lining-up association" - were based on bilateral relationships between the organiser and the investor, with the organiser promising an impressively high rate of return on the initial investment. The problem with these variants was that the capital was not truly being invested in productive business ventures; prospective "investors" were basically speculators who were lured by the appeal of quick money (Tsai 2002: 136).

Tsai identifies a systemic transformation of the kind of credit association that was predominant earlier. Whereas earlier forms of credit mobilisation took place among smaller and more integrated groups of established members who, for example, took turns at disposing over the funds that had been grouped together, lending in its new guise increasingly took place between two parties, i.e. bilateral agreements between the organiser and new creditors. The appeal of high returns attracted new participants into the game, yet these returns were increasingly predicated on the mobilisation on new participants and less on productive economic investments. The requirement of new participants to keep the schemes going meant that organisers would increasingly rely on participants that they did not know. Organisers themselves would often be debtors as well, providing strong incentives for expanding the schemes to include more participants. The new forms of reciprocity in lending relations, according to Tsai, carried less social regulatory weight or 'moral constraints' and were therefore more prone to escalate into mere pyramid schemes. A similar process could be detected in Ordos. Ordinary creditors like old Wang preferred interest payments to be made in person, which was a common preference in the initial years of lending. Yet, as the scope of

gaolidai expanded, many transfers were made through ATMs. This sometimes created long waits at the cash machines as some debtors could have many creditors and large amounts were being transferred. Interlocutors in Ordos perceived the impersonal electronic transfers as practical as they were less time demanding given the scope of lending, yet on occasions these transfers were also seen as a weakening of reciprocal ties, similar to that noted by Tsai above. A similar progression was described by Mr Qiu and his father who, in principle were reluctant to expand their business to include people they did not know, yet with the ease that more and more creditors could be mobilised, eventually expanded to allocate funds in between creditors and debtors who they were less familiar with.

As more and more Ordos' debtors were unable to pay, locals' mutual trust and reciprocity suffered. In the case of the Humvee this was evident as Mr Li expressed his doubts in regard to Mr Hu's trustworthiness. The problem, he asserted, is that debtors in general attempt to conceal their funds: 'they [the debtors] surely have money stashed away somewhere. Maybe they use their relatives or children to hold on to their property and values while cases are proceeding. There are many ways to do this. Of course these people still have money.' The prospect of not retrieving the loan had generated an air of mistrust between Mr Hu and the Wang family, indicating a change in terms of the relation toward negative reciprocity. In addition, the fact that Mr Hu himself was a creditor acquiring the Humvee in the first place by debtor's default, alerted the family that funds were trapped in an upwards spiral with Mr Hu acting as a 'middleman' (*zhongjianren*) in a larger system of chain lending or *Ponzi* scheme. Such preoccupations and mistrust became endemic in Ordos from the end of 2011, and echoed the destabilising effects of the pyramid schemes that proliferated in 1980s Wenzhou. As seen in the introductory case, often families or friends would pool funds and savings together and extend the loan based on one person's knowledge or contact. This way the *gaolidai* implicated more than merely the debtor and creditor. The fact that even bilateral loans might also implicate more people became painfully obvious as on-going case proceedings of debt settlement suddenly summoned upon friends and family who had guaranteed the creditworthiness of the creditor. These 'guarantors' (*danbaoren*) were those who in case of some doubts about debtors' ability to repay, had vouched for a debtor's capacity to repay by posing collateral. Although post-crisis rumours circulated about how some people were forced to act as others' guarantors due to prior unpaid debts, posing as guarantors for each other would mostly occur between the closest of friends or within families

due to the obvious risk. The conflicts that emerged between friends who had posed as collateral for each other were often emotional and stood out as bitter indications of how the crisis effectuated a change in social relations and moral standings.

Similar to the changes that occurred in Wenzhou's credit associations, lending circuits in Ordos also changed along with growth and the escalating demand for ever more extensive credit. As suggested in the introductory joke, loans were increasingly extended in between people characterised by different social classes and in the more extensive chain lending also cut cross rural-urban boundaries. The strong moral constraints that scholars note work as a kind of regulatory authority might more readily be compromised as many loans in Ordos were characterised by funds that flowed across the urban-rural divide. This was illustrated by the case of young Mr Liu in the introduction where one could find large flows of capital from some of the many new settlements of landless farmers located outside the urban fringe spilling into the urban areas. As the joke about the two elderly women alluded to, many common creditors were located at the lower end of the social strata. Conversely, debtors were usually the ones thought to understand productive investment – usually inferred from debtors' status and visible wealth: e.g. being urban residents, driving luxury vehicles, having powerful networks, and engaging various forms of conspicuous consumption.

Tsai's account of the transformation in the type of lending associations coincides well with anthropological theories of exchange and reciprocity. Sahlins' correlation between space, morality, and exchange, does despite its' schematic and somewhat static layout, provide a valuable point of departure. The debt/credit nexus can thus be understood along a temporal axis, evaluated by the expected time frame for repayment and along a continuum between generalised, balanced and negative reciprocity (Sahlins 1972: 194-195). Generalised reciprocity is the most altruistic form of transaction and the one that less forcefully demands quantifiable repayment within a specific time frame. This form of reciprocity is located within families or close networks. Balanced reciprocity is understood as a relation, where both parties perceive to gain from the given exchange agreement within a relatively short timeframe. The challenge of maintaining a perceived balance comes with the failure to reciprocate within given time frames and in accordance with socially sanctioned forms of repayment (Ibid: 195). Negative reciprocity or what Sahlins' also terms 'the unsociable extreme' often implies an element of trickery or coercion. Negative reciprocity is the least personal form of exchange as the motive for transaction is to 'get something for nothing' and

occurs in the sphere that lies in the periphery of a person's social ties (Ibid: 195). Although Tsai depicts the transformation of reciprocal relations as a consequence of the introduction of new unfamiliar investors, this falls short to explain to what extent already existing relations and perceptions of what debts are regarded as sanctioned or unsanctioned might also change.

To better account for changing perceptions of indebtedness another possible path is to examine the thresholds on the continuum that affects a potential change in the relation between the two parties in terms of moral claims and social hierarchy (Graeber 2011: 117, 121): when is something perceived as merely extending a timeframe on a loan that is expected to be repaid? When and for whom is the acceptable timeframe crossed and by which interactional standards? This way, every transactional relation is perceived along the continuum of reciprocity, which thus holds the potential to be generalised, balanced, and unsociable. What is less clear from Tsai's analysis is how the changes in reciprocal relations reflected a broader reshuffling of values. One could argue that part of the escalation occurred due to an emerging sense of opportunity and the vernacular urgency treated above. Rather than simply assuming the mind-sets of new participants in escalating credit associations to be speculative, 'lured by the appeal of quick money', I wish to draw attention to how the shifting forms of credit associations might better be understood as a reorientation of certain values arising from a decade's worth of radical changes; and thus representing an emerging set of ideals existing in society more broadly. To do so, I draw on anthropological accounts of the financial schemes that flourished in several post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

Chinese Pyramids

Caritas, Catherine Verdery's exemplary pyramid scheme from Romania, illustrates how lending schemes could transform into larger social movements conjuring up strong moral sentiments with nationalist and religious underpinnings, while also closely tied to capitalist utopianisms, treated more broadly by the Comaroffs (2000). Verdery writes, 'Caritas offered cargo cult like visions of an earthly paradise, the ushering in of a new life of plenty in which people would no longer have to work, and an imaginary world full of material goods; it posited new rules of materiality suited to a new cosmic order.' (Verdery 1996: 189). Besides acting as a means to redistribute wealth, *Caritas* also acted as a means to redistribute hope. Juxtaposed to the socialist economy, *Caritas'* promises of capital accumulation enabled people to 'plan an economic future different from the past' (Ibid: 180). Verdery suggests how the mass participation in the pyramid schemes had been an effect of the overall transformation

from socialism to capitalism: on the one hand *Caritas* offered a whole new conceptualisation of time, money, and value; while on the other hand, participation rested on preconfigured forms of social exchange and entrepreneurship forged during socialism. In other words, rather than merely seeing the schemes as a rupture, Verdery draws attention to how participation also drew its force from mutual aids funds or credit associations that existed during socialism (Ibid: 176).

The way wealth was conceived and portrayed during Ordos' boom indeed attested to similar 'cargo cult like visions': this was clear from the vivid utopianisms displayed in Kangbashi's promotional video, but also in more popular and vernacular expression as 'Ordos Speed', the abundance of easily accessible cash and gold presented in real estate advertisements around the city, and finally also from the faith in the ever escalating property prices. The 'mass lending' in Ordos coincided with *Caritas* on several other points: as lending surged and interests were deposited into creditors' accounts, citizens were propelled into new standards of life. Plans quickly proliferated, in turn, populating the many vacant urban spaces with ever more ambitious ventures for business expansion and investment: both within the public and private sphere. The collective sense of finally catching up, even surpassing China's developed regions, evoked similar longings as those *Caritas* fostered among its participants. As noted in the first part of the dissertation, collective memories of hard-ships and poverty had forged a strong sense of urgency among the population; an urgency that eventually became a driving force behind the proliferation of *gaolidai* practices. Interlocutors' memories of closer community ties, interdependence, and the collective accounts of poverty, did ironically serve to strengthen the tendency to discard questions of collateral, in turn, aggravating the social impact of the crisis. The proliferation of high-risk loans, however, was not only something that could be explained by these feelings of community and interdependence but was equally a consequence of the forms of sociality that formed during the boom. For instance, in pre-crisis times, acting as financial guarantors for friends taking up new debts was likely to occur at banquets, in high spirits, and often as a symbolic praise of the trustfulness and strong reciprocal ties of the relation. Many interlocutors accounted for such conditions, and as they were called upon by locals courts to settle the unpaid debts of friends, often with severe bitterness.

In "Tales From Albarado: The Materiality of Pyramid Schemes in Postsocialist Albania" (2011), Smoki Musaraj argues how it was the magical lure of neoliberal economies

combined with the everyday experience of the transition that could account for the rise and collapse of Albanian Pyramid schemes.⁹⁵ Rather than simply accepting explanations that tap into universalising tropes of financial manias and bubble economies (e.g. Jarvis 1999), Musaraj argues how what impelled the wide participation were the visible stacks of cash and the circulation of remittance funds in a range of different currencies. This was much akin to the vivid descriptions of bundles of cash that resettled families in Ordos had received in eviction compensation. It was thus less abstract considerations or calculations that drove participation but simply the wealth inferred from the visible environment. Ordos proved similar to how the ‘materiality’ of the Albanian money schemes prompted high participation, albeit materiality in Ordos came in a distinctly urban form. Ordos was a veritable city of cash, at least for a while. The considerable changes in Ordos’ environment, the new wealth, trends of consumption and emerging business culture, high-end cars, and luxury brand names were all tangible manifestation of wealth and thus served as motivators. The Albanian schemes gained legitimacy through their particular ability to translate in between socialist entrepreneurial practices and new ‘neoliberal registers of wealth accumulation’ (Musaraj 2011: 95-101). Hence, the schemes emerged out of already existing repertoires for economic transactions under specific institutional conditions and the everyday experience of the transformation. Both the cases of Verdery and Musaraj show how schemes were predicated on the place specific nature of the transition, but also suggest that the schemes served to reconfigure local ideas of value and wealth.

The value of circulation and changing perceptions of interest rates in Ordos were thus more profound than merely being a civic ingenuity forged to make up for the unequal access to formal credit. Hopes and personal aspirations were widely reconfigured as participation soared. Participation in *gaolidai* was the most tangible way that people took part in what they believed to be urban life with its plethora of imageries including new modernised property, luxurious hotel banquets, car and real estate exhibitions, new patterns of conspicuous consumption and so on. It was the means to partake in the affluent life induced by the countless advertisement billboards that made up a great part of the city’s physical

⁹⁵ Musaraj points to the fact that the Albanian investment schemes were more akin to *Ponzi* schemes. Despite many similarities, *Ponzi* schemes purportedly attract investors through promises of high returns on assets or investments rather than on the mere participation of new investors, which is the basic structure of pyramid schemes. In reality, though, these two forms often mix or mutate into each other.

environment. On another level, as illustrated by young Mr Liu, the *gaolidai* constituted an essential part of young bachelors' practices of establishing families. As bachelors in Ordos, and China more broadly, increasingly need to show home and sometimes even vehicle ownership to obtain the consent of parents to marry potential spouses, several interlocutors described how the *gaolidai* as part of Ordos' overall transition, partly enabled them to 'establish a family' (*chengjia*).

As argued above, the diminishing of moral, social, and geographical constraints that could somehow inhibit the velocity and scope of *gaolidai* lending attested to a more extensive reshuffling of values beyond the lure of pecuniary gain, what I have termed the financialisation of everyday life. But as I will go on to argue, there were other less apparent reasons for the escalation. Taking a quick recourse back to Wenzhou, I examine whether and how perceptions of authority might also explain patterns of escalation,

Listen to Your Wife and Follow the [CCP] Party

An often-overlooked aspect of the Wenzhou case I wish to highlight is how specific perceptions of state apparatus stimulated an escalation in informal lending practices: in 1986 the government disseminated a public announcement banning any further participation in the credit associations. Paradoxically, its attempt to prevent further escalation had the opposite effect and participation in various forms of credit associations became pandemic, enabling *hui* organisers to mobilise participants with no effort at all. As one of Tsai's interviewee's noted, 'what the Party opposes must surely be profitable' (*dang fandui douneng zhuanqian*) (Tsai 2002: 139). Although it is not entirely clear from Tsai's interlocutor how come profits were conceived as something the Party State would surely oppose, one possible explanation could be Wenzhou's particular history of thriving private entrepreneurship. Even before open and reform policies, Wenzhou was already undertaking reform with regard to the thriving private economy (Ibid: 120).⁹⁶ Hence, given Wenzhou's particular history of private entrepreneurship and informal finance, the local population might more readily identify the Party State as locked into pre-reform ideology, and this way, expecting the Party to oppose what might

⁹⁶ Despite assumptions that render economic transitions as singular and synchronic processes, scholars stress the heterogeneous nature of these transformations. For instance, Caroline Humphrey (1991) notes how the concept of transitional economies fails to acknowledge how certain institutional forms of ownership and organization survive across transformations, what Humphrey refers as 'icebergs'. Moreover, that transition in most cases was happening both before and after the proclaimed transition.

essentially be profitable.

