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Ruins, Rubble, and Abandoned Places in China: Exploring Ordinary Spaces

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Ruins, Rubble, and Abandoned Places in China:
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Special Feature

Ruination and the Production of Space in Contemporary China

Judith Audin

This special feature was driven by a collective reflection in the form of the multidisciplinary workshop entitled “Ruinscapes in Urban China,” held on 21 December 2018. The workshop was co-organised with Katiana Le Mentec (CECMC, EHESS) with the support of the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I would like to thank all the participants to this first workshop. I would also like to thank the CEFC and the editorial team of China Perspectives, as well as Katiana Le Mentec, Tong Lam, and the authors and anonymous reviewers for their precious contributions to this special feature.

Beyond the exceptional lens: Ruination and the shaping of ordinary spaces in China

- 1 Urban ruins constitute ubiquitous spaces in contemporary China: from neighbourhoods and areas undergoing urban demolition to newly built “ghost cities” (*guicheng* 鬼城), from industrial wastelands to forgotten buildings and abandoned theme parks in various states of disrepair. The familiar strangeness of Chinese urban ruins and abandoned places has been seen and described through the lenses of filmmakers, photographers, and journalists. As in other contexts, rubble, ruins, and abandoned places fascinate, as architect Ignasi De Solà-Morales Rubió explains with his concept of the “*terrain vague*”:

Empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place seems to subjugate the eye of the urban photographer. Such urban space, which I will denote by the French expression *terrain vague*, assumes the status of fascination, the most solvent sign with which to indicate what cities are and what our experience of them is. (2014: 25)
- 2 While these ruinscapes tend to be mediatised as exceptional and spectacular, analysed as “unreal” (Lam 2020b), “vanishing” (Messmer and Chuang 2013), or empty, this special feature argues that ruination deserves to be studied through the angle of the “production of space.” As Henri Lefebvre (1991) explains, any given space is produced

by social interactions, including spaces in ruins, where we would not expect to find people still using them in everyday life (see cover photo). Ruins, rubble, and abandoned places are here conceived as ordinary spaces produced by individuals, social groups, and any other actors that inhabit, practice, or represent such places. The four articles in this special feature contain original materials on ruins, abandoned places, and derelict buildings in various Chinese contexts such as China's most famous "ghost city," abandoned places in Beijing, derelict neighbourhoods in the urban fringes and in rural areas, and an abandoned coal town. From the angle of ordinary space production, the articles focus on the interactions between such spaces and the people that use them: remaining residents from different generations, journalists, and researchers, as well as tourists and urban explorers.

Ruination and dereliction as social facts

- 3 Ruination has generated a rich body of research on contemporary Chinese society, driven by the unprecedented trajectory of urbanisation since the reform era. Scholarly publications on ruins, rubble, and abandoned places exist in the fields of political history (Lee 2009; Li 2020), cultural history (Wu 2012), geography and architecture (Sorace and Hurst 2015; Woodworth and Wallace 2017), as well as political science (Sorace 2017; Xu 2017), and visual and ecocritical studies (Li 2009; Chu 2012; Lam 2013a; McGrath 2014; Ortells-Nicolau 2015; Schulz 2016). The rich body of research on urban demolition (Ren 2014) and displacement (Padovani 2005) has contributed to taking urban ruins and the interactions with local residents as full social facts. These perspectives on the Chinese built environment produced new concepts out of multidisciplinary approaches. More precisely, many published works in the social sciences focus on the rubble of urban destruction with qualitative research on the social impact of "demolition-relocation" (*chaiqian* 拆遷), and especially on violence, resistance, and resilience in neighbourhoods and "urban villages" (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) under demolition (Vale and Campanella 2005; Ho 2013; Shao 2013; Wu, Zhang, and Webster 2013).
- 4 Yet, beyond urban demolition and displacement, ruination is here conceived as a process happening in many overlooked social and spatial dimensions of Chinese society, from dilapidated buildings and depopulated villages to industrial wastelands and unfinished-abandoned buildings (*lanweilou* 爛尾樓) produced by real estate speculation, as well as abandoned Cold War cities, ruins of natural disasters, and many more. The difficulty lies in the scientific interpretation of such ruins, whose landscapes reveal a sharp contrast between the planned project – or "conceived space" according to Lefebvre (1991) – and the "perceived" reality on the ground. Some studies on contemporary ruins tend to exceptionalise these spaces, seen as urban pathologies (Shepard 2015; Sorace and Hurst 2015), or to study them through aesthetic approaches (Braester 2010; Ortells-Nicolau 2015; Nieszczyrzeweska 2015; Valjakka and Wang 2018). Qualitative studies based on solid fieldwork have helped grasp how the textures and materialities of Chinese urban spaces in disrepair or abandoned continue to have strong social and political effects (Chu 2014; Ulfstjerne 2017). Grounded research also presents how ruins can produce new systems of "value" (following Davidov 2016), both economic and aesthetic, from street artists and urban explorers inspired by urban ruins and abandoned places (Massey forthcoming) to waste pickers making a living out of

scrapping in such spaces (Wu and Zhang 2019). In this special feature, the study of ruination gives special attention to the temporalities of these spaces (Garrett 2011). Geographer Marc Augé explains that “ruins convey the feeling of time that passes and lasts” (2003: 92). For instance, by exploring abandoned cities from the Cold War era, Tong Lam produces original materials for the study of twentieth-century China (2020a). As Max Woodworth puts forward in his article on Ordos in Inner Mongolia, ruination opens up new perspectives, not only on urban demolition, but also on various cycles of the built environment, including the construction phase. He describes it as follows: “Ruin is always a looming possibility, not just at the end of a structure’s life cycle, but throughout its existence, including during the construction phase.” Ruination, as a multifaceted process, helps bring to light overlooked social processes in contemporary China, beyond the lenses of demolition, heritagisation, or full decline.

- 5 Urban ruins are part of what Anna Jorgensen calls “urban wildscapes”: “Urban spaces where natural as opposed to human agency appears to be shaping the land, especially where there is spontaneous growth of vegetation through natural succession” (2012: 1). Rubble, ruins, and abandoned places in China contribute to various urban wildscapes reshaping human agency. Urban wilderness is a key element of the attraction of abandoned places and urban ruins for Chinese urban explorers, who visit these spaces as a way to alleviate “urban alienation and everyday boredom,” as Annabella Massey argues in her article. Her study reveals new forms of human agency in the city, especially as “urbex narratives often draw links between urban exploration and the reclamation of a childlike sense of discovery, appealing to those who feel dissatisfied with ordinary city life.” In another approach of “ludic” and “childlike” practices of ruins, rubble, and wastelands, Camille Salgues’s article explores the ordinary social processes that characterise children’s uses of their neighbourhoods in an urban village under demolition in Shanghai and in a depopulated village in Guangdong Province. The playful dimension of ruins becomes central through the experience of children, shedding new light on the social life of derelict neighbourhoods. This exploration, focusing on children, displays another form of “perceived space” than the common spatial practices of migrant workers in the same environment. By studying the overlooked practices of children in interaction with their neighbourhood, Camille Salgues shows that urban ruins constitute a full element of their mental maps in a dilapidated area of Shanghai’s periphery and a left-behind village in the Chinese countryside: “The abandoned spaces, linked to the dispersion phenomena, provide isolated places, suitable for secrets, exploration, and activities (...)” Such spaces are essential spaces for childhood development, providing settings where children create their own itineraries, developing risk management as well as physical skills. Indeed, ruination induces new forms of agency through specific processes of socialisation. Judith Audin’s article, based on fieldwork in Kouquan – an uninhabited coal town in Datong –, argues that ruination does not correspond to the destruction of social ties. It induces specific spatialities, routinised experiences of the abandoned buildings by old residents, but also new experiences of these spaces by former residents, journalists, filmmakers etc., that reconnect rather than disconnect people and places in this former industrial town. Because they understand ruination as a process contributing to the production of ordinary spaces, the articles in this special issue analyse more closely what Lefebvre calls the “perceived space” of ruination (1991), that is to say the various social processes at play, taking the local contexts into full consideration.

Challenging images: Urban exploration and photography

- 6 Visiting or studying contemporary ruins is intimately linked with the production of images. Approaching ruination in China as an ordinary research object beyond fascination or aesthetisation constitutes a challenging, ambiguous effort that engages not only local actors, but also researchers in a form of introspection. Urban exploration (*chengshi tanxian* 城市探險) – the visiting and documentation of derelict man-made structures and abandoned places – has developed in recent years and has inspired various research methods in social sciences (Garrett 2014a, 2014b; Offenstadt 2018). This approach has proven useful to infiltrate undocumented places and to access new fields of knowledge and offer a critical understanding of the Chinese city (Lam 2013b; Audin 2018). In recent years, the practice of urban exploration also developed as a creative practice in the Chinese urban space. In this issue’s article, Annabella Massey studies the way these urban explorers produce and exchange images of ruins on specific forums. She analyses more precisely the photographic work of Zhao Yang 趙陽, the *Cooling Plan* project, understood by Massey as “present[ing] the ruin as a creative refuge that helps the explorer build a restorative sense of individual autonomy and mitigates the negative mental impact of the ‘seen’ city.”
- 7 By exploring urban ruins in qualitative perspective, the articles in this special issue also produce original contributions on the methodological challenges of studying ruination and dereliction. One key aspect is the use of photography during fieldwork. An important methodological issue is the aesthetisation of the object, all the more so as urban exploration is often connected to the systematic use of photography. Between pure documentation of the context and aesthetic production, images produced through this medium should be analysed more closely. In his study of an urban village under demolition – Xian Village in Guangzhou – Tong Lam develops a “critical aesthetics of resistance through [his] own intervention and dialogue with the environment” (2021). The “ghost city” imagery studied in this special issue by Max Woodworth uses the photographic lens to highlight how the Chinese real estate industry has produced “spectacular instances of disuse.” Woodworth critically reflects on his own status as a researcher while discussing the use of photography in Ordos: photos of this “ghost city” convey a “dramatically eerie impression of abandonment and ruin.” The author indeed wonders how “fieldwork images of spaces commonly pictured as ruins confirm or disrupt the idea of ruins.”

Ruination and alternative geographies

- 8 The empirical studies contained in this special feature are useful to understanding contemporary Chinese ruins grounded in specific contexts with a focus on the ways local communities interact with them. More precisely, the articles show how residents (Audin and Salgues), but also urban explorers (Audin and Massey), journalists, and researchers (Woodworth) interact with these ruins. Audin’s and Salgues’s articles are based on ethnographic approaches that participate in a critical understanding of Chinese urban development by highlighting dynamic economic, political, ecological, social, and cultural processes embedded in the ruins. In both articles, the authors follow closely the itineraries of overlooked communities in overlooked spaces: migrant

workers' children in Shanghai's outskirts and in a village in Guangdong, as well as old residents in a coal town near Datong, continue to interact with disused buildings and abandoned spaces. Grounded acts of dwelling, games, and other forms of socialisation characterise these spaces. More broadly, such methodology allows an acute analysis of the ways in which specific social groups practice, use, think, and shape abandoned or derelict spaces. Far from being left empty, the material texture and social contexts of abandoned spaces stimulate sociocultural creativity and adaptation. Hence, considering the various forms and processes of ruination, the articles in this issue help consolidate not only knowledge on contemporary China but also geographic knowledge on ruination. They offer new perspectives on how local communities and other various actors invest the ruins and derelict buildings. In his article on migrant workers' children in Shanghai and Guangdong, using the concepts of concentration and dispersion, Camille Salgues concentrates his attention on how children use and represent their dilapidated neighbourhoods, producing alternative geographies of the everyday less focused on urban density. In his critical discussion on fieldwork photography in Kangbashi New District in Ordos, Max Woodworth confronts the "conceived" landscape of planners to his bottom-up spatial experience. Finally, Annabella Massey's paper discloses an alternative geography of Chinese mega-cities such as Beijing and Shanghai by envisioning the city through the ludic use of abandoned places by Chinese urban explorers.

The lived space of ruination

- 9 Exploring the processes of vanishing, as well as the presence (or absence) of traces (Ginzburg 1980) can bring to light how individuals and social groups consider these spaces and their trajectories. How does dereliction contribute to making places and communities? The articles manage to reveal the practices of individuals and social groups in these spaces even if they are "invisible" to others (Huang and Yi 2015). In his theory of the production of space, Lefebvre develops a third dimension, more cultural, called the "lived space": through a dynamic process, spaces become attributed with symbols, representations, and values (1991). How do inhabitants or other actors react when confronted with processes of ruination, depopulation, abandonment, or disrepair? Much of the research on the "lived space" of ruination has focused on traumatic ruins stemming from natural disasters, widely studied in the case of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China, which generate complex effects and affects, from the "politics of compassion" (Xu 2017) to difficult memory issues (Xu 2018). The landscape of destruction generated ambiguity in the double meaning of the notion of "ruin" in Chinese: ruins as rubble (*feixu* 废墟), but also ruins as a historical site (*yizhi* 遗址), producing both extreme trauma among the local population as well as new forms of dark tourism through a heritagisation plan leading to the "commodification of both the living and the dead" (Le Mentec and Zhang 2017). This special issue contributes to this aspect by studying the lived space of ruination in ordinary spaces. In their analyses of dereliction and ruination, the articles fully consider the representations produced by social actions and reactions in such spaces. In his article on Ordos, Max Woodworth wonders if his "fieldwork photos of ambiguous ruin sites perform the same critical or ideological work as the formal ruin photograph genre." Camille Salgues's article follows the everyday itineraries of children, and he accurately describes how their daily wandering in the ruins creates feelings of freedom, joy, and fear. In her contribution,

Annabella Massey highlights a “more amateur and everyday dimension of Chinese ruin representation” in the way urban explorers visiting abandoned places generate a “sense of authenticity” and allow the cultivation of “solitude in China’s overcrowded urban environments.” Judith Audin analyses the various ways in which local people and off-site actors (former inhabitants, artists, tourists, heritage activists, or journalists), by expressing memories or other cultural narratives, develop a sense of place in uninhabited Kouquan through their various personal and social interactions with the town in ruins and its abandoned buildings.

- 10 To conclude, this special feature on ruination gives special attention to how local communities composed of old and young residents, as well as visitors such as urban explorers, scientists, or journalists, experience ruination processes and appropriate these ordinary spaces through fieldwork photography, dwelling practices, games, memory, and nostalgia in contemporary China. The articles in this special issue bring out how people and communities, including researchers, (re)create communities, lifestyles, and social practices, as well as represent, re-envision, and re-imagine the built environment in abandoned buildings and in uninhabited or half-demolished neighbourhoods.

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Ruins, Ruination, and Fieldwork Photography

Max Woodworth

EDITOR'S NOTE

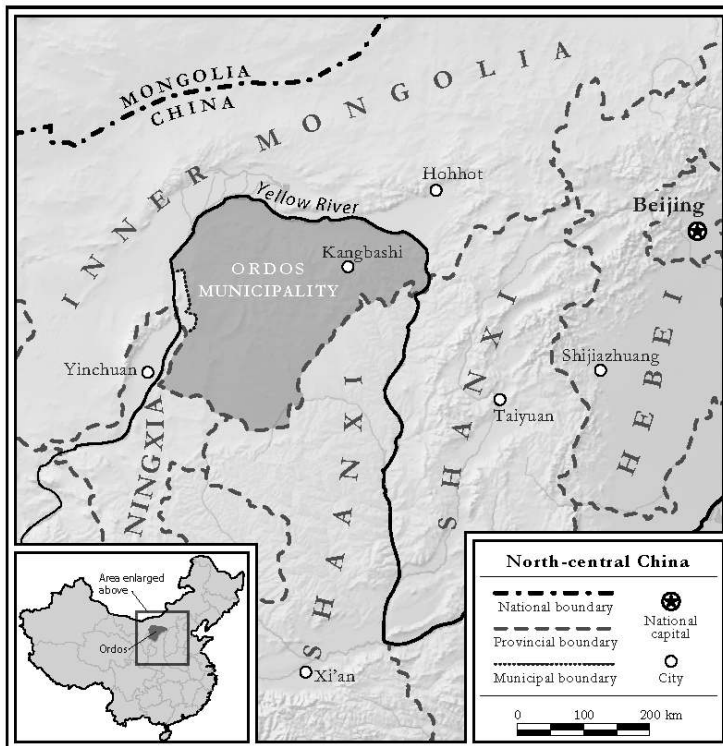
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Introduction

- 1 This article is a reflection on urban ruins, fieldwork, and photography. In line with this special issue, its purpose is to explore how these intersect in the context of researching the contemporary Chinese city and to critically assess practices of documenting and narrating China's urban transformations. To illustrate these connections in a preliminary way, I begin with a photograph taken in 2011 during a scorching July day in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, in the course of an extended fieldwork stint in that municipality, and consider a number of ways of viewing the photo that, taken together, illuminate some of the stakes of ruin imagery and the role of the visual in documenting field sites. In so doing, I seek to highlight what Mike Crang terms the "scopic regimes" (2003) of geography and related controversies over the truth value of images in general and of ruins specifically.

Map 1. Ordos



Credit: Jim DeGrand.



FIGURE 1. Ordos 100 villa, 2011. Credit: author.

- 2 To start, without the affordance of any contextualising information, a viewer of Figure 1 sees a poured-concrete structure. In its bare concrete massing, the modernist angular

building looks similar to a military bunker. It appears unfinished, and because there is neither machinery, scaffolding, nor workers, the building does not appear to currently be under construction. Little more can be drawn from the image than this simple description of its central subject. Fuller context might inform the viewer that the structure is one of 100 planned luxury villas in a residential development on the outskirts of the Kangabashi New District in Ordos. The villa project, titled Ordos 100 (*E'erdusi 100* 鄂尔多斯 100), was curated by the artist-activist Ai Weiwei and organised by a local developer hoping to sell the villas to the city's class of coal and real estate barons made wealthy over the previous decade by a tremendous local energy resource boom (Ulfstjerne 2016a). When the photograph was taken, however, Ordos' real estate market was shaken by an oversupply crisis, the developer had fled town, and the Ordos 100 project was left in a state of suspended animation. The few villas under construction at the time of the market crash in the winter of 2010-2011 were left exposed to the elements, which is the state in which they were found. A property manager, who kept watch over the site, offered to give a tour of the villas under construction. With this context in mind, the photographed structure comes into sharper focus as potentially symbolic of the collapse of Ordos' real estate sector. But there is an even larger context to the image. During the year or so before this photograph was taken, Ordos had been lampooned in media around the world as ground zero of China's "ghost city" (*guicheng* 鬼城) problem, whereby massive, speculation-driven new construction projects in multiple cities around the country spawned vast urban spaces with scant residents. The implication of the ghost city phenomenon, dramatised by the seeming unlikely emergence of a major new city in an isolated corner of a peripheral provincial territory, was that China's overheated investment-driven economy in the 2000s was on the verge of collapse. News reports made this connection explicit.¹ Seen in this light, the photo fits alongside the raft of imagery and commentary focused on China's ghost cities, which depict depopulated and abandoned new urban developments in ways reminiscent of what Kathy Korcheck has termed "speculative ruins" (2015) to describe built environments thrown up in a frenzy of financial speculation and then abandoned.

- 3 As the description above lays out, the photograph of the building is inherently ambiguous. Originally, it was taken as a form of documentation produced along with written fieldnotes and was stored with other assorted data during fieldwork. It was, in a sense, visual data intended for personal reference collected and kept in a private digital photo archive as part of a research aimed at exploring urbanisation and resource extraction in Ordos. However, staged in a certain way with an appropriate amount of contextualising information and an audience socialised in the aesthetics of ruins, the same villa might readily appear to a different set of viewers as an urban ruin, at which point it enters a global discourse of ruins popularised in recent decades through an abundance of textual and visual commentary (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). An honest appraisal then leads me to ask of myself: am I not the intended audience for precisely this type of ruin imagery, and was producing a ruin image not my intention? While ruin photography is surely a global fashion, the viewership for such imagery is understood to be a narrow subset of cultural elites, no doubt inclusive of social science practitioners. Having followed closely the ascending popularity of the ghost city trope and its reliance upon photographs of depopulated urban expanses in ambiguous states of ruin, I was well aware at that moment that the villa photographed here resonated the discourse of ruins and was, at some level, aesthetically aligned with the ruin genre,

echoing similar images from post-industrial Detroit, the Ruhr Valley, Japan's Hashima Island, and other locales that have received considerable scholarly (Vergara 1999; Millington 2013; Lyons 2018) and artistic attention² in recent years. Though my agenda during research was not to generate images of urban ruins per se, photographs like this one, of which I produced and retained scores for my image archive, might readily be classified as such. What interests me in this essay is the entanglement that this ambiguity of classification instantiates. What counts as data, and how might urban change be represented? Though social scientists seem loath to address the aestheticisation of data, how might photographs of urban ruins work productively to illuminate processes of change that have transformed China? How might aesthetics actually help understand processes that are not easily represented in what commonly is understood as data proper?

- 4 Questions such as these emerge when considering that China's transformations over the past several decades have been marked by construction on a monumental scale (Hsing 2010), and the flipside to construction has naturally been demolition and destruction. The ubiquity of destruction is necessarily the case, as China's physical environment was built atop things that were already present, including everything from factories, residential neighbourhoods, and infrastructures, to whole villages. To build the new usually requires a process of destruction. Thus, debris of varied description and new construction have been inseparable components of China's historic development drive during the reform period. Images of change in place are bound to feature evidence of destruction not just as a precursor to growth but its necessary complement and conjoined partner.

Spatial transformation and ruin in contemporary China

- 5 Since 2000, China saw a proliferation of massive urbanising projects that failed to quickly gain population and therefore stood largely empty for stretches of time. As such, these giant urban projects straddle a boundary between construction and ruin, for it remains unclear whether they will ever attain the density that such spaces are designed to achieve, or whether they are on the cusp of falling into decay and ruin. These projects began to be labelled as ghost cities in a wave of news reports and scholarly literature starting around 2010 (Shepard 2015; Woodworth and Wallace 2017). In much of the reporting on ghost cities, these sites are deemed to symbolise rash overbuilding and looming systemic crises in China's urbanisation. In some scholarship, urbanisation where the form of the city is erected without its human substance is discussed as a kind of pathology (Sorace and Hurst 2016). When labelled with such nomenclature, ghost cities appear as failed speculative developments akin to those left in the wake of property booms around the world. The uncertain futures implied by the term ghost city being applied to new construction further exemplifies how construction and ruin coexist as simultaneous material realities in China's everyday landscapes. This ambiguity also points to the conceptual slippage between construction and ruin in rapidly urbanising contexts. It is not always clear, in other words, nor can it ever be, whether speculative development will end up as a completed project or slide into ruin. Ruin is always a looming possibility, not just at the end of a structure's life cycle, but throughout its existence, including during the construction phase. The uncertainty to which this alludes must be understood as an intrinsic feature of

speculative development and is a feature that photography of ghost cities attempts to represent, as the example of the image at the outset of this article sought to show.

- 6 A remarkable feature of the attention paid to the specific phenomenon of China's ghost cities has been its aestheticisation through photography. As I have argued elsewhere, the photographic medium has been crucial not just in documenting ghost cities, but in creating the phenomenon of ghost cities itself (Woodworth 2020). Imagery of ghost cities consistently pictures these spaces in states of semi-completion and voided of population, lending them a dramatically eerie impression of abandonment and ruin. This manner of figuring these new urban spaces as ruins helps draw attention to the ways financial speculation in the built environment generates unstable combinations of construction and destruction (Kitchin, O'Callaghan, and Gleeson 2014). What is significant in the case of China's ghost cities is that they were rarely, in any visually obvious way, already failed when represented in images. The onset of decay and debris that conventionally defines ruins is not in evidence. Moreover, the broader narrative of China in the early 2000s was one of relentless growth, not crisis and decay. Instead, what is distinct about photographic representations of China's ghost cities is that they are pictured as "instant ruins," to echo Robert Smithson's term (2011), where new development indexes ruination. Although ghost cities are depicted as new and pristine, the impression of the sites' unsettledness and emptiness carries an implication of ruin. In this way, the photography becomes part of diverse critiques of developmental crises centred on, but not limited to, China's booming real estate sector. Such imagery also reverberates a tradition in landscape photography associated with the landmark 1975 exhibition *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*,³ featuring work by Robert Adams, Louis Baltz, and Nicholas Nixon, among others. Though hardly univocal in approach, the core thrust of new topographical work has been to highlight the human imprint, often destructive, on the land and its human and non-human elements.⁴ The destructive aspect in the topographical genre is usually not indexed by debris or evident decay, but rather by the banality of the landscape as a product of capitalist development. When portrayed as mundane city spaces, China's ghost cities fairly echo this approach.
- 7 It is worth noting that ruins in everyday landscapes have been a dominant motif in contemporary Chinese art as well, which provides another link to a broader discourse of ruins centred on China's urban transformations and to the topographical tradition. Instances of urban demolition, dislocation, redevelopment, real estate frenzies, and so on have appeared recurrently in recent artistic projects (Wu 2012; Wang 2015; Ortells-Nicolau 2017). As Xavier Ortells-Nicolau has argued, by "salvaging and recycling rubble, and reframing it, via photographic technologies, as an aesthetic object, artists re-evaluate the meaning of that by-product of development and aim to reintegrate it anew into society with a critical purpose" (2017: 265). The photography of ghost cities, therefore, arises in an already crowded representational field, where China's epochal transformations have been figured through diverse renderings of places and communities in various stages of ruin.
- 8 The analysis that follows is motivated by the coincidence of the ghost city phenomenon and my own research into urban development in Ordos. The ghost city trope arose through the circulation of images depicting spaces I was at the time inhabiting in my participant observation field research into energy resource extraction and its entanglements with urban planning, design, and finance. Part of my research practice

was to document my research sites photographically, and over the course of multiple visits during a six-year period, I amassed an archive of several hundred digital images of urban spaces in Ordos that look like the one presented in Figure 1. Construction, after all, was a defining feature of Ordos at the time, much as it is all across China. What struck me in the wake of fieldwork was the pictorial similarity between images taken as part of journalistic and artistic projects to reveal ghost cities in China, and my own image archive from Ordos.

- 9 I am keen, therefore, to place the photographic figuring of ghost cities as speculative ruins into conversation with recent critical ethnographic theorisations of ruin and rubble and, separately, to consider ghost city imagery in relation to my own fieldwork photographs. More specifically, I place side by side images produced within varied artistic projects portraying China's ghost cities and my own fieldwork images. I use the juxtaposition of photos as an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities and limits of a critical discourse on ruins and ruination. This leads me to address a number of questions that pertain to the ghost city specifically and to ruins more generally: how are photographic images central to the making of ruins and ghost cities? How do the stakes of ruins as an ethnographic heuristic change when the encounter with the ruin is mediated by the photographic image? How do fieldwork images of spaces commonly pictured as ruins confirm or disrupt the idea of ruins? Can we speak of ruins outside of a conceptual commitment to see them as such, and what are the intellectual and political implications of that commitment? The argument here is that identifying and analysing ruins reflects an unavoidably selective and ideological critical stance with important implications for what ultimately is judged to be present. What is revealed by ruins is a function of a discourse on ruins, an aesthetic convention, and scholarly/personal dispositions. As this special issue shows, China is fertile ground for ruin analysis since vast landscapes of debris have been generated in the process of spectacular urban expansion.

Ruins, ruination, and ruin photos

- 10 It is widely accepted that ruins carry powerful symbolic resonance by virtue of their indexical relation to large, world-shaping historical forces. According to conventional ruin analysis, the crumbling masonry of ancient Greece and Rome or medieval cathedrals evoke the passage of time and the ephemerality of culture in the face of encroaching nature (Macaulay 1953; Simmel 1965). The dilapidated buildings of Detroit and rusting industrial districts around the world manifest the vagaries of economic cycles and their social consequences (Vergara 1999). Waste and demolition sites, with their anarchic piles of discarded products, conjure the peril and violence associated with environmental degradation, urbanisation, and climate change. Specific objects carrying such diverse symbolic meanings is premised on the conditioning of viewers to a visual rhetoric of ruins, a shared understanding that is uneven in its breadth and depth, and yet one that is undeniably global at this point and rests on a foundation composed of a vast repertoire of writing, art, popular fascination, and scholarship. Ruins thus maintain a strong popular appeal as ways to expose, bear witness to, and interpret tectonic shifts in social life. Consider, for instance, the presence of ruins and ruination in Canadian photographer and environmentalist Edward Burtynsky's monumental photographic project titled *China* (2005),⁵ exhibited around the world and

forming the basis for Jennifer Baichwal's documentary film about the project titled *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006).⁶

- 11 Collectively across 115 plates, Burtynsky's *China* captures images of a country disfigured, dismantled, and destroyed by breakneck change. What we see in image after image are disparate landscapes in various states of ruin and degradation. Images of the Three Gorges Dam construction site are exemplary, and open to view the ordered chaos and gigantic scale of the project, making it appear as a surgical disembowelling of the Earth for the insertion of massive hydroelectric machinery. In a similar vein, images under the thematic heading "Urban Renewal" present panoramic vistas of Shanghai's resplendent new infrastructure carving through the new high-rise cityscape in ways perhaