

TODAY'S CHINA FROM WITHIN

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

Patrick Le Galès



Ilustración: [Sr. García](#)

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

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

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

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

## Megaregions of China



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

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

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

elites and fostered a staggering urban growth. They had incentives to invest in urban development to finance their investment.

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

(1) Stunning housing price increase and massive urban sprawl at the scale of Beijing. Beijing growth attracted millions of Chinese and despite massive construction; house prices have faced an increase comparable to some of the leading world metropolis since the mid-2000. Housing price have never ceased to increase in complete disconnection from average income. Some assessment suggests that in relation to income, Beijing has the highest housing price among leading world cities with a ferocious housing market. As in New York, London or Paris, home ownership is nearly impossible for the average worker except for those who inherit substantial money. Vast numbers of people have been leaving further and further away with commuting time exceeding 4, sometimes 5 or 6 hours a day. The arrival of scores of Chinese from rural areas fed the development of a semi illegal population, without residential permit (the Hukou system), living like illegal migrants in western cities in dreadful conditions.

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

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

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

solutions to the water shortage, raising many questions for the future

## Building the world urban capital in China

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

This is no small job as competition between world cities, whatever that means, is rather intense in order to raise prestige, attract tourists, students, high tech, business or financial leaders, investments, start up, research centres, cultural stars and academics. In a classic Chinese way, the Chinese leadership has prepared a long-term plan and devoted immense energy and resources to build the future capital of the world. It also aims at building the capital of the future and the plan reveals the urban imaginaries of Chinese leaders, in this case the lack of imagination and large-scale imitation of current urban development models.

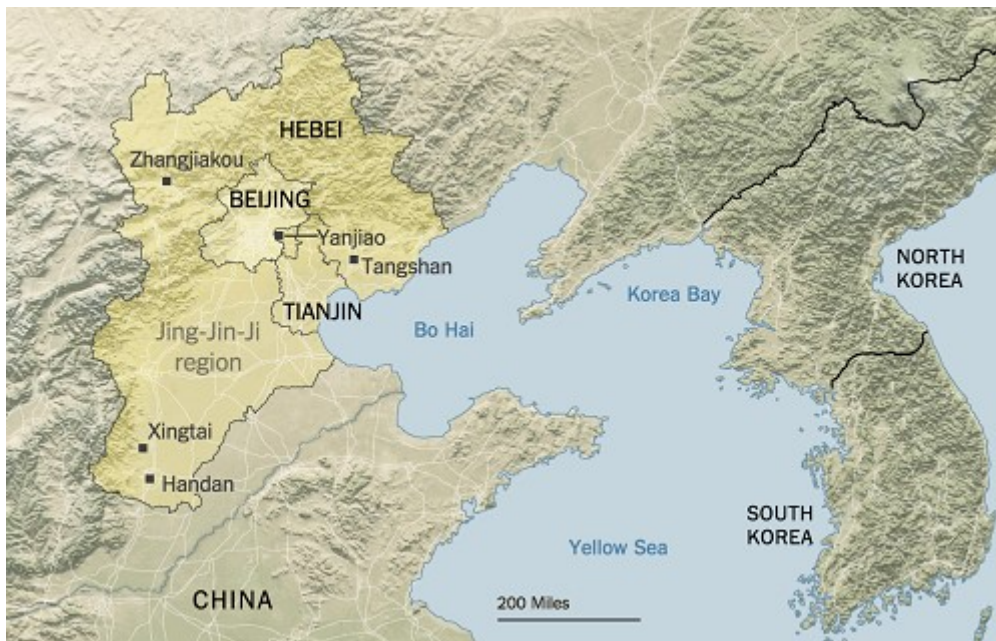
The first step was probably more internal and the Chinese leadership was always very concerned to make sure that the prominence of Beijing, the bureaucratic state capital, would not be undermined by Shanghai the economic engine. In the 1990's the aim to transform Beijing as a world city, an international centre was formulated in different policy documents from the national urban policy to the Beijing plan. The strategy included massive investment in infrastructures (energy, the metro system, the ring roads, new neighbourhoods), a business central district. Economic growth provided increased resources for the state. The massive scale of investment was further fostered when Beijing won the Olympic Games that took place in 2008. For the authoritarian regime, the games were an opportunity to show the world the formidable modernization of Beijing and the economic success of China. Classic investments were made large scale and as Gu and colleagues put it [2]: "The Beijing Action Plan 2002 [...] aimed to push Beijing to open to the nation and the world in all aspects with international regulations and modern standards". According to the plan, the strategies included the theme of "New Beijing, Great Olympics", the organization principles of "green science and technology" and "humanism", and a commitment to showcase images of a "renowned, historical, cultural city", and "a framework of a large, modernized, international metropolis".

Infrastructure projects included four subway lines, light rails around the city, a high-speed train to the airport, and a second highway to the airport, the fifth and sixth ring roads, and an extension of the Capital Airport. The plan also included the construction of cultural equipments seen as "modern" such as the Grand National Theatre (architect Paul Andreu),

China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters (spectacular building by Rem Koolhaas), Capital Museum, the National Museum and the most innovative beautiful bird's nest stadium built by Herzog and De Meuron. The internationalization of Beijing has therefore followed the classic model circulation between world cities including western star architects involved in the making of iconic buildings. However, the scale of the investment and the speed of the implementation are mostly unique and we do not know much about the conflicts, the protest and the way they were solved.

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

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



Source: Business Tianjin

The government established an urban region around Beijing, already conceived in the 1980's, Jing-Jin-Ji bringing together the port city of Tianjin 11 districts of neighbouring province of Hebei. Tianjin is a booming port and has been granted a special free trade zone.



This urban region is being reorganized with massive infrastructure investment for its 110 M inhabitants and planned for 130 M. By contrast to Shanghai or the Pearl Delta River, this mega urban region in the making is the result of top down government policy with wide political goals.

Again, the scale of the ambition was matched by the scale of the investment and the effectiveness of its implementation. The project included the making of a special economic zone Xiong'An (similar to Phuong in Shanghai or Shenzhen), at equal distance from Beijing than Tianjin (i.e. 100 kilometres southwest of Beijing) where many central administration employees will be transferred. Economically speaking, Beijing is still trailing behind the Pearl Delta River (Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong) and Shanghai. This new town is supposed to become a special economic zone, with massive investment to promote research and innovation clusters (big data, biotech) with possibly 7 million inhabitants for what is presented as an eco-smart city. Other cities at the border of Jing Jin Ji such as Lanpfang or further south Shijiazhuang are becoming giant logistics centres for the whole region.

The government then transformed the eastern city district of Tong Zhou as the location for Beijing municipal administration. Even if many employees have been rumoured to oppose the move, the transfer was swiftly realized and new constructions are on the way: a museum, a library, a theatre. Several dozen foreign companies were incentivized to locate there. A handful of supposedly eco new towns were created all over the region.

The making of the leading global urban region of the world requires formidable investment in mobility. As one would have expected, a new international airport was planned as Beijing main airport, although renovated and expanded for the Olympics reached saturation. The Daxing international airport is the most spectacular one of the new generation, designed by French Aiport Company *Aéroport de Paris* together with star architect Zaha Hadid and planned to become the busiest airport in the world. It is located about 50 kilometers south of Beijing and could accommodate 130 M passengers a year within a decade or so.

In order to organize a polycentric urban region, the government invested heavily in transport: a high speed train (running between 250 and 350 kms/h) will run like a regional metro to connect the extreme of the urban region in particular to the airport in 30 minutes, or Beijing to the new airport in 20 minutes, new metro lines to the main centres, a myriad of new railways and light trains. Those investments were matched by investments in energy and water provision, new public services (universities, hospitals, schools).

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

In the Chinese imagination of a world capital, attracting tourism and flux (conferences,

visitors of different kinds) has been seen as a priority. The Olympic games were successful in that regard as the flux of annual tourists double after the games more or less from 2,5 million a year to 5 million. As usual, imitation is an important part of the strategy. Shanghai had already built a Disney Park so Beijing authorities have negotiated with Universal Studios to build a new large scale innovative Park, Universal Beijing resort in Tong Zhou in order to attract large flux of visitors. As the Olympic games strategies proved successful for Chinese leaders, they tried again and obtained the 2022 winter Olympic games to be hosted by Jing Jin Ji, namely Beijing and the mountains in the surrounding regions.

## The safe capital

The authoritarian regime has always argued that security is an essential element of the quality of urban life. There is a long tradition of education and modification of public behaviour engineered by the Communist Party. In Beijing, a dense network of party members or police members has ensured the surveillance, the control and the security of the city at the level of buildings, streets of neighbourhoods.

The Chinese regime is supporting high tech firms to quickly develop technologies of surveillance. Successful AI start-up are experimenting all ranges of services to control the population and to accumulate data and the amount of surveillance camera Beijing and in large cities is staggering.

Every metro station in Beijing has a security system to check all bags comparable to an airport. Chinese firms have made large publicity for the technology of facial recognition based upon a dense network of cameras and the use of artificial intelligence. Officials claim they can locate anyone making trouble in the transport system within 15 minutes. In major public space, the police uses sophisticated ID technique and official documents to accept or exclude different groups of population. China is experimenting at the highest level the type of Surveillance organized by a highly capitalist authoritarian state together with high tech booming firms. All this is largely documented but we know little about the protest of the population except for a few cases.

## Blue sky policy

In China, as in Europe or the US before, the formidable economic acceleration had dreadful environmental consequences and led to serious environmental protests. Beijing urban region was one of the leading heavy industry region. The large-scale urbanization combined with industrialization to create the worse air pollution problem in the early 2010 hence what was called the “airpocalypse” crisis with disastrous images of heavy polluted Beijing in winter circulating around the world. The environment became an official priority for the Communist party in the 2010’s. It had become clear for its leaders that the making of a world capital required serious revisions in order to restore the “blue sky” of Beijing.

A series of policies were vigorously implemented. Firstly, in a few years, China became a leader in waste recycling. Secondly, when major event took place in Beijing (like the



congress of the party or the visit of the American president), polluting firms were required to close some weeks before the event in order to get clear skies. In parallel, the restructuring of the economy and the upscaling of Beijing towards high tech, finance and services led to the closing of some sections of the industry. Finally, the polluting firms were firmly required to leave Beijing urban region and to locate far away to avoid pollution in the capital. Strict regulations were issued to prevent old car to circulate and one is always struck by the amount of new cars circulating in Beijing highways.

Finally, the government took seriously the question of air but also land pollution. It implemented a massive forestry project as 8 million new trees were planted including 200 urban forests. The international press suggested that the army was mobilised to plant the trees in a few years. More importantly, China used its best scientific and world expert to precisely plant trees aiming at depolluting the soil over some years and to play an active role to limit air pollution. This forestry investment dramatically changed Beijing landscape and now Jing Jin Ji with vast area being protected. The dark city is becoming a greener city as one would expect for an aspiring world capital. This has been a successful policy to clean the air of the capital and the Chinese government has made visible numbers of photographs contrasting the air pollution in Beijing by comparison of Delhi or other large Asian cities. The government is also investing in high profile high tech energy project like the Zhangbei High voltage project combining wind and solar energy production together with a system storage and transmission.

The large-scale urbanization combined with industrialization created the worse air pollution problem in the early 2010, the “airpocalypse”

However, despite the scale of the investment in transport, forest and to promote biodiversity, the regime still faces contradictions. Beijing middle classes and new bourgeoisies have busily buying more and more cars and large traffic jams are limiting the effectiveness of the blue sky policy. Beyond Beijing, some of the most polluted cities in the world are within not far from Jing Jin Ji. Some of the most polluting firms have just been displaced and the rapid economic development is requiring constant increase of energy production that is still relying far too much on coal, one of the worse factor of the climate crisis.

## Conclusion

The Chinese government is implementing the most ambition integration plan for the sustainable development of the Jing Jin Ji urban region in order to make it a capital of the world of the 21st century and the vitrine of the political regime. The plan is being implemented steadily through massive investment and coercion.

What is striking however is the strength of the political symbolism and the world political ambition to surpass the west by using the most recent modern standards of urban life? But the urban imagination is limited is rather builds upon the systematic imitation of what has been done elsewhere. The urban imagination seems to put together what is promoted in international organisations as the good city : polycentric and dense with a highly developed transport system, sustainable with limited pollution and urban forests, full of cultural events and equipments, stadiums, breath-taking new buildings, reinvented traditional neighbourhoods, world leading universities and research centres, surveillance mechanism for a safe city, systematic use of big data to improve services. The most innovative part so far is related to surveillance and the capacity of firms to develop massive control and surveillance because of the scale of the project, the interest of the state to use the data and to control the population and the lack of rights for the population. This, associated to the social credit system, is probably the most innovative and terrible element of the making of Jing Jin Ji. Big Brother is watching you.

The government aims at contributing to decreasing house price, better transport, reduced commuting hours, a better environment and an exciting city, everything any planner would hope for the city. There are many doubts about the implementation of the plan and the results for the way of life of inhabitants or to foster the economic growth of an ageing population.

The making of a world city, or the future capital of the world dominated by China faces three major contradictions. The first one is environmental. Despite the scale of investments to green the growth of Jing Jin Ji, the whole project requires massive resources and questions of energy provision without coals, water supply and food supply are far from being solved in the dry North East of China. There is a contradiction between wild capitalism (even within a communist regime) and the combat against the climate crisis. How sustainable is the mega urban region? Second, there is a contradiction between the attempt to build a world capital and the authoritarian trajectory of the regime provoking a backlash and more isolation from the rest of the world. The uncertainty surrounding the boycott of the next winter Olympic game may a sign of things to come. Thirdly, nobody knows how long the population will accept the domination of the Communist party and the massive surveillance. The systematic surveillance and authoritarian does not solve all the governance problem of a mega region of 110 M inhabitants.

## REFERENCES

- 1 — Chaolin Gu, Yehua Dennis Wei & Ian G (2015) "Cook Planning Beijing: socialist city, transitional city, and global city". *Urban Geography, Volume 36, 2015 - Issue 6*
- 2 — *ibid.* p.917

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gu, C. L. (Ed.). (2012). Development plan for Beijing Capital Circle: New approaches on constructing a world city. Beijing: Science Press.  
 Gu, C., Dennis, Y., Wei & Ian G (2015) Cook Planning Beijing: socialist city, transitional city,

and global city *Urban Geography, Volume 36, 2015 – Issue 6*

Hsing, Y. (2010) *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Available on line](#).

Li, L. M., Dray-Novey, A., & Kong, H. (2008). *Beijing: From imperial capital to olympic city*. New York: Macmillan.

Li, Y., Wu, F., (2020) Territory, the state and geopolitics of mega city-region development in China. *Handbook on the Changing Geographies of the State*. [Available on line](#).

Sun, Y., & Zhao, S. (2018). Spatiotemporal dynamics of urban expansion in 13 cities across the Jing-Jin-Ji urban agglomeration from 1978 to 2015. *Ecological Indicators, 87*, 302-313.

Wang, J. (2011). *Beijing Record: a physical and political history of planning modern Beijing*. Singapore: World scientific.

Yu, K., Wang, S., & Li, D. (2011). The negative approach to urban growth planning of Beijing, China. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, 54*(9), 1209-1236.



### **Patrick Le Galès**

Patrick Le Galès is CNRS Research Professor of Sociology and Politics, at Sciences Po, Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics and he chairs the “Cities are back in town” and “restructuring the state” research groups. He is a corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, a former editor of the *International Journal of Urban and regional Research*, a past president of SASE (Society for Advanced Socio economics), a trustee of the Foundation for Urban and Regional Research. He was educated at Sciences Po, Paris, Nuffield College Oxford (M.litt.) and the University of Paris X Nanterre. He was a visiting professor or researcher in particular at UCLA, King’s College London, Nuffield College University of Oxford, the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Society in Cologne, the Universities of Milan Bicocca, Venice, the University of Sao Paulo (spring 2014), Colegio de Mexico. He is co-editor of the *European Journal of Sociology/Archives européennes de sociologie*. He is member of the CNRS Scientific Council. He was elected member of the Academia Europaea in July 2019. Patrick Le Galès was awarded the bronze medal in 1995 (*Médaille de bronze du CNRS*) and the silver medal by the CNRS in 2018 (*Médaille d'argent du CNRS*)