Since Wenzhou in the 1980s there appears to have been a dramatic change in the perception of state⁹⁷ vis-à-vis the above statement. Local states are increasingly considered to be capitalist driven, entrepreneurial, or even termed predatory (Duckett 1998; Li 2006; Tsai 2002: 13). Albeit in a different way from Wenzhou, popular perceptions of the Ordos Municipal Government nevertheless seemed to yield similar results in terms of escalation. On several occasions throughout various periods of fieldwork I encountered an expression that, at first, struck me as an insignificant proverb, but that I later came to appreciate: ‘listen to your wife, and follow the [CCP] Party’ (*ting laopo hua – gen dang zou*). Mr Li, suitably married to a government employee and party member, applied the proverb, providing one explanation for why he believed few locals resisted the government’s urban expansionist schemes. Reflecting on the expression, Mr Li pointed out how it had been turned on its head entirely. Earlier, it was a statement about how to be a ‘real man’, in terms of living by the right values. Adding less emphasis to the former part of the proverb, Li explained:

The expression has lost its meaning. Now it simply means that where the government chooses to invest, you know there will be growth. That’s why everybody followed the Party. That’s the way it went with Tiexi,⁹⁸ and later Kangbashi, and basically the whole property market in Ordos. In a way, it is the government’s own choices that laid the foundation for all of this, including the gaolidai. [...] Now with the crisis, who knows whom to follow?

As implied by Mr Li’s statement, citizens’ commitment to ‘follow the Party’ had transformed from a question of complying with certain moral values simply to become coordinates for opportunity and profit. ‘Following the Party’ left a clear mark on the urban environment. Yun

⁹⁷ As I have not conducted fieldwork in Wenzhou I rely on the statements and findings in Tsai’s account. The idea that the perception of the state in Wenzhou might also have changed in a similar way as Ordos is thus based on an assumption, and not on empirical observations or interviews. Tsai herself does point to a similar conclusion with regard to state behaviour on subnational level in reform-era (Tsai 2002: 13).

⁹⁸ Tiexi was a new developing zone off the Dongsheng district. It developed through 2003-6 and has attracted many citizens from the older areas of Dongsheng district through its more modern urban design, leisure areas, and modernized residential units.

Feng, the prior Mayor's⁹⁹ initial idea behind urban development was to build low and instead expand into the territory. As the next government came into power they decided to expand upwards as well, a change of policy that was clearly inscribed in the built environment. In several places, building typologies changed from a certain geographical point and outwards. Suddenly, six-storey residential housing areas exploded upwards in Ordos' new built-out typology. It was then, Mr Li stressed, that the real estate frenzy escalated, and soon everyone was *following* the government and investing heavily in the expanding high-rise districts.

In an ironical way the proverb helped shed light on a common perception; one that had previously eluded me by its contradictory nature: on the one hand, I found little evidence that the local government, despite the obvious development it had instigated, enjoyed any deeper sentiments of trust among its citizenry. As argued earlier, even civil servants fostered widespread perceptions about local governments' corrupt nature and its power abuse. Nevertheless, as also shown in the first part of the dissertation, citizens would rarely oppose or resist the development trajectory before the crisis. While there was little to suggest that local leaders enjoyed much admiration among its population, trust, it seemed, was more a question of decoding the workings of the government, crooked as it may be.

The conceptual framework that has been developed to depict phenomena as *gaolidai* and *folk lending* takes many forms. Variation on the theme include: informal finance, unobserved finance, illegal finance, underground finance, shadow banking, grey-blackish economy and so on (Li 2009: 42, 52). Li Jianjun makes a categorical distinction between informal finance, underground finance, and illegal finance: all three labelled under the rubric of 'unobserved finance' (2009). However, as the term unobserved implies a lack of acknowledgment or observation, it stands in stark contrast with the case from Ordos, as *gaolidai* was conspicuously visible. Before the crisis, distinctions between legal and illegal finance played a minor role in the local perception and activities would spill from one kind into another. Moreover, there were little efforts to regulate non-bank finance, even the kinds that were beyond question illegal. With the lack of regulation within construction and finance, the term 'unobserved' might better be rendered as deliberately ignored. Like 'unobserved', the widely used term, 'informal economy' (Hart 2007) builds upon a similar set of

⁹⁹ Yun Feng was the Mayor who had initially launched the expansion of the city into several new urban districts after Ordos was established as a Municipality.

problematic binary oppositions.¹⁰⁰ Janet Roitman's analysis of regulatory authority and fiscal disobedience in Central Africa further illustrates the limitations of the term on two points: firstly, informal is easily applied as a 'catch-all term to describe many economic pursuits and logics that are part and parcel of capitalist relations in both "the West" and "the rest."' (Roitman 2005: 19). Secondly, despite its considerable impact the 'informal' is often treated as a 'residual category', a set of practices working on the margins of society (ibid.). The centrality of *gaolidai* practices to the radical changes in the physical environment not to mention the lives of most citizens in Ordos suggests that the phenomenon must be considered as both locality specific and as being the rule, i.e. a driving force in city-building, rather than the exception, i.e. marginal. Among interlocutors in Ordos, the social life of temporary wealth was essentially premised on nebulous and expanding networks of lending that played out across boundaries between public and private, young and old, high and low, urban and rural, and didn't display any preferences between ethnic groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that *gaolidai* practices attested to the increasing financialisation of everyday lives during the boom, a financialisation that went beyond the simple scramble for new wealth or pecuniary gain. Rather, they revealed a broader reconfiguration of local redistributive systems, ways of calculation, and a reshuffling of values and moral outlook.

As illustrated by Mr Hu's failed real estate venture, the rapid circulation of promissory notes was intrinsically tied to the local construction sector. The link between the *gaolidai* and local construction attested to a sort of financial involvement in real estate ventures beyond that of powerful entrepreneurs like Mr Cai (chapter 2). The circulation of property as repayment for loans revealed the lower branches of a system that reached up through the social strata and connected the sudden wealth injected into basic household economies through compensation payments with the fictitious qualities of the local real estate market. In this light, the broader predicament of the Humvee was in no way an extraordinary case by Ordos' standards. It illustrated how particular channels for financing real estate ventures served to spread profits as well as risks. By 2011, the majority of Ordos' citizens, whether

¹⁰⁰ Keith Hart does not assume that there exists a clear-cut division between formal and informal urban economies but applies the term as a 'remedial concept' to bridge the gap between mainstream economic assumptions and reality (Hart 2007).

retired, or working in the private as well as in the public sector, were equally if not more dependent on ‘eating of interests’, than they were on official salaries. *Gaolidai* had become part of everyday practices and formed the backbone of the household economy and families’ new patterns of consumption. *Gaolidai* effectively changed the lives of many citizens as existing hierarchies were reconfigured and class standings momentarily dispersed. Opposed to other instances of rural based lending practices, *gaolidai* in Ordos was characterised by weak moral constraints in relation to claiming high interest rates; little or no need to conceal lending practices; and the high velocity with which promissory notes would circulate beyond the scope of productive investment or even material cash. Moreover, as *gaolidai* partly proliferated due to the social significance attributed to the value of keeping funds in circulation, people could rarely keep from extending loans when asked. And, supported by the broad urgency to catch up, often loans were extended with little consideration of collateral. The widening of lending relations, including a rapidly increasing number of participants and mobilising an increasing mass of private capital resonated with the escalations that took place in Wenzhou’s credit collapse in the late 1980s, and in several ways, echoed the collapses of pyramid schemes in Romania and Albania where broader perceptions of value and wealth were radically reshuffled in the process of large-scale societal change.

The literature that treats Chinese informal finance displays an ambiguity that shifts between perceiving informal finance as being either a productive force or a destabilising element, threatening the political legitimacy of the state. What is often left out and rarely acknowledged is how popular perceptions of state might facilitate certain escalations in realms of informal or even illegal practices. The final part of this chapter has shown how particular perceptions of local authority served to instigate wider participation, rather than acting like a regulator. From the way even *gaolidai* finance seemed to rely upon a decoding of official investment, by ‘following the Party’ (*genzhe dang*), it maybe even be meaningless to make the distinction between separate economies at all.



*If I owe you a pound, I have a problem;
but if I owe you a million, the problem is yours –*
Proverb

CHAPTER 6

DEBT OF DREAMS

As noted in the previous chapter, *gaolidai* was simultaneously what fuelled part of the excessive production of urban infrastructure and real estate while also pivotal to the experience and value orientations of urban dwellers, enforcing a change in the local distribution of both wealth and personal aspirations. As the crisis unfolded, delayed exchange was perceived as unpaid debts and marked the beginning of a wider course of social fragmentation including processes of debt settlement, property seizures, and the general loss of trust between citizens. Until the time of the crisis the municipal government paid little regard to transgressions, or might simply have been incapable of enforcing regulations that would somehow inhibit economic growth. In a similar manner, the broader population rarely touched upon this lack of regulation in pre-crisis times. As the crisis unfolded, however, critical reflections emerged and debts were called in, one way or the other. Action was taken, both within the domain of legal action and outside. During 2012 there were much talk about suicides, debtors fleeing town, regular abductions, debt-related violence, escalating mafia activities, and the general loss of trust between citizens, even within close-knit networks of friends and families. Some referred to the crisis as one of mutual trust, more than one of finance. Others rendered their subjective experiences of the crisis along the lines of losing face. Examining what more accurately could be termed the *anti*-social life of wealth gone awry, this chapter addresses the sudden explosion of unpaid debts fostered by the property market's collapse. It asks: **how were these debts engaged and to what extent did unpaid debt materialise in social demeanour and public discourse?**

To answer these questions, the chapter is divided into two main parts that each treats different aspects of unpaid debts: the first part – ‘Ordos law’ – deals with the question of debt regulation. Here I trace young Mr Liu from the dissertation's prologue into the time of economic decline in his attempts to recoup his family's funds as he navigates through the city's new institutions of debt settlement. Addressing these institutions in greater detail I move through the physical and legal landscapes accompanied by Old Wen, a local lawyer that

worked debt related lawsuits for the Dongsheng District Government. Legal action, it shows, was characterised by irregularities and exceptions. Beyond indications that local legal resources fell short of dealing with the debt-related lawsuits, accounts from processes of debt settlement revealed that hierarchies that were somehow obscured during the hey-day of *gaolidai* lending would once again materialise. Many citizens similar to Mr Liu again found themselves at the margins, with meagre hopes of recouping funds lost in the schemes. In the second part – ‘Spoils’ – I take up the question of what happens when accumulated debts remain unresolved. The sudden lack of accessible informal credit and the call for more transparency in lending opened new opportunities for profiting for those who were in positions to seize them. Yet these forms of profiting were widely perceived as spoils. The final discussion unfolds interlocutors’ post-crisis statements, arguing that unpaid debts marked a new morality of exchange, a morality of taking without reciprocating. This, I argue, materialised as a collective loss of face; face as related to social prestige and moral conduct.

Ordos Law

In his research on historical debt evasion practices Gustav Peebles (2012) traces societies’ inclination to offer some form of quasi-ritualistic debt forgiveness as a way to pre-empt credit systems of total collapse. ‘The social power to rehabilitate the debtor only extends as far as social power holds sway. Rituals of debt-forgiveness require the power of the community; not only must it force both the creditor and the debtor to come to terms (often against both of their wills), but the community often must socialise the lost debt itself’ (Peebles 2012: 440). The reason, Peebles argues, is simple: should a large number of people flee (e.g. by ‘leg bail’) or disappear, an increasing level of discontent and instability will eventually bring credit systems to a collapse. Comparing historical practices of ‘leg bail’ and ‘white-washing’ with offshore accounting and the geographical tax havens providing sanctuary for debtors, Gustav Peebles accounts for both historical as well as contemporary strategies of debt evasion. Reviewing the different types of debt evasion, Peebles show how practices vary according to status and especially to wealth. Rich people have better options to find sanctuary and escape social obligations and debt relations (Ibid: 440). Looking into the practices and perceptions that surround the regulation of debt and its institutions in Ordos, I draw on Peebles’ insights, to examine changes in how indebtedness was engaged.

The following returns to the case of Mr Liu to shed light on the wider social implications of unpaid debt for the less affluent part of the population. Upon my arrival in

2012, I spent a considerable amount of time locating Mr Liu. When I finally did, I learned that he had deliberately avoided me as he was simply too ashamed to let me know the state of the mess he was currently in. On several occasions Mr Liu excused that he couldn't afford to take me out, and felt better meeting somewhere private. On his visits he was keen to share cigarettes but would always politely reject my offers for soft drinks or beer. On one occasion due to our overlapping interests in issues of local debt, we visited one of Ordos' new institutions for debt settlement. On foot towards Dongsheng district's northern area Mr Liu and I reached the *Dafeiban*. Located at the bottom of the 21-storey International Trade Building (*guomao dasha*) an official signboard said, 'Dongsheng District's Security Bureau for Striking Down on Illegal Fundraising' (*daji feifa jizi bangongshi*), often just referred to as the *Dafeiban*. The office sign was posted outside a narrow entrance at the side of the building at a place you wouldn't necessarily find, if you weren't looking. Although it was still early, the entrance was already a busy place, and security steep. Three types of authorities were almost permanently installed during opening hours. These were respectively the municipal police, the buildings local security, and some sort of security personnel in civil clothing affiliated with the office. Initially, Mr Liu and I stayed clear of the entrance. The crowd that was gathered by the entrance was engaged in loud arguments. Many carried purses with paperwork, identification documents, and, as I later learned, small, often handwritten notices that served as lending agreements (*tiaozi, jietiao*). Two types of vehicles continuously arrived at the entrance: new luxury vehicles carrying just a few passengers, and the cheap Chinese brand of minivan known as the 'bread truck' (*mianbao che*). The latter would most often originate from outside the urban fringe where large groups of landless, resettled peasants occupy new high-rise residential areas, the *yiminqu*. Most of the creditors arrived in small groups, coming from the same rural residential area and as later interviews suggested, they were often related.

Like Mr Liu and his family, a common practice had relatives and close friends pool their savings and funds together; choose some form or outlet for *gaolidai* based upon the advice of someone they know, or simply by following the example of others. The 'bread trucks' were packed, and the atmosphere felt tense as people left the vans and entered the building. In the midst of confusion several consulted us for directions to the office. A few even stumbled in, perplexed, asking us directions for the *Daheiban* (strike black office). Earlier the same year, Mr Liu had decided to invest in his own repair shop. He had even

bought his own black Toyota Land Cruiser (upon down payments) and was living well off the interests from his and his family's collective 'investment', i.e. the *gaolidai*. Nevertheless, the developer eventually went bankrupt and could allegedly neither pay interests nor pay back the principal. Since then things got worse. Despite working long hours, his car repair business was not making any profits, on the contrary. He couldn't afford employees and had moved to a small shabby room close by his worksite. On one occasion in summer 2012 he explained:

Headaches. I can't get my money back. Nothing to do but wait. He [the developer] probably wouldn't even repay us if he had the money. At least, we would surely not be first on the list over people to repay. And there's really nothing I can do. Wait, and wait. If you push a developer too far he might commit suicide, or he might run away. And in neither way you get your money. It's a difficult balance. [...] I bought this nice car, a black Toyota Land Cruiser, just like the one I drove last year, but my very own. Then I had to sell it and now mostly walk or take taxi. I feel losing face, working on other peoples' cars, while not having one of my own.'

Even worse, without cash he had to postpone his coming marriage indefinitely, something that preoccupied his future parents in law. Mr Liu had considered every option for retrieving his own loan, but he had little confidence that bringing the case through the *Dafeiban* would help. We nevertheless stayed a while, both observing. After a guard's initial but friendly interrogation about my agenda (often presumed to be a reporter), I managed to establish my interest in the office out of concern for my friend's predicament, and my general interest in matters of finance. Eventually, by the courtesy of the building's security guard we were set up on a couple of chairs inside the lobby. The 10th floor was the place where most cases were filed and negotiated. The main task of the office, the security guard explained, was to bring together lenders and the illegal fundraisers. These are brought together along with an official mediator so to reach an agreement without having the debtor fleeing, committing suicide or having any of the creditors using violent means to retrieve their money. As to the chance of locating debtors (fundraisers), the security guard pointed out that these were often the ones who turned themselves in: 'owing that much money to a lot of people in such a small place is not very convenient, or safe'. The guard consistently referred to the practices as either 'underground' (*dixia*) or simply 'illegal finance' (*feifa rongzi*). While we talked a young

aggravated man left the elevator, engaged in a loud monologue about how he had no use for apartments in the city, how could that bring anything but worries? He wouldn't be able to sell it and didn't have the money to either renovate or furnish it. Cars or urban apartments were the most common means of settling debts. And yet these rarely sufficed to meet the creditors' demands. Being a collective 'investment' was one reason why cars and apartments were problematic as settlement compensation, in some cases bringing more fragmentation to the group of creditors or families. They were simply hard to share. New entitlements, as shown by Katherine Verdery's work on changing property relations in the former socialist bloc, came along with new risks and certain obligations (Verdery 2004: 139). In Verdery's case, the newly redistributed land in post-socialist Romania illustrates how privatisation and the distribution of something, that was, in principle a 'good', included new liabilities and had adverse effects¹⁰¹ (Ibid: 143). In this light, an emphasis on the intrinsic value of any kind of property tends to obscure the obligations and liabilities that also come with ownership. The value of property is therefore dependent on the kind of people and the conditions under which they receive it (Ibid: 140). The transfer of property as compensation was not always without complications. The same piece of 'property' might be perceived as economic resource for one owner while becoming a source of liability when transferred to another.

The security guard doubted whether the impact of the office would yield results in the larger picture, a comment that further discouraged Mr Liu to bring his case before the office. A decision he later settled on. The strong current of people who arrived at the building in the 'bread trucks', the frustration, the arguments, and the general atmosphere left Mr Liu with little optimism in terms of retrieving his family's funds. Soon, Mr Liu proposed that we should go. As indicated by the aggravated man above as well as in the Humvee case, neither urban apartments nor cars necessarily bring closure or a sense of security. Moreover, with the long queues and the general lack of faith in legal action, creditors as Mr Liu were left with few options to recover loans.

As illustrated by Mr Liu's lack of faith in legal resolution, and even less faith in debtors' willingness to repay, trust and even hope had become a scarcity. The dreamlike existence many lived just a year earlier had quickly vanished, converted into a sense of

¹⁰¹ Verdery writes: 'upon receiving land, parcels were given away: 'Once people obtained land, they might give some or all of it to newly forming producers' cooperatives called "associations," which sprang up because few land recipients could assemble the other production factors necessary to farming' (Verdery 2004: 143).

helplessness, an experience of chronic waiting bordering on inertia. Moreover, the feeling of suddenly being cast back into the necessity of doing demeaning and hard labour felt as a setback for many of the lower branches of the local workforce. One step back toward a sense of marginality they had just escaped. Mr Liu, for instance, who had to sell his vehicle and was now walking back and forth to repair other peoples' cars felt it particularly bitter return. Among interlocutors and in daily conversation with common creditors rumours abound of fraud and debtors hiding out in the tropical island of Hainan, with more than a few plausible cases. Besides the flood of proceeding insolvency and liquidation cases some debtors fled while others chose to take their own lives. During the years of growth, *gaolidai* lending was predicated on some form of imagined equality that helped conceal signs of asymmetry between the commoner-creditors and the debtor-developers, something that was further reinforced with the amass of new wealth and the sense of upward mobility afforded citizens from the lower echelons of society. The very act of extending a loan and instituting an economic debt also builds on an idea, that both parties are essentially the 'same kind of person' in the sense that there exist a formal, legal sort of equality through the contract (Graeber 2011: 191). As the crisis unfolded, however, social hierarchies seemed to re-emerge.

Changing Legal Landscapes

Before everybody was happily lending money to each other with no consideration of the risks involved, there were no risks... just interests. At least nobody acknowledged the risks, although some of us might have suspected it. People would just write a small lending receipt [tiaozi] on any writable piece of paper. You could easily get a million just by saying a few words to a familiar face. Now, even if I signed my name in blood on a contract, nobody would lend me money. There is a crisis of trust in Ordos.

Old Wen, *gaolidai* creditor and district lawyer working debt-related cases

In the wake of the crisis, bankruptcy and insolvency cases proliferated and, as seen above, many debtors were unable, or simply unwilling, to pay their debts. Petitioning institutions (*xinfangju/shangfang*) which are the administrative systems for dealing with citizens' complaints and grievances were flooded with complaints from citizens that had left their homes against the promise of free resettlement and high-compensation, but had received

neither due to developers' bankruptcies. In an attempt to pre-empt the potential conflicts that was starting to surface, the Ordos Municipal Government publicly acknowledged the problem¹⁰² and implemented a set of 'interim measures',¹⁰³ i.e. a series of regulatory means to formalise loans, and bring the darker shades of the economy into light. This was further paralleled with the establishment of several institutions that were set up to handle the endless complaints and conflicts that followed in the wake of the crisis. The one that gained most attention was the abovementioned, the one colloquially known as the *Dafeiban* (literally 'strike illegal office'). The *Dafeiban* was set up in summer 2011. The office specialised in illegal fundraising i.e. interpersonal chain lending schemes where debtors default. Assessing the forms of regulatory interventions set in to pre-empt social unrest, this part outlines the changing legal landscapes and its key institutions.

In summer 2012, I was introduced to Old Wen through the group of Kangbashi state functionaries. Old Wen remained one of the most consistent and helpful interlocutors that I befriended during fieldwork.¹⁰⁴ Old Wen held a law degree, and before his employment working with debt related lawsuits in the Dongsheng District Government, Old Wen had been stationed in various peripheral courts from the time before Ordos had become a municipality. He was one of the first to work large-scale cases of default payments, and was responsible for much of the tedious work of assessing the case of debtor Shi Xiaohong back in 2009, Ordos' first infamous case of 'illegal fundraising'. Beyond debtors and creditors' opinions of the way debts were handled, Old Wen provided a unique insight into the contradictions, inconsistencies in legal action and other challenges of professionals working actively to enforce new regulations or even create new ways that debts could be settled in Ordos.

During the time of fieldwork, Old Wen generously introduced me to what he saw as the most central places where debts were filed, treated, socialised or paid – one way or the other. On several occasions we frequented Old Wen's 'work unit', the district court. The court was recently relocated to the district's more modernised area, only a few hundred meters from the Dongsheng District Government building. Next to the courthouse, Old Wen urged me to

¹⁰² http://www.ordos.gov.cn/xxgk/ghjh/zfgzbg/201202/t20120222_588318.html (Last accessed July 2012, no longer available).

¹⁰³ <http://news.hexun.com/2012-06-14/142446065.html> (last assessed on April 28, 2014)

¹⁰⁴ During the latter half of fieldwork from 2012 onwards, I spent considerable time with Old Wen, enjoyed the hospitality and company of his family, friends, and co-workers. Despite considerable workload, Old Wen was always generous with his knowledge and helpful to shed light on my quandaries.

notice an unfinished building. Little progress had been made on the building since it was commenced, something that discouraged most employees at the court on a daily basis. The reason, he explained, was that the developer initially had offered employees at the court high interest rates if they were to invest in his project. Most of the creditors, however, never saw their money again, and probably never would, he concluded. Old Wen appeared to enjoy the bitter irony of it as he inferred, ‘If all the lawyers fall victim, who then should conduct case proceedings?’

A space for automobiles was located underneath the building. I learned that this was where most of the seized vehicles were shelved, although some, as the Yellow Humvee, managed to leap out into further circulation. Despite large capacity, most slots were taken. Many luxury cars resided in the debt-ridden cellar. Some had arrived recently, while thick layers of greyish dust and sand revealed how others had stayed submerged for longer. The problem, Old Wen explained, was that the price was set too high. With the current boost in second-hand car markets that induced by Ordos’ economic decline, the cars in the Court’s cellar rarely ascended to roam in the streets. Inside the building, we entered Old Wen’s office. Although the office was spacious he described how the bulk of cases had people running in and out of his office everyday. Queues that would extend all the way down the hall made his office feel remarkably smaller during work hours. The crisis, he explained, had a large impact on the general workload, and even on the nature of the cases: Old Wen distinguished between three of the most common types of lawsuits that are currently dealt with: ‘property related’, e.g. people suing developer as they never received compensation upon eviction; ‘people against people’, referring to cases of inter-personal lending; and, ‘banks against people’, cases where creditors had taken large loans in the banks that either evaporated in the *gaolidai* or in failed property development. The distinction between legal vs. illegal loans is often made on the basis of interest rates. Nevertheless, despite being common knowledge, no one that I encountered would think twice before extending loans above the legal limit. Moreover, as interests had become the backbone of household consumption many families vigorously pursued getting back their lost interest payments, even though the high rates exceeded the allowed roof on interest bearing loans; a key trait of the current cases. Considering the kind of cases that Old Wen would treat every day, it seemed debts themselves had changed. Legal cases increasingly dealt with intra-family grudges, all debt related. In old Wen’s opinion the nature of legal cases was an indication of the level of mistrust and upheaval: ‘these [court

cases] show what problems a society faces in terms of stability, beliefs, trust, and relations between people.’ Old Wen had not yet come across indictments between parents and their kids, but close kin increasingly held grudges against each other in lawsuits.

From conversation with employees in both district and municipal level courts I learned that lawsuits had tripled since last year, while the number of employees working the cases had remained the same.¹⁰⁵ During a later interview conducted in summer 2013, Old Wen stated how cases had not only increased by numbers since 2012, but also in their financial scope, which had serious implications for his work. On a regular basis, cases implicating funds beneath 2 million RMB would go to the district court while cases above would fall under the responsibility of the municipal court. By 2013, however, the bar was raised so to include cases implicating funds beneath 50 million RMB. This meant that several of the more serious cases of fraud and insolvency had landed on his desk. Assessing debtors’ property had Old Wen busy travelling to larger cities across the country to evaluate indicted debtors’ property and assets, people who were rarely happy to assist. Old Wen explained in more detail about the difficulties of processing larger cases:

This one person had four different sets of citizen registration papers, in Shenmu the person had 44 pieces of property, this is a kind of loophole in the administrative system. I found out that this person, in addition, owned 37 pieces of property in Beijing. This case is a 60 million RMB case. These cases are far more troublesome as cases dealing with that much cash involve more complicated matters. All these people are wealthy. Such people get together with this and that leader. Within legal terms such cases are pretty simple. No more than cases of moneylending. That's it. Whether it's about 10 million or 10.000 RMB, cases are principally the same. It's still like I borrow your money and we set upon an interest rate and write on a slip of paper. But matters outside the law make it different. As stakes are higher, proceedings get more complicated to handle, even dangerous.

Despite the hazards of working larger cases of financial fraud and the heavy workload, Old

¹⁰⁵ Several employees working debt-related lawsuits at the Ordos Dongsheng People’s Court estimated that by August 2012 the court had seen a three-fold increase of cases since 2011, from 3000 to 9000. Such increase heavily strained the court’s capacity and proficiency in case proceedings.

Wen considered himself in a privileged position, pioneering into hitherto uncharted territories within legal practices. ‘It’s like I’m in the middle of an experiment’. In his opinion, Ordos was in a state of exception, and new legal interventions needed to be implemented in order to circumvent further escalation of social unrest. Cases proliferated, not only in numbers, but also in scope. Cases of economic fraud of insolvency played out in between close relatives and friends, giving the crisis a distinctly personal character. As most district attorneys and court employees seemed to be equally engaged in the same lending practices as the rest of the population, informal finance had become the rule, to which law needed to be adapted. Therefore, the bar had to be raised and the legislative and moral implications of debt reconsidered.

The mere burden of impending debt cases put a serious strain of legal action and its efficiency to engage the problem. Stories spread about debtors who turned themselves in to the local police due to millions worth of outstanding debts, yet was rejected on the basis of lack of space in detention: allegedly the bar for bringing in debtors was raised so that debts below 40 million RMB needed to pass through other proceedings. The efficiency and manner in which lawsuits were handled were very likely to enforce alterations in public perceptions of issues related to legal rights, corruption etc: the long queues outside Old Wen’s office, the anxious waits and delays in case proceedings effectively caused the population to lose more and more faith that new ‘interim measures’ or legal institutions could deal with the problem. Lawsuits that dealt with informal finance, bankruptcies, and unpaid debts clearly exceeded the local legal capacity, bringing many citizens to question the city’s legislative authority and triggering further social unrest.

Exceptions as the Rule

Old Wen’s feeling of being ‘in the middle of an experiment’ explicitly denoted the particular nature of transgressions that Ordos, as the ‘City of Loans’, had brought to the fore under much controversy, i.e. the area of usury and informal finance. Bringing attention to localised credit bubbles and debt-ridden local governments’ ever more fragile forms of financing, post reform informal finance is gaining an increasing deal of attention among legal scholars and regulators. Not only do existing laws rarely seem to address the nature of the contemporary transgressions; also, as several professionals working within the field point out, the laws

regarding non-bank finance is a widely contested ‘grey area’, by some referred to a ‘regulatory’ or ‘administrative lacunae’ (*jingguan luodong*).¹⁰⁶ One report on financial fraud from 2012 treats the impending challenges that illegal finance pose to order and security on most levels of administrative systems. It proceeds through the relevant articles in China’s national criminal law.¹⁰⁷ The report states that most laws that treat illegal finance or fundraising rest on the proof of intention (e.g. for ‘illegal possession’), and are therefore difficult to assess in praxis.¹⁰⁸ Although laws and regulations do exist, many of these and other relevant articles overlap; some seem contradictory while others leave plenty of room for interpretation. During numerous conversations, Old Wen helped shed light on the large disparities that existed between contract law (e.g. covering lending agreements), financial, and banking regulation (with regard to lending practices and interest rates), and criminal law (e.g. illegal fundraising). For instance, article 28 of the ‘Provisional Regulations of the PRC on the Bank Oversight’ (*zhonghua renmin gonghe guoheguo yinghang guanli zanxing tiaoli*), stipulates that neither private persons nor local governments are legally entitled to establish banking or other financial institutions. The clearest restriction was against the action of collecting funds from the public for the purpose of lending, something only official banks were entitled to. Accepting deposits from the public is thus principally banned while some forms of mutual assistance, as the rural based credit associations as well as inter-personal or inter-enterprise lending are permitted. The distinction between illegally deploying funds raised from the public for purposes of informal banking is in practice difficult to distinguish from inter-personal loans between families, close networks, mutual assistance groups, enterprises etc. Article 6 of the Supreme Peoples’ Court stipulates that private interest rates

¹⁰⁶ <http://money.sohu.com/20110928/n320827247.shtml> (last accessed on April 27, 2014).

¹⁰⁷ It primarily draws on article 192: using cunning acts to raise relatively large funds for personal possession; articles 160 and 179: crimes related to fraudulent and illegal issuance of stocks and bonds, including private companies; article 176: illegal ways to absorb public funds; article 225: illegal business including fundraising fraud, deemed harmful to the public.

¹⁰⁸ 参照1996年《解释》的规定，实践中下列情形之一的，应当认定集资诈骗具有“非法占有目的”（1）携带集资款逃跑的；（2）挥霍集资款，致使集资款无法返还的；（3）使用集资款进行违法犯罪活动，致使集资款无法返还的；（4）具有其他欺诈行为，拒不返还集资款，或者致使集资款无法返还的。With reference to the 1996 ‘interpretation’ of law, in practice the following conditions needs to be established for a case to be deemed financial fraud by intent of ‘illegal possession’: (1) to raise funds and flee from repayment; (2) squandering the funds raised, with the result that the funds raised can’t be returned; (3) employing raised funds for criminal activities, also with result that funds can not be returned; (4) Refusal to return the funds raised (my translation). <http://dltqfy.chinacourt.org/public/detail.php?id=257> (last assessed on February 25, 2014.)

are allowed to exceed those of banks, and need to be assessed in accordance with local and regional conditions. Yet these rates may never exceed the centrally set lending rate by more than four times. Pawnshops are an exception to this rule as these may extend loans at up to seven times higher than official rates. If the stipulated limits are exceeded, law will not cover the part of the loan that exceeds the formal lending rates. This indicated that there were no legal sanctions against setting out private high-interest loans, as long as one did not engage in banking activities.

In addition to the lack of a clear legal framework within contemporary law on non-banking finance, the level of local interpretation and implementation made for an even more inconsistent regulation (cf. Tsai 2002). The way local courts apply or interpret national legal framework bears witness to an immense flexibility through which most ends can be met. One illuminating example is the question of whether debtors or creditors should be punished for engaging in illegal fundraising. Comparisons between legal cases indicate a wide disparity in the use of these regulations: while creditors in one financial scheme are deemed culprits before debtors in one province, cases from other provinces are inclined to vilify debtors, while rendering creditors as victims who had fallen prey to predatory lending schemes.¹⁰⁹ One municipal court employee noted: ‘in Ordos, every kind of loan is principally legal, at least, until unpaid debt becomes a problem.’ Besides these existing ‘grey areas’ that resided in regulations on informal finance in China and the flexibility that accounted for the variety in local implementation, Ordos’ institutional body for engaging the problem was itself an exception.

Old Wen explained that the *Dafeiban* (office for handling illegal fundraising) was a temporary institution, and to his knowledge the only one of that kind in China. It acted as a special branch of the police department for financial fraud. According to Old Wen, the *Dafeiban* was a ‘legal exception’ and key component in what he counted as the ‘Ordos law’ (*eerduosi fa*). So to ease the burden of local courts, police officers employed at the *Dafeiban* received the authority to undertake several functions: first they received and handled complaints from creditors making an assessment of the overall debt and number of creditors involved in the case; next, the *Dafeiban* was responsible for locating the debtor and seize the debtors’ assets, a task that often proved difficult as many disappeared from Ordos in the

¹⁰⁹ <http://star.news.sohu.com/s2012/gldmf/> (last accessed on February 25, 2014)

aftermath of the crisis; when succeeding to grab hold of debtors, officers brought together debtors and creditors to negotiate a settlement, valid by law. In other words, the *Dafeiban* acted as a temporary, yet powerful institution imbued with the authority to assess, detain, seize property, and deploy measures of punishment or repayment. Old Wen remembered how, at first, citizens felt optimistic towards the institution. After a while, however, sentiments changed. The meagre funds creditors would retrieve translated into widespread perceptions of the connivance between officials and powerful debtors. Many therefore started to see the *Dafeiban* as a sort of debtors' refuge. Although not directly supporting this hypothesis, Old Wen accounted for several innovative ways that debtors would hide or divert their funds, not paying back creditors. One such strategy was writing fake lending receipts to close friends or extended family. These false creditors would then make claims to recover lost funds through various forms of legal action. Often they would file a case for the debtor to repay his *fake* debt, and this way legally transferring the funds into a safe haven without actually paying any *real* debts. Consequently, debtors' assets would then simply shift to collaborators without reaching the real creditors. More and more debtors would turn themselves in to the *Dafeiban*, and rarely the settlements would satisfy the many creditors, eager to get back their money. Some large cases were transferred from the *Dafeiban* and, depending on the scope of the debt, ended up in either the district court or in the municipal court. On a later occasion, in the company of several of his colleagues working at the district court, Old Wen made a general assessment of the question of legality and authority: 'some places you say that the law is king; in other places the king is the law. In China only the boss' words counts as law. And he's free to change it as he pleases.' The statement reiterated a broader perception of law and authority in Ordos. Partly alluding to the inconsistencies of legal action, and partly to the power of the local government – 'the boss'.

Ordos' sudden enforcement of regulations attested to how disparities in legal action varied between different periods: while transgressions were widely ignored in the years of growth, times of crisis called for new regulative measures and the need to identify culprits, as we saw in the case of the high-end developer, the Star River Group (*Xinghewan jituan*) (chapter 3). Such wide disparities in legal action alert us to the erratic forms of legal action that local governments undertake, and the opportunistic flexibility that resides in regulative authority (cf. Tsai 2002: 12, 13). As Old Wen among others pointed out, with the extent of informal transactions in Ordos, everyone – including every attorney or lawyer – would

somehow be a culprit. The ‘interim measures’ alongside its new provisional institutions served to place Ordos in a state of legal exception.

Despite momentary thrills and the sensation of a pecuniary mobility, the wealth obtained through relocation quickly evaporated. Citizens’ daily experiences with unpaid debt and their mutual loss of trust were only intensified by irregularities in local authority and the ambiguities that resided in the ‘Ordos Law’. Illustrated by debtors’ strategies to conceal or divert their funds so not to pay their debts, in many cases, creditors stood helpless (cf. Peebles 2012). Old Wen’s less subtle caricature of authority where the boss’ words counts as law raised the concomitant issue of what role exceptions in legal actions and institutions play. In this regard, the ‘Ordos Law’ instantiated as a concrete example of Walter Benjamin’s critical thoughts on history seen from the vantage point of the oppressed of which he wrote: ‘the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception, but the rule’ (Benjamin 1999: 248). In this sense, the ambiguities of legal action and irregularities of enforcement were only seen as such from one perspective. Seen from another, these very exceptions alert us to hierarchies that were latent all the while, but didn’t emerge until lines of credit collapsed. Lending agreements that in a sense were based on an assumption of equality momentarily masked such hierarchies. Yet as debts largely remained unresolved, hierarchies appeared to resurface.

Spoils

[...] Cameroun is a HIPIC [Highly Indebted Poor Income Country] by cheating, by demagogy, in order to have the white man’s money. So Cameroonians follow the example of the state [...] The state steals from the whites, the civil servants steal from the state, the merchants steal from the civil servants by selling them products at prices incompatible with their standard of living or by making them pay exorbitant rents on housing, and the bandits steal from the merchants and the civil servants, who, together transformed the state into a criminal entity.

(Unregulated border trader in Roitman 2003: 231)

In theories of exchange, debt is often seen as the foundation of society, the glue of sociality. Paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss, Gustav Peebles writes: ‘to be human is to be in debt, take away the debt, take away the humanity’ (Peebles 2012: 429). In his recent tour de force on debt,

David Graeber (2011) asserts how we do not owe society (a debt), instead, Graeber asserts, society is our debts to each other. In this light, indebtedness can be reliable as a redistributive system. This is not always the case. Janet Roitman's ethnography from Cameroun (2003) suggests that once the broader perceptions of debt changes, from something that is honoured to something that most probably will never be paid – debt might have equally adverse effects. The unregulated border trader above draws out the contours of a broader scheme of complicity in which everyone from the country's leaders to its bandits are co-producing the state 'as a criminal entity', i.e. a state in which everyone see fit to steal. In other words, radical changes in the ways debts are perceived or engaged with are often accompanied by changes in social orders and moral outlook (Roitman 2003; Verdery 1996). This last part examines what happens when a large majority of debts remain unresolved and are thus not 'socialised' or 'cleansed' within society, if practices of debt evasion became the norm, and not the exception that would call for societies' quasi-ritualistic ways to 'socialise' debts to use Peebles' terms (2012). Building on post-crisis observations and interviews, I aim to show that an emerging morality of spoils seemed to effectuate changes in what Roitman calls the 'sociability of exchange' (cf. Roitman 2003: 231).

Popular Perceptions of the Crisis

In Ordos, the lack of reciprocity inferred from the mountains of unpaid debts was paralleled with a surge of rumours and plots, often morally laden. By 2012, the general positive outlook on lending practices changed and was followed by more critical comments although some maintained a humorous tone. Critical poems, petitions or commentaries were distributed as text messages on cell phones or through the Internet: all dealing with the effects of lending and its intimate relation to real estate speculation. A popular example that circulated in 2012 was an alternative edition of Chairman Mao's famous poem "Snow" (1936), a poem treating the greatness of the northern plains and a genealogy of China's great leaders. In Ordos' edition of "Snow", the poem was transformed into an ironic commentary on skewed urban planning, however, carefully keeping intact Mao's rhyme and rhythm (see Appendix II): the great empty plains of Mao's poem recalibrated into new largely empty urban districts and the great leaders were reconfigured as key players in Ordos' most infamous of pyramid schemes. The increasing dim outlook on Ordos as a 'city of loans' was expressed in a multitude of ways.

Another that I found particularly instructive was a widely circulated cell phone message formulated as an appeal directed to the central government, asking for their help.¹¹⁰

Although most interlocutors agreed that a mass of funds had flowed into the oversupply of vacant and unfinished construction – what some labelled the *lanweilou* (literally, rotten-tail-building) – conversations nevertheless attested to an underlying uncertainty as to where all money went? In July 2012, I sometimes accompanied grandfather Wang to his daily workout site, a place where kids played, elderly people exercised, and in the evenings gathered to dance. One day, while stretching out, Wang pointed in the direction of some green plants and explained that Ordos – unlike the plants – did not follow the rules and regulations of growth. ‘Now’, he repeated loudly, ‘no Money!’ In his opinion, urban construction and property development went far too fast. Drawing on his own work experience in public administration, Wang elaborated on this point and suggested that development transgressed a kind of natural law for development. ‘Everything has a natural law and need to follow certain regulations’. As we touched upon the local real estate condition, Wang noted how the lifespan of buildings seemed unnecessarily short-lived in Ordos.

Tear down this one ... build a new high-rise building. These days it's even hard to come by a staircase as they only use stairs in up to six-storey buildings. A few years ago there was a law that banned the construction of high-rise buildings in Ordos. That changed with next government. One of the downsides of high-rises is that they need a lot of space between them to allow the light from being blocked. Now, nobody cares for other peoples' residence. People only consider profit.

Expressing a prevalent attitude I encountered in Ordos during 2012, grandfather Wang understood the crisis as a consequence of an unhealthy pace and lack of regulation, in his own reading, indexed from the unnaturally short life expectancy rate of local buildings. From the conspicuous lack of sunshine in the Dongsheng District, old Wang inferred a loss of morality as people ‘only consider profit’ and didn’t ‘care for other peoples’ residence’. An employee who worked in one the countless but now inert real estate sales offices that thrived before the crisis expressed another instance of such logic, imbuing the city’s speedy development with

¹¹⁰ For the entire text message petition, see Appendix III.

moral values. Alluding to the general pace of development and lack of overall planning, the employee applied metaphors for healthy family planning to criticise unhealthy urban planning:

It is like if you are raising a child. It needs to develop from one, to two, to three years. First it must crawl then it can learn to walk. Development was simply too fast here. It was a leapfrogging city [tiaoyue shi]. In other words it skipped the normal steps and left something out. This is not healthy for the child. This is what Ordos' speed really means.

The above statements point at a discrepancy between moral reasoning and practices, akin to the one observed among state functionaries in the new urban areas. Ideas about healthy, scientific, and natural growth patterns stood in stark contrast to the actual practices in which citizens propelled the massive construction boom by partaking in the *gaolidai*, or as the second example suggested, criticised the unnatural pace of development while being engaged in the actual promotion and sales of new speculative housing. As we have seen earlier, a 'community of the bubble' helped consolidate a great many transgressions and regulatory inconsistencies, simply as incidental to 'Ordos' speed' and the general terms of the pre-crisis economy. Yet in its wake, people suddenly remarked how the speed had prompted irregular uses of land, and brought more attention to transgressions. Perceptions and statements as these, illustrated how the issue of regulations and moral outlook suddenly became a field of much contention. The crisis seemed to generate a critical reflection that was mostly absent a year earlier. Not a reflection, however, that would question urbanisation *per se*, or criticise the basic premises of the *gaolidai*. Instead, it would frame the problem as one of deviance from natural growth patterns, and the transgression of regulations that should ensure sound and healthy development.

Plots of all kinds were rife in the aftermath of the crisis: one interlocutor explained the collapse of schemes by the local taste for power and status, or as he phrased it, 'slap one's face until it's swollen in an effort to look imposing' (*da zhong lian chong pangzi*). A few minority interlocutors rendered the ill nature of the crisis as a malicious effect of Han Chinese culture and its contagion on the Ethnic Mongol population, often juxtaposing a general lack of morality and spirituality among Han as opposed to the Mongols who would always be

accompanied by the spirit of Chinggis Khan. More common accounts attributed the crisis to the local government's sudden need to crackdown on informal finance due to increased central state surveillance, something that urged participants to withdraw their funds, often in vain. Many were also disposed to more conspiracy-like explanations about the most extensive lending cases; assumed set up by local political and financial elites who would absorb ordinary people's cash' through intricate or skewed schemes, only to conceal them. In some cases, the lacking legal capacity to pursue or assess debtors was explained by reference to connivance of local officials – a perception that, whether or not it was true, yielded effects in the way people turned to harder means of settling debts. A general line in the rumours and folk explanations centred upon questions of local power and an alleged lack of, or simply skewed regulation. It seemed, no matter how irregular or non-existing regulation might have been, one thing was certain: whatever happened it was surely in line with some interests vested by the political elite. During an interview in summer 2013, Mr Liu expressed this the succinct way:

My feelings toward the government are now filled with hate [hentou]. Every one of them is guilty of graft and corruption, all swindlers [pianzi], exactly the same as before. Even now, what they say counts [tamen shuole suan]. If you want to take action yourself, you can't. They are the law. You can't sue them. You might have words to say, but nowhere to say them.

Verdery observed a similar tendency around the collapse of Romania's infamous Pyramid Schemes: the many intricate rumours and folk explanations about *Caritas*, despite their rich variety, would generally acknowledge that economy was somehow directed by, and subordinated politics (Verdery 1996: 180). This was true for socialism, and, according to these accounts gathered by Verdery, also after. The way that citizens in Ordos raised issues of regulation, corruption, graft, etc. revealed a similar set of assumptions. Essentially that the local state's potency, no matter how crooked, was beyond question. And therefore, if something happened in a particular way it was most likely because political elites' would take an interest in doing so.

A New Morality of Exchange:

We were in a town where the authorities were politically unstable, besides being corrupt. In such a place, at such a time, only very small rogues are given the run-around. Big rogues are treated respectfully

(Lattimore 1941: 11).

Coming back to Peebles' rituals of debt forgiveness, these are often carried out through state institutions (Peebles 2012: 430-431). But what happens when 'big rogues are treated respectfully' as Lattimore observed in his early experience from Ordos, or, when the authority that is supposed to ensure the consolidation of debts within the community, in turn, holds the largest debt? As seen above, the perception of those in the top seizing upon the property of those at the bottom was a common narrative. Tracing possible origins of such perceptions in Ordos, I address a few of new schemes that formed in the wake of the crisis; schemes that formed in an opportunistic manner crisscrossing official and less official domains.

Beyond being enrolled as creditors or debtors, or both, there was more tangible evidence of how local officials were implicated in forms of *gaolidai*. In addition to the *Dafeiban*, one of the new institutions that emerged with the escalation of informal debts was a 'Folk Debt Service Centre' (*minjian jiedai fuwu zhongxin*), allegedly a 'lending association' (*jiedai xiehui*) embarking on the task of bringing transparency to the plethora of *gaolidai*. The centre was set up in 2011. Purportedly it was a private institution that, albeit with considerable support in local government, should provide information and advice on non-bank loans in order to stabilise the market. Officially sanctioned as being in line with the local government's recent attempt to standardise lending by introducing its 'interim measures', the centre boasted its goal to make private lending transparent, accountable, offering better regulatory measures and guidance for lending intermediaries. Even help build a sounder atmosphere for a flourishing private financial sector.¹¹¹ Yet, much indicated that part of this was merely a front. Other non-bank lending offices and intermediaries held the centre to be the local government's attempt to capitalise on the informal market by creating a kind of monopoly through managing a central 'lending exchange'. But also, forcing the cohort of

¹¹¹ For the service centre's invocation to comply with the local government 'interim measures' see <http://www.ordosmjjd.com/Secondary/CreditInquiries/ViewNews.aspx?id=145> (last accessed on May 4, 2014.) For more detail on the service centre see homepage, <http://www.ordosmjjd.com/index.aspx> (last accessed on May 4, 2014).

pawnbrokers, micro-lending offices etc. to register with them through its close government ties.¹¹² Although set up as a private firm, ownership terms suggested its close connection to the local state: it was divided between the state run chamber of commerce, the municipal government, and three retired officials. Subsidiaries of the firm included micro-lending, insurance, capital management, and securities trade – all standard covers for *gaolidai* enterprises.

Still other entrepreneurs were quick to gain from the new avenues of profit prompted by the economic decline and general scarcity of credit. Big Brother Fei who I had encountered in Litai on several occasions was the head of a local debt collection company. Besides providing this service, that in a similar way as Old Wen also included a great deal of travelling, Brother Fei was responsible for a lending operation that was ‘collateral based’ (*diya daikuan*). This meant that debtors would on beforehand sign an agreement that their car of property would transfer into the hands of the creditor upon no payments. Due to the general scarcity of easily accessible credit around, the business was thriving and they could set the value of debtors’ property extremely low. So, in the not so uncommon case that debtors should fail to return the loan, the transferred property would make up a sizable profit. The change in forms of lending was a palpable sign that what was earlier perceived as credit (likely to be returned) between friends and associates were suddenly perceived as debts (not likely not to be repaid). More predatory forms of lending increasingly calculated in the gains won from debtors’ *not* paying back funds. New cars, Big Brother Fei explained, could easily yield 50% returns. Their operation thus gained equally if not more from loans that were not repaid, but through seizing and reselling the property of others. Adding a degree of legitimacy to their operations, Brother Fei’s employer, a shareholder in a local coal extraction company, provided him and his associates with a warrant (*fangwu ta xiang quanzheng*) issued by the housing authorities with which he could seize property without having to go through courts. At least so Brother Fei claimed. Although it was unclear as to the actual legitimacy of this, they nevertheless boasted having the warrant and kept it with written records of debts, fingerprints, listed items of collateral, dates and so on in a large book of accounts that they brought along. In Ordos, property seizures had a longer history that stretched way back before

¹¹² I want to thank Max Woodworth for bringing this to my attention and sharing information and data from the Ordos Folk Lending Service Centre (see also Woodworth 2013: 87).

the economic growth had even commenced. In Owen Lattimore's early experiences from traversing Ordos he wrote:

In the service of the banner, or of official travelers accredited to the banner, horses or camels are commandeered without pay. Properly there should be herds of animals, kept at regular posts, so that you ride from post to post. In the impoverished Ordos, where everything has broken down but the duties remain, the system worked in a harsh way; the soldiers who accompany you seize animals wherever they find them [...] " ... but here the right of seizure was being used in a desperately poor, settled country, where years and years of banditery and ruthless taxation had cleaned the wretched people out of livestock (Lattimore 1941: 12, 13)

The right of seizures appeared to be no less harsh than when Lattimore first observed it. Only, it seemed to have leaked from being a right of soldiers or others 'in service of the banner', to become part of a widespread form of entrepreneurship working in a legally grey area. Cars had replaced animals, but the seizures remained. The general scarcity of cash and need for quick credit prompted new entrepreneurial forms of lending that would profit from speculation in unpaid debts.

Besides these opaque yet opportunistic forms of co-opting and profiting from changes in the informal economy, the state also deferred its own debts. In summer 2011, Mr Li and I paid regular visits to the construction sites where he would follow the overall progress and supervise his work teams. Mr Li's invocation to 'follow the Party' (*genzhe dang*) incited him to become a contractor for the local government. The business contract clearly stated how Mr Li would receive half of his payment upon finishing 70% of the job, and the second half upon completion. Yet, upon completing 70% he had still to receive payment. Already in 2011, Mr Li was clearly frustrated with the terms of collaboration. He repeatedly pointed out how the government would not respect their contract and were always finding ways to delay the payment that would altogether bring him 20 million RMB, enabling him to repay his own creditors and make good profit. Throughout 2011 and the first half of 2012 Mr Li was convinced that he would eventually receive payment. After all, they were the government. From then on, however, his doubts gained more ground. With the increasingly fragile real estate condition Mr Li had cut his crew from 200 to 7 workers. Mostly these did maintenance

or undertook smaller tasks. ‘If just the government paid all its hired contractors, things would at least move a little. Now everything is stalled’. When asked about his options, he rejected that there was any chance the matter could be resolved in court. ‘Suing the government makes no sense’. By summer 2012, the condition had worsened and many sub-contractors developing real estate for the government were still without payment. Many contractors and mid-level developers were thus stuck in a middle position as both creditor and debtor. Mr Li had borrowed three million RMB for construction material in order to do the building insulation in Kangbashi’s residential area for the government. As payment had been continuously deferred, Mr Li’s own creditors were calling him up on a daily basis. Running large deficits of its own, the municipal government eventually decided to transfer the majority of residential areas it had contracted, but not paid, to private developers who would obtain rights to the buildings, but with these rights also had to face the claims of contractors as Mr Li. In the end, these developers decided to pay many of these contractors back in kind, i.e. with the very same residential apartments they had designed, built, insulated and so on. On several occasions interlocutors referred to the local government as a ‘grass cutting team’ (*gecaodui*), an expression that denoted a bad moral standing, or simply theft.

In a conversation about the general terms of lending transactions and risk, Mr Li expressed a view that somewhat coincided with what I have tentatively identified as a new morality of exchange:

There is no risk involved in loosing other peoples’ money [...] you don’t lose money you’ve had to work for. Sure, people will lose faith in you. But if the cash is not there, well then there is nothing you can do. Most people anyway are wise enough to distribute their property to family or someone close to them before it is seized. This way, nothing can be taken from them. And in ten or twenty years they still have money.

Again, echoing the logic of the border trader: if the state does not pay its debts, why should you? Or, even more pressing it appeared that Lattimore’s ‘big rogues’, those who held the largest debts, were those most likely to get away with it.

Leaving Faces Behind

In the opening joke on the previous chapter, the immediate reaction to the death of someone

hinted at the cynicism by which deaths were generally received: not with the loss of someone, but with the loss of invested funds. Although the very existence of the joke seemed to suggest that locals were dealing with unpaid debts in various ways, it also alluded to the more dim sides of negative reciprocity. Having treated how debts were diverted, deferred, and how the sudden scarcity of informal credit opened new avenues for profiting, I now turn to how this was reflected in moral discourse, giving particular emphasis on interlocutors' statements about the debasing of morality and prestige.

On several occasions I raised the issue of 'face'¹¹³ in relation to what now appeared as debt that would not be repaid. Mr Liu explained: 'face [*mianzi*] is very important. But if you are too deep in debt, you don't really care so much about these things. Loosing face is simply about whether one has or hasn't got face. There's not much to do about that. All you can do is simply to pull off your face [*zhineng ba mianzi la xialai*]'.

Baatar, one of the officers employed in the Ministry for Land and Resources local branch, framed the problem along similar lines. With millions of his family's and his own funds trapped with a debtor claiming insolvency while the debtor's son allegedly was on a spending spree shopping for millions of RMB in Hong Kong, Baatar spoke of a general loss of face. But, contrary to Mr Liu, Baatar framed it more as a collective facelessness: 'faces have all been left behind' (*lian dou liu xialai*). Baatar used the term *lian* and not *mianzi*. While *mianzi* roughly translates into social prestige, something that can increase or shrink according to effort and manoeuvring skills, *lian* is better understood as a set of principled values regarding a person's moral standing, the latter thus being a somewhat more fundamental quality at the disposal of every person beyond questions of status (Hsien-chin Hu in Kipnis 1995: 125; Yan 1996: 136-7). Losing *lian*, Kipnis notes, is not simply a question of loosing prestige, but a far more basic loss, i.e. 'of the right to be treated like a human being' (Kipnis 1995: 126). Both *mianzi* and *lian* can be thought of as what Kipnis calls 'constitutive visibilities' (1995: 127), i.e. qualities that are essential to the relational constitution of persons. Yet other scholars note how concerns about faces can act as a moral restraint that direct interaction (Yan 1996: 138). But if this basic component of personhood is 'taken off' or 'left behind', what then happens to sociality? The

¹¹³ I do not hold 'face', 'face-work' or even *guanxi* (social relations) as distinctly Chinese phenomena, but instead emphasize its more fundamental aspects of interpersonal relations, of giving and receiving, and in light of its centrality as an indigenous concept, contribute to broader anthropological debates on reciprocity and exchange (cf. Yan 1996).

collective loss of face, or in Mr Liu's statement the increasing level of indifference to face that surged with the unpaid debts, was a sign that relations and interactional forms were strongly affected. Mr Liu implied that the social relation between debtor and creditor, or even the bad name one could get from not paying one's debts, had become less important. In other words, suggesting that debts were sometimes left unpaid on purpose. In Baatar's case, the loss of the morally laden *lian* attested to the wider breach of moral principles, and was thus framed as a more collective loss, or change towards what I have here coined as a new morality of spoils.

This perceived condition of facelessness, I propose, emerged partly from changes in patterns of social interaction: related to the general flow of gifts and favours in Chinese social networks. At the heart of Chinese *guanxi* networks is a code that work along similar lines as Marcel Mauss' classic take on a gift economy reminiscent of the intrinsic obligation to give, receive, and most importantly, return: as *guanxi* is established between two parties it relies on the premise that each can ask a favour of the other, and, in turn, expect to repay it at a later occasion. Similar to the gift there is no exact time for due return, and making haste to repay will only be detrimental to the relationship as such (Osburg 2013: 23). A *guanxi* system, however, is marked by a directional flow where gifts flow upward and favours down (Yan 1996: 15). It is thus premised on some kind of status hierarchy where the one on top might see fit to help those who have courted his goodwill. Essentially, when considering the *gaolidai* schemes, this meant that lending by contractual agreements somehow circumvented this natural flow of favours, exchanges, and interdependency. Although it seemed that funds in the *gaolidai* on a general basis flowed upwards, i.e. toward those with greater power or social network to reinvest or build, I did not experience that these loans were extended as gifts or prestations that called to be reciprocated on some later occasion. Rather, loans were extended on the basis of the 'imagined equality' between people who were increasingly not familiar with each other, and moreover with an exact date for repayment. Any hierarchies or forms of interdependence were thus effectively concealed in the very act of extending the loan.

As noted above, classic anthropological theories build upon the premise that debt and exchange lies at the heart of sociality. David Graeber makes a central distinction between debts that can be paid and debts that can't be paid. Or rather, he looks into the questions of why debts must, or should be paid, launching a critique of money's prosaic ability to erase debts. What enabled some debts that were essentially incalculable, although essential to what

he terms ‘human economies’ to become quantified, and thus payable? Debt in its financial sense, Graeber asserts, ‘is just a perversion of a promise. It’s a promise corrupted by both math and violence’ (Graeber 2011: 391). In his historical outline Graeber points to violence as the central ingredient of this transformation. Violence, and here Graeber makes his most compelling argument in the case of slavery, was essentially what enabled the change from debts as un-payable into a system of endless equivalences, that called for debts to be repaid, at all costs. Although the introduction of financial debts in Ordos had existed prior to *gaolidai*, Graeber’s argumentation seems to resonate with some of the transactional logics that are described above. For instance, from Old Wangs’ case of settling debts, and, in the process, even ‘giving face’ to their debtor this was predicated on the return of the principal, or through the miniscule calculations of the Humvee’s net value; both quantifiable measures that, if paid, with good chance would conclude any further exchanges between the Wangs and Mr Hu. Or, considering how Old Wen’s cases of debt settlement at the Dongsheng District Court suddenly played out between close kin suggested that indebtedness was increasingly quantifiable, obliterating other forms of indebtedness or systems of exchange that might have preceded them – and, paradoxically, forms of exchange and interdependency that facilitated the very act of extending private loans in the first place. In other words, undermining the very foundation of informal credit.

Despite rich analytical and empirical ethnographies that deal with the indigenous concept of ‘face’ in China, there seem to be a paucity of studies that directly examine facelessness as a phenomenon. One exception that is particularly relevant to the case of Ordos is Ellen Hertz’s discussion of “face in the crowd” (2001). Building on her ethnography from Shanghai’s stock market in the beginning of the 90s, Hertz raises the problem of how a strong emphasis on face works in a crowd; in other words, how a vision for social interaction that is modelled on small-scale community life translates into an urban setting that, at least in the western tradition, is widely conceived as faceless and anonymous (Hertz 2001: 277).

Examining empirical conditions for the constitution of both face and facelessness in Chinese urban life, Hertz identifies what she terms a ‘sociocultural resistance towards facelessness’: examples of this resistance include the Chinese work unit (*danwei*) under socialism that served to minimise citizens’ experience of living in a city among strangers; in another example, she mentions the *guanxi* systems that in some way inject reciprocal and personal relations into a period marked by rapid marketisation and economic reform (Ibid:

277-278). On the other side of the spectrum, facelessness, Hertz detects conditions of Chinese urban life where the importance of face is dwarfed for some reason or another. Going through a variety of different urban experiences that include crowds: shopping, strolling, crammed commuting, etc. Hertz arrives at the phenomenon of fevers (*re*): focusing on moments where a collective identification with the crowd imposes ‘codes of “public” or “mass” sociability over and against those particularized relations’ (Ibid: 282).¹¹⁴ This brings Hertz to the stock market and particularly the *sanhu* (dispersed players) who make up smaller heterogeneous groups of investors – the ‘subjects par excellence of stock fever’ (Ibid: 284). Although stock fever is particularly laden with the values of reform era marketisation, Hertz notes how the fever itself as a sociocultural phenomenon stretched further back into the latter years of the Cultural Revolution (Ibid: 287). Fevers, Hertz argues, are defined by moments when the person stops defining him or herself in relation to others, but rather ‘as others’, i.e. where the ‘give and take’ of face interaction dissolves in favour of ‘universalizing ambitions of the crowd’ (Ibid: 291).

To a large extent, the ‘universalizing ambitions of the crowd’ translates nicely into the *gaolidai* phenomenon considering popular accounts of ‘mass lending’ inside the ‘city of loans’; how participation appealed to everyone beyond age group, ethnicity, gender, occupation – people from all strands of life. Two things however differ: ‘fevers’, are intrinsically tied to a pathological condition that will eventually pass. They are thus explicitly temporary. Accounts of *gaolidai* participation and some of the growth imaginaries described throughout the dissertation, on the contrary, were more akin to millenarian movements. Also, the heterogeneous ways that people inscribed themselves in the schemes, actively scheming did not suggest that faces were dissolved in the feverish act of participation.¹¹⁵ Contrary to the fevers described by Hertz, whereby people sacrifice their identities to a ‘collective design’, mass participation in *gaolidai* schemes were often crafted as ways to solidify personhood and social status. For instance, the interlocutor who explained the collapse of schemes with reference to ‘slap one’s face until it swollen in an effort to look imposing’ indicated the exact

¹¹⁴ ‘Fevers’ (*re*) as a phenomenon presents an interesting dimension of mass movements in China. Fever have not only been used to delineate how urban dwellers are captured by the latest fashions or fads, but also the way urban officials without question follows the latest trends of urbanization models and trends (Zhang Z. 2010).

¹¹⁵ Hertz analysis does, however, also suggest that fevers were simultaneously an idiom for the ‘expression of a group’ and ‘individual identity’ – participants actively chose what fevers to partake in, and how (Hertz 2001: 290).

opposite than disappearing in a crowd, i.e. ascending in social recognition. Others saw participation as a way to establish families, thus countering the main traits of the fever or the fad. Faces seemed to thrive in Ordos' 'mass lending'. Yet along the way, they were pulled off or left behind. And by the same implications that prestige and recognition could benefit from it, the ensuing collective loss of face that was inferred from social interaction was an ever more stark reminder of what was now gone.

This begs the question of what emerged when faces were left behind? With the danger of falling back to the search of whatever truth lies concealed underneath the surface, I instead return to my last encounter with Tegusi, the other civil servant working in the local branch of the Land and Resource Ministry. We met for a last night of friendly conversation over some noodles and beer. Conversation, however, was more tense than usual. Tegusi had recently moved with his wife and baby daughter to Kangbashi. Although his wife who worked as a lawyer in the Ordos Municipal Court, was on maternity leave, her work unit had recently approached the family. A year earlier, Tegusi agreed to pose as a 'guarantor' (*danbaoren*) for a friend's loan. As the loan was long overdue, it was now to be settled in court by calling in the assets of those who had validated the debtor's credibility. Employees at the court called Tegusi and his wife suggesting that they put pressure on the debtor and his family to pay up so the debt would not fall upon them. In between unanswered calls to his friend's the debtor's wife, Tegusi reflected upon the broader social repercussions of economic decline:

In my life as such, whether things will worsen further or not, I don't give it too much thought. But, as I see it, conditions will deteriorate. We [civil servants] might face several months of not receiving salaries. These are the money our daily lives depend on. Still, I think life will go on as before. If we don't get paid, then we can eat a little less. More at home, with families [...] About the relations between people, it's more serious. We might face an unprecedented level of mistrust. That's the gravest effect, the most frightening one. With nobody trusting each other, then it really is a ghost town. When you go outside, what you see is people. But you don't trust them. ... That's a kind of ghost I guess.

Tegusi was certain life would continue, and, although salaries might be left unpaid, families would provide some solace. In the broader perspective, however, Tegusi feared that trust

between people in society would only deteriorate. In sum, the increasing level of indifference to one's social standings or moral obligations; the truckloads of bilked creditors that queued up hoping to recoup lost funds; 'iron friends' who turned into ghosts; all were steps to the sedimentation of what I have termed an emerging morality of spoils, or, in the haunting image provided by Tegusi: a step closer towards becoming a real ghost town.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined what I referred to as the *anti*-social life of wealth gone awry, what we could also call the social life of debt in Ordos. Particularly dealing with the un-making of schemes the chapter's initial part approached their adverse effects through a focus on legal measures taken to regulate the debts that surfaced as *gaolidai* schemes collapsed. In cases such as that of Mr Liu, whose largely common trajectory from being resettled, compensated, participant in the *gaolidai*, to becoming a frustrated creditor clearly marked a fall from grace – a loss of faith and optimism. Given the daily crowds that would gather at the *Dafeiban*, Mr Liu merely represented one of many who had been affected by the boom to bust cycle of Ordos's development. His experience resonated well with many other accounts of how *gaolidai* as a model for redistribution of wealth and dreams brought along qualitative changes in the lives of most citizens, instituting a strong optimism for the future of Ordos – one that was mediated by the *gaolidai*. But as lines of credit collapsed, many of the creditors were left with no option but to wait, or to put more pressure on the debtor using extra-legal means. The little faith that creditors had that legal action could bring any good compelled a closer look at the institutions that were to engage debts, and contain the crisis. Besides the existing 'regulatory lacunae' and 'grey areas' that appeared to reside in existing regulations regarding informal finance, inside accounts from employees working with debt settlement framed 'Ordos Law' as a legal exception. An exception, I have argued, that was not only an exception in the sense that it was supposedly temporary and the only one of its kind, but also in the sense of Walter Benjamin's notion of a 'state of emergency' being the rule, and not the exception. Rumours of debtors' refuge, connivance between large-scale schemers and officials abounded, in turn, making it even more apparent that wealth and aspirations had evaporated for the majority of participants. *Gaolidai* lending successfully concealed hierarchies between common creditors and another class of debtor-developers. Hierarchies, however, that became painfully obvious as debts were continuously deferred.

In the final part, I took up the question of what happens when debt evasion becomes

the norm, i.e. when society's attempts to socialise debts and pre-empt the collapse of credit systems fail. Along the same lines of the border trader's neat observations about spoils in Cameroon, implicating everyone, high and low, in a scheme that eventually transformed the state into a criminal entity, the last section tentatively claims that a new morality of exchange was emerging in Ordos: one of taking without reciprocating. Interlocutors' vivid expressions about 'taking off' or 'leaving faces behind' were indications of this new morality; not simply confined to a few fraudulent debtors, but also indicative of a broader condition of facelessness. The collective loss of face and surge of negative reciprocity opened cracks for the uncanny presence of Tegusi's ghosts, the people you see, but don't trust. Not understood along the same lines as more popular ghost town narratives, that centre on the scarcity of inhabitants or excessive construction, but a ghost town in the sense that the enchantments of finance eventually proved fictitious.

IN SEARCH OF A NEW DIAGNOSIS, BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This inquiry has been oriented towards a period of abrupt transformations, the momentum that drove it, and how it spilled into the lives of people I encountered in Ordos, some of whom I managed to trace throughout Ordos' boom-bust, and others who were quick to leave as prospects dwindled. At its most basic the ethnography brings us from boom, over bubble, to bust. It also marks an odd passage from the empty spaces in a developing frontier region to the vacant or vacated spaces of a city dotted with unfinished construction and ruination. In many cases the spaces remained the same while the perceptions around them changed dramatically.

The argument made in this dissertation is simple yet controversial in the sense that the shift of emphasis from compliance to complicity counters oft-quoted narratives of dispossession that are often evoked when dealing with processes of forced eviction and relocation. Moreover, local responses to state-ordained development schemes in the periphery of states are often framed with concepts such as compliance or resistance, rarely complicity. However, from the ambivalent and manifold ways that schemes played out in peoples' lives, and conversely how people actively schemed, in turn, affecting the larger schemes, alerted me to the productivity and muddled nature of schemes in Ordos. Boom, bubble, and bust, I have argued, was not simply about failure or dispossession. Rather, it was about the formation of what I have termed a 'community of the bubble', and the way in which peoples' financial dispositions proved complicit with larger schemes to modernise China's hinterlands. The local resistance to the 'bubble theory' was a defining feature of the community that, I became convinced, cut across class, ethnicity, and employment sector – accentuating an intimate space of common yet unspeakable knowledge. If something was *not* to be exposed, it was the prospect of a speculative bubble, much akin to Taussig's evocative idea of the public secret. 'Outsiders who come here and talk of a bubble don't know anything about Ordos'. It was nothing if not uninformed and 'malicious slander' (*huaihua*). To understand this momentum and its moods, the six chapters of the dissertation each examine an aspect of what I have called the social life of temporary wealth. Moving through the chapters further serves to

structure the dissertation by denoting a progression from development rhetoric to the muddled nature of implementation, from plan to effect, from the more official of schemes to the ones less so.

The first chapter – *City, Makes Life even Better* – gives a brief outline of the development since Ordos was made a municipality. It illustrates how local development discourse was framed around notions of the good life in the city that ‘makes life even better’: a life of abundance and leisure – the apex of civilization. In the process, farmers and herdsmen would be transferred to areas with supposedly improved conditions, not having to burden themselves with the hard labour of earlier times. The new area of Kangbashi emerged as a modern and civilised didactic authority that helped legitimise the forced resettlement of denizens who inhabited the territory needed for urban expansion or the extractive industries. Beyond the political and economic interests vested by powerful pro-growth coalitions, the chapter argues that a vernacular urgency accounted for the speed and general patterns of compliance with state schemes. In spite of a few accounts of outright contention over questions of land use and compensation, I encountered surprisingly little resistance considering the scope of change. It seemed that the speed and relative ease of eviction and relocation was predicated on the generous compensation packages received by the thousands of households that were relocated in the process, which was later attributed to the ‘Ordos Model’. Another effect of this unofficial development model was to stimulate local demand for new housing and thus boost the property sector. The perceived absence of local development and the general feeling of a temporal and spatial ‘lateness’ became a central driving force behind this very same sector in a way that engendered concepts like ‘Ordos Speed’ or popular ideas that presented Ordos as ‘China’s Dubai’, alluding to modernised construction and a resource bonanza. As the young underground banker, Mr Qiu, described, beyond the lure of class mobility and the convenience of urban life, the very act of acquiring modern property in the city was widely conceived as way to hedge against uncertainty, an appeal that to a broad extent resonated across ethnic boundaries.

The second chapter – *Unfinishing Buildings* – looks at how the official leap was co-opted by sophisticated entrepreneurs, following the hype and value that was conjured up by a prestigious creative industries cluster development. Posing the somewhat strange question of what could be gained from not finishing buildings, the chapter provides insights from inside the Chinese building sector, drawing attention to the speculative and virtual aspects of real

estate development in high-growth areas. Behind local booster rhetoric that positioned Ordos as the successful and civilised frontier in perfect synchronisation with central state policies, it was suggested that governance in Ordos during the years of rapid growth was best characterised by connivance between developers and officials, opportunism, and a disregard for central state policies aimed at curbing property speculation. It also pointed to the potential fragility of the so-called growth coalitions. Strategies to build ‘empty containers of space’ indicated how developers navigated in a market characterised by erratic and potential changes in policy regulation. Whether or not the end point was building billionaire villas or botanical gardens was less important.

The third chapter – The Iron Bubble – takes a step closer to the pioneer investors and citizens of the Kangbashi New Area, namely a group of civil servants. Tracing this group through personal and professional activities, the chapter examines what sustained the bubble and what made this group so adamant in their faith that Ordos had not only struck a seam of almost infinite resources, but also that growth was never-ending. Providing part of the answer, it was argued that the local resource bonanza, coupled with the values inferred from modern property ownership, gave citizens a sense of social security, similar to that which the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ had earlier provided, with lifelong security for state functionaries. Despite its apparent contradiction in terms, the ‘iron bubble’ marked access to wealth along with family security. The belief in ever-escalating property values in the resource rich Ordos, however, did not mean that civil servants were not critical of the many transgressions upon which the schemes were founded. While the local proclivity for corruption could be dealt with in various ways, other things were not easily pronounced. Baatar’s request for me to ‘write something nice about Ordos’ was not so much to cover up either graft and corruption or other transgressions – practices that were hardly concealed yet widely ignored during the boom. Rather, ‘writing something nice’ implied that he would rather I did not mention the bubble or write something along the lines of the common ghost town story. The ‘iron bubble’ was an ambivalent manifestation of local development optimism, one that drew out the intimacies of a community of the bubble that fed off it, before it eventually did burst.

Chapter four – The Tower & the Tower – has two aims: first, to describe what were the kinds of schemes that played out inside some of Ordos’ newly constructed office spaces: in boom and in bust. Secondly, to try out the tentative idea of whether, and in what ways, vacant space itself could be regarded as complicit in the nature of schemes. The chapter marks

a central turning point in the dissertation: from the ubiquitous optimism shared within a ‘community of the bubble’ to the adverse effects of the crisis. From the making of schemes to their unmaking it comprises the momentum into a condensed, yet simplified version, seen through the story of a simple office tower. Moving on from the preceding chapter’s focus on civil servants, this chapter primarily traces a group of young investors, the Litai Investment Company. On the boom side of things it shows how young men such as those of Litai came together as newly established groups of entrepreneurs. The general opacity that characterised Litai’s organisational structure, its mixed membership and level of engagement, suggests how Litai emerged rather spontaneously from the momentum as one effect of the opportunities offered by a booming economy. Reflecting the wider optimism that was intimately linked to vacant space at the time, Litai resonated with general forms of entrepreneurship outside the tower, where people from all strands of society acquired licences as real estate agents, construction firms; some became middlemen in the supply of informal credit. Entire families would suddenly emerge as family firms. On the bust side, observations from inside the tower attested to the material and social effects of the decline; particularly the progressive social fragmentation of people who had come together during the boom and the material decay that followed as schemes and investments foundered. Yet, confounded by the building’s ambiguities, its almost simultaneous co-existence of boom and bust, it seemed vacancy itself could not entirely account for the question of why some occupants chose to defaecate in the same spaces that others used to invest in, or dwell in. Although vacant spaces did yield effects as they contributed to the rapidly shifting leaseholds, the flipping of property titles, and the general upholding of the ‘iron bubble’ imagery, this hardly explains the heterogeneous nature of occupancy inside the tower; neither before nor after the bubble did burst. Occupants, it appeared, made deliberate decisions as to what they chose to see to or *unsee*: like the small family’s *unseeing* of the waning and decay, or the collective faith in escalating property prices that called for more expansion: of credit or new business plans, venturing into new areas. Even the migrant community that morphed sterile office space into spaces of dwelling implied a decision of what to see, and what to make of it. In effect, this helped account for how spaces were subleased, filled, abandoned, reappropriated, put to new uses as lavatories or residential quarters for migrant communities.

Chapter five – City of Loans – brings us even closer to how citizens were actively scheming by way of participating in the mass lending of *gaolidai*. Either as creditors or

debtors, or in many cases as both. Drawing on retrospective accounts from common creditors and debtors while also following the circulation of property as collateral for outstanding debt, the chapter seeks to understand these schemes from comparative accounts of informal finance in China and more broadly. Based on this it makes a set of propositions: first, *gaolidai*, more than simply being attributable to the lure of pecuniary gain or a scramble for new wealth, attested to a wider reshuffling of values. This reshuffling was inferred from an emerging propensity for rapid circulation, frequent extensions of high interest loans within close networks, escalating patterns of participation, and the visibility of lending practices that would otherwise have to be concealed, as comparative accounts of usury suggested. Informal financial practices in Ordos were not marginal, neither were they merely something that pertained to the dispossessed class as an ingenuity to survive in the face of bureaucratic constraints. It had become a central means of redistribution of wealth and dreams: for young bachelors such as Mr Liu *gaolidai* was crafted to establish families; in the case of Old Wang, as inheritance; for entrepreneurs like Mr Li, *gaolidai* schemes were convenient channels to finance new business endeavours without having to go through the slow and often unsuccessful quest for formal banking credit. For some, *gaolidai* enabled them to become spectacularly rich. As common parlance would suggest, given the local appetite for the ‘eating of interests’ and the ‘sweet taste of dividends’, *gaolidai* had become the backbone of household consumption and expenditure. While informal finance is generally conceptualised as existing in a sphere outside the formal economy, *gaolidai* lending seemed to ‘follow the [CCP] Party’. Not in the sense that the ‘Party’ was a moral entity or guidance for proper demeanour, but in the sense that investors were certain that wherever the ‘Party’ would venture, there would surely be growth and opportunities for profiting. Yet, as quickly as opportunities materialised they proved equally fast at disappearing again. From being a place where credit was readily extended through social networks, citizens of Ordos increasingly experienced a surge of mistrust as default payments and bankruptcies mushroomed. This was apparent in the case of the Wang family with their considerations about installing surveillance cameras to safeguard their Humvee collateral. As liquidity dried out and money stopped flowing, the adverse effects of lending schemes became obvious.

The final chapter – ‘Debt of Dreams’ – further traces the social ramifications of the unmaking of *gaolidai* schemes. Examining how unpaid financial debts were engaged with in the time of decline, and how this was reflected in moral discourse, the chapter makes two

claims: first, related to how debts were engaged, the chapter shows how unpaid debts exceeded the local legal capacity. This brought many citizens to question the city's legislative authority, creating incentives to use extra-legal means to recoup lost funds. Despite the irregularities of regulative authority and the lack of any clear distinction between what forms of financial transaction were sanctioned by law and what were not, this did not mean that law played an insignificant role – simply that the role of law was not necessarily that of transparency. The institutional framework that was set in place to handle the surge of unrest proved not only to fall short, but was quickly perceived as complicit with large-scale debtors, or outright as an extension of fraud. Enshrined in ambiguity, this legal framework was exceptional in the sense of being temporary and one of a kind. It was seen in a different light from the way in which hierarchies that were latent during the boom suddenly resurfaced. The very same framework also implied that the 'state of emergency' that had brought it into being was the rule rather than the exception. Second, with the collapse of the *gaolidai* schemes not only did property values dwindle, but so too did citizens' mutual trust. Asking what happens when debts are continuously deferred and when institutions that should regulate debts are unmasked as complicit with prominent debtors, the latter half of chapter argues that a new morality of spoils was emerging; a morality characterised by a collective loss of face and prevailing indifference to one's social standing. Also one that materialised in a set of new schemes that could profit from the debts and property seizures, or sought to gain from the state's new vocation to make informal finance more transparent.

The chapters roughly sketched above are my attempt to make sense of Ordos' momentous leaps in a way that sheds light on the productivity of these schemes, even of the ones that failed to materialise. This also means bringing attention to what fell outside the purview of planners and regulators. Here, the most central and surprising finding was the intrinsic relation between overarching state schemes and what has been termed informal finance. Although informal finance is often located outside the ambit of state, I have instead probed into the interdependencies between state and the mass participation in local lending schemes. Examining this relation illustrates how the micro level of interpersonal schemes and households was interwoven with the expansion of the city: not as a simple causal relation where one configures the other, but as mutually constitutive. The examples that I have presented suggest that such lending practices have effects beyond the obvious challenges they present for market regulation in high growth areas. As they are built upon notions of trust,

social connections, and the degree of familiarity between lender and borrower, they equally contain the power to consolidate social relations as well as to destabilise not only the formal economy, but also the very relations that generate trust and stability within society. The official schemes were carried by informal schemes, and vice-versa. By implication, it became obvious how changes in the overall economy had a backdraught effect into the social realm of trust and credit between friends, colleagues, even within families.

Then where does this leave ‘the schemes to improve the human condition’? Closing his opus on the failures of high-modernist planning, James Scott points out that many such schemes were often set in motion in the genuine belief that they actually would improve the human condition, and therefore, in Scott’s view, in even more dire need of a refined diagnosis. A serious problem with planners, Scott holds, is that they routinely ‘ignore the radical contingency of the future’ (Scott 1998: 343). Giving his take on what could be done differently, Scott devises a few rules of thumb so as to pre-empt or at least minimise the devastating effects of failed schemes:

Take small steps

Favour reversibility

Plan on surprises

Plan on human inventiveness

Although small steps never did make it far in Ordos, in a peculiar way, Scott’s additional three rules of thumb resonate almost perfectly with the profitable *failures* that thrived in Ordos’ heated property development sector. In what I’ve coined the economy of *unfinishing* buildings, the speculative drive to conjure up value without actually building anything serves as an apt example of favouring reversibility. When something is actually built, the logic behind ‘building empty containers of space that in the future can be anything’ follows Scott’s rule as to plan on surprises. Acknowledging that building specs or policy regulations will almost certainly change means that buildings are built to adapt, rather than to simply follow plans or designs. In this way, planning *for* surprises and not only *on* the chance of surprises

seems to suggest a total inversion of contingency and plan. Acquiring the plot, dividing the territory, and getting out in due time left space open for inventiveness – new speculations. In this inappropriate light, Scott's device to improve our condition translates well into current strategies of speculative real estate development in contemporary China. Closing the circle and returning to where I began, by the villas that never materialised yet yielded profits for those who got out in time, what might best summarise the planning side of what I've termed 'un-real estate' could very well be planning along these lines – in a way that that does consider Scott's 'radical contingency of the future'.

If, as Scott suggests, the antidote to the failure of schematics is the local and practical knowledge that come out of everyday experience, how then are we to understand the 'community of the bubble'? This community was premised on the everyday experiences of people taking part in schemes of various sorts, people making the best of it. Yet as I have argued, a defining characteristic of this local and embodied knowledge was predicated on a kind of shared sense of knowing what not to know, or what not to see. A knowledge that proved not only complicit with the larger schemes, but essentially also a knowledge that leaves us in need of another, more searching diagnosis.



It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way —

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

EPILOGUE

That's not real love, anyway!

In March 2013, I met Mr Liu at the eastern fringe of the Dongsheng District. Driving a borrowed 'bread truck', Mr Liu brought me to meet two friends who were the additional investors in their joint venture: what Mr Liu had earlier described as his 'mobile truck repair facility'. Located at a dirt stop off the side of the eastern entry road to Dongsheng it mostly rendered services to coal freight trucks. Along with the two young men who came from Ordos' Dalate Banner, Mr Liu had invested in a small van complete with tools and spare parts. They also purchased a second-hand caravan that they used to stay warm, play cards, eat and pass the time in between clients. Inside the caravan at the rear end, Mr Liu's two associates rested on a small bed. By the entrance was a worn coal stove, and on top of it a site for simple cooking. To keep warm the windows were covered with homespun isolation materials. Scattered around inside were empty bottles and cigarette boxes, oil, tools, and advertisements for spare parts. Ever since last year's decline in coal prices their business only yielded small sporadic profits. The three young men agreed that they would surely lose money from selling everything, 'in the current market'. They had already been forced to sell some of their repair tools, which they hoped to repurchase when – or if – the market turned.

Mr Liu doubted whether he would be able to get out of his small business and didn't see how he could leave Ordos either. He wanted to save enough money to buy a second-hand car and with that maybe drive unlicensed taxi for a while. To ease their minds and hearts, they sometimes visited a place not many miles away where a woman relieved them of some hardship. 50 RMB for fifteen minutes, an agreeable price, the three young men consented. The girl he was supposed to marry had become somewhat impatient and was now – backed by her family – convinced that Mr Liu at least owed her some financial compensation for waiting in vain for a marriage that he proved unable to follow through with. As long as his family's *gaolidai* predicament remained unresolved, there was nothing he could do. In need of a hideout from his *would-have-been* family in law, Mr Liu sometimes took refuge at his uncle's place who lived in a small one-story brick house at the outskirts of Yijinhuoluo Banner, only a few kilometres from his family's initial home before resettlement. On one of our final encounters driving back towards Dongsheng District from the quiet mobile car repair shop,

Mr Liu reasoned: ‘now that she only thinks of money, I’m not sure she’s the right one for me. That’s not real love, anyway.’

Glossary of Central Chinese Terms

<i>annajia / annaka</i>	illegal substance for consumption (benzoic acid sodium caffeine)
<i>baijiu</i>	liquor distilled from sorghum
<i>baofahu</i>	nouveau riche, new wealth
<i>bianzheng</i>	frontier administration
<i>chengjia</i>	establish family
<i>chi lixi</i>	eating interests, living from dividends
<i>dachonglian chong pangzi</i>	slap one's face until it becomes swollen and looks imposing
<i>dage</i>	big brother, also head of criminal entity or gang
<i>daji feifa jizi bangongshi</i>	Dongsheng District's Security Bureau for Illegal Fundraising
<i>danbaoren</i>	person posing as guarantor (in Ordos most in the case of loans)
<i>danzi da</i>	have a big nerve, daring in business
<i>daobi</i>	bankrupt
<i>diandang hang</i>	pawnshop
<i>dixia</i>	underground
<i>diya daikuan</i>	collateral lending
<i>du</i>	gamble
<i>eerduosi fa</i>	Ordos' law
<i>eerduosi moshi</i>	Ordos' model
<i>eerduosi sudu</i>	Ordos' speed
<i>facai</i>	make a fortune
<i>fangdai</i>	made a deposit, extend a loan
<i>fangwu ta xiang quanzheng</i>	warrant
<i>feifa rongzi</i>	illegal finance
<i>fengjing</i>	location and surroundings
<i>fengshui</i>	traditional Chinese practice of geomancy
<i>fubai</i>	corruption, filth
<i>gei mianzi</i>	give face

<i>gaolidai</i>	high-interest loan
<i>gecaodui</i>	thief, literally cut grass team
<i>getihu</i>	entrepreneur
<i>guanxi</i>	social relations, network
<i>gudong</i>	shareholder
<i>guicheng</i>	ghost town
<i>guojia wenming chengshi</i>	National Civilized City
<i>guotu ziyuanbu</i>	National Bureau for Land and Resources
<i>hei shehui</i>	mafia
<i>heli</i>	rational
<i>hexie shehui</i>	Harmonious Society
<i>hong huo</i>	literally ‘red-fire’, meaning lively, exuberant, or sexual intercourse
<i>hongniu</i>	Chinese red bull (beverage)
<i>hong bao</i>	red envelopes implying money, corruption
<i>huaihua</i>	slander
<i>huangsha/huangdi</i>	wasteland
<i>jiedai xiehui</i>	lending association
<i>jieqian</i>	loans without interest
<i>jietiao</i>	lending receipt, informal contract
<i>jiedai zhicheng</i>	city of loans
<i>jingguan luodong</i>	administrative lacunae
<i>jingji weiji</i>	financial crisis
<i>juhui (chenghui)</i>	rotating credit association in Wenzhou
<i>kaifaqu</i>	developing district
<i>kexue fazhan</i>	scientific development
<i>kongcheng</i>	empty town
<i>kuoda</i>	expansion
<i>lanweilou</i>	unfinished construction, literally rotten-tail-building
<i>lian</i>	face
<i>lixide tiantou</i>	sweet taste of dividends
<i>luodong</i>	holes

<i>luohou</i>	backward
<i>meng gai shi</i>	league transformed to municipality
<i>mianbaoche</i>	bread truck', Chinese brand minivan
<i>mianzi</i>	face, prestige
<i>mianzi gongcheng</i>	face (prestige) projects
<i>minjian jiedai</i>	folk lending
<i>pai mapi</i>	pad the horse's behind, i.e. curry favour with someone
<i>paoche</i>	fast cars
<i>paomolun</i>	bubble theory
<i>pianzi</i>	swindler
<i>pinkun diqu</i>	impoverished region
<i>pochan</i>	bankrupt
<i>qiangzhuang</i>	shadow bank
<i>quanmin fangdai</i>	mass lending
<i>re</i>	fever, fad
<i>rongzi jingtai</i>	financing platforms
<i>shangao huangdi yuan</i>	the mountains are high, and the emperor far away
<i>shenpi</i>	examine and approve of projects
<i>taiqian</i>	loans with interest
<i>taihui</i>	escalating lending association
<i>tiaozi</i>	lending receipt, informal contract
<i>tiaoyue shi</i>	leapfrogging city
<i>tiaoyueshi fazhan</i>	leapfrogging development style
<i>tiefanwan</i>	Iron Rice Bowl
<i>tie zuo de paomo</i>	iron bubble
<i>ting laopo hua, gen dang zou</i>	listen to your wife, follow the Party
<i>touzi</i>	invest
<i>tuimu huantao</i>	Converting pastures to grasslands
<i>wailai gongzi</i>	extra income
<i>wan</i>	fun
<i>xiao 'e daikuan</i>	micro-lending/finance

<i>xia hai</i>	engage in the market economy, literally jump in the sea
<i>xianzhan houzou</i>	execute the criminal first, report to the emperor later
<i>xincheng</i>	new city/district development
<i>xinfang/shangfang</i>	Bureau for letters and visits (petition institution).
<i>xibudakaiifa</i>	Campaign to Open up the West
<i>xinren de weiji</i>	crisis of trust
<i>yangqi</i>	foreign flavour
<i>yang-mei-tu-qi</i>	cashmere wool – coal – rare minerals – nature gas (Ordos' version)
<i>yang-mei-tu-qi</i>	feeling proud and elated (original proverb)
<i>yaozhai gongsi</i>	debt collection company
<i>yiminqu</i>	migrant community (for relocated citizens)
<i>yiye baofu</i>	become a millionaire over night
<i>youhui</i>	advantage
<i>zhengji gongcheng</i>	prestige project
<i>zhongjianren</i>	middleman
<i>zhuanzu</i>	sub-lease
<i>zuo houmen</i>	corruption, taking the back door

Appendices

Appendix I: Ordos Prize of Architecture

The Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Industry Zone: Background

The winner of The Ordos Prize will receive a commission to design a building in the Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Industry Zone. An incubator for cultural and creative industries, the center is being developed by the Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Development Co., Ltd, a company founded by 41-year-old Cai Jiang, a brilliant entrepreneur who made his fortune in numerous industries including coal, natural gas and agriculture. Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Development Co. is investing \$600 million in the 200-acre park to attract and sustain creative industry and arts, a first within this region of Inner Mongolia. Established in September, 2007, the park is one of the satellite developments of Kangbashi, Ordos' new urban center, which was developed several years ago when Dongsheng, the old urban center 20 miles away, became too crowded.

The park will contain numerous cultural venues, theaters, studios, offices, apartments and villas, all designed by acclaimed Chinese and international architects. Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Development Co's vision is to make it a unique architectural landmark in China, and even the world, by showcasing the work of numerous world-famous architects and sponsoring international architectural prizes and competitions.

The company became interested in architecture after realizing that many of the buildings that went up so quickly in China in recent years will not work in the future and will not reflect China's social progress. Sustainability and new technology are the company's prime interests. The first building constructed in the park is The Ordos Art Museum, designed by Xu Tiantian, principal of the Beijing firm DnA Design and Architecture. The museum displays Chinese and Asian contemporary art. A 10,000-square-meter Artist Studio by FAKE Design also is complete.

The park's development is moving forward with numerous other buildings under construction, including several of the Ordos 100 villas. These are expected to be completed later this year. A large lake is a central feature of the park and also serves as a reservoir for the water supply.

A creative industry incubation zone, a cultural industry education base and commercial and residential buildings comprise the second phase of the park and are expected to be under

construction late in 2009. The third phase will include schools, kindergartens, a waterfront park, a playground and additional commercial and residential buildings.

Ordos 100: Background

The Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Development Company's first foray into the world of architecture attracted international attention and put Ordos on the map. In 2007, the company approached Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, the Swiss architects who designed the Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium in Beijing, to help build 100 luxury villas for the housing component of the Jiang Yuan Cultural & Creativity Industry Zone. Instead of designing the houses themselves, Herzog and Meuron recommended enlisting 100 of the world's most promising emerging architects. The architects, who hail from 27 countries around the globe, designed approximately 10,000 square feet single family homes which included amenities like servants' quarters and indoor pools. Well-known artist Ai Weiwei of FAKE Design oversaw the master plan of the Ordos 100, as it is known, and the project's conceptual framework. Models of the villas are now on display in the museum and several are under construction. Once built, the villas will meet the growing demand in Ordos for luxury residences, which has been fueled by the city's booming economy.

Appendix II: Dongsheng Edition of Chairman Mao's poem, "Snow":

沁园春 过年二〇一二年正月 东胜风光，千里冰冻，万里沙飘。望新区内外，空楼莽莽；阿康两岸，顿失滔滔。牛鬼蛇神，冰雪塑象，欲与京沪试比高。须晴日，看酒店食堂，无法妖娆。江山如此不娇，因无数公司竟折腰。惜小红叶女，借贷挥霍；有庆白昊不逊风骚。一代天骄微小企业，捡起石头射大雕。俱往矣，数风流人物，还看东胜商人

Appendix III: Gaolidai petition:

鄂尔多斯成了祸害 男女老少全民放贷 家家户户人人受害 扬眉吐气风光不在 灰头土脸耷拉脑袋
金融危机来的太快 民间资本出了意外 国家调控买房停贷 房地产业没了买卖 房子拆掉土地拍卖
补偿资金放高利贷 姐妹弟兄跟上受害 同学朋友也不例外 所有家当全放在外 家里没留零花一块
没米没面难揭锅盖 真的就要沦为乞丐 夫妻不和父子不爱 六亲反目上门讨债 儿女出国学习在外
没有学费心里感慨 大街小巷很是古怪 商品吆喝促销拍卖 饭店萧条空桌没菜 宾馆门前被褥晾晒
会所酒吧不再气派 桑拿按摩没人喜爱 公主小姐寂寞难耐 情人小三激情不在 宝马路虎全部抵债
房屋出租降半买卖 珠光宝器身上不戴 言谈举止也不豪迈 企业经营受到挫败 裁员降薪实属无奈
有的还是资不抵债 关掉手机跑路在外 满城楼房缺钱停盖 塔吊设备风吹日晒 外来人口卷起铺盖
回家没钱真是无奈 煤炭销路也不畅快 整体形式不好把脉 资金回笼受到阻碍 人人观望都在等待
政府出面协调放贷 银行迟迟不给表态 打非协办忙的无奈 天天都把债主接待 融资老板良心真坏
挥金如土变了心态 有钱不给就会玩赖 跳楼上吊逃避外债 二零一二真是无奈 各行各业全没买卖
当今社会缺少真爱 活的他妈真是腻外 仰望中央在家等待 赶快清醒还是梁外 稳稳当当会有买卖

My translation of the last section:

The government made new measures to standardize lending,
Banks are slow to reveal their stand,
The *Dafeiban* stand helplessly busy as everyday new debtors are sought for,
But finance bosses [debtors] have lost their conscience
Spending money like water have changed their hearts,
Having money but still not paying eventually shows,
Jumping off buildings - hanging themselves – running away from their debts,
2012 bares no fruit, no business or trade yield any profits
There is no real affection in the current society, hate to live like this,
We petition to the central state while we wait at home,
Sobering up and clearing the mind is still beyond,
First when things settle and calm down will business profit again

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Resumé

Denne afhandling bygger på syv måneders etnografiske feltstudier i Ordos, Indre Mongoliet. Feltstudierne fandt sted i en periode præget af radikale omvæltninger som følge af den lokale regerings storstilede udviklingsplaner. Afhandlingen følger det momentum, der drev en lokal økonomi i hastig vækst ind i en altomfattende social og økonomisk krise. Den analyserer hvordan planerne materialiserede sig i lokale borgeres liv, men også hvordan borgerne selv, med deres egne planer, indskrev sig i regeringens, og derved tog del i vækst såvel som i krise. For at afsøge dette momentum udfolder kapitlerne i afhandlingen forskellige aspekter af planlægning fra det overordnede officielle niveau til de mere private planer og projekter som de materialiserede sig i sociale netværk og udvekslinger.

Den første del af afhandlingen viser hvordan et samspil af flere elementer muliggjorde at intensiteten i dette momentum blev så høj som den gjorde: enorme afkast fra et lokalt ressourceboom ansporede lokalregeringen til at iværksætte omfattende urbanisering og modernisering; generøse kompensationer for ekspropriation og genhusning fordrede et udbredt samtykke blandt lokalbefolkningen og skabte samtidig grobund for vækst i boligmarkedet. Dertil var tiden med vækst præget af en manglende vilje til at regulere visse spekulative praksisser omkring ejendomsudvikling og uformel finansiering. Disse faktorer spillede sammen med en udbredt følelse i området af at være forbigået og ladet tilbage af Kinas hastige udvikling. Folk oplevede det således som påtrængende nødvendigt at indhente forspringet og blive en aktiv del af de lokale beslutningstagere og planlæggeres udviklingsplaner.

Afhandlingens anden halvdel analyserer implikationerne af denne aktive medvirken fra borgernes side i form af uformelle kredit ordninger, omtalt som 'mellemfølkkelige lån' (*minjian jiedai*) eller 'højrente lån' (*gaolidai*). Udover de mere åbenlyse forandringer i livsførelse og forbrugsmønstre skabte rigdommen og masse-deltagelsen i den uformelle låneøkonomi også mere grundlæggende ændringer i de lokale fordelingssystemer for rigdom, hvilket affødte nye opfattelser af penge og arbejde. Den sidste del af afhandlingen undersøger de sociale og materielle effekter af disse fænomener idet væksten, pengestrømmen, og den nyerhvervede rigdom pludselig forduftede efter hvad der skulle vise sig at være et kortvarigt og, i lyset af krisens natur, for mange også risikabelt eventyr.

Analytisk kaster afhandlingen lys over de subtile former for delagtighed og gensidig afhængighed der i feltet mellem lokalstatens forsøg på at forcere Ordos' modernisering og lokalbefolkningens reaktioner derpå, lagde grobund for den overordnede udvikling. I stedet for et retrospektivt blik der undersøger hvorfor storstilede udviklings projekter slår fejl, analyserer afhandlingen hvad mislykkede projekter skaber. Således, snarere end at være en beretning om en lokalstats fejlslagne eller kortsigtede planlægning viser afhandlingen hvordan et særligt fællesskab tog form omkring den voksende boble. Under boomet var der i Ordos en udtalt modstand mod kritiske mediers fremstilling af byen som en 'moderne spøgelsesby' skabt af den overflødige produktion af ejendom. På samme måde var der modstand mod kritiske røster der pegede på den overhængende fare for at ejendomsboblen ville bryde. Denne modstand var central for det fællesskab der indfandt sig på tværs af klasse, etnicitet, og arbejdssektor, og den accentuerede et intimt rum af fælles, men samtidig udtalelig viden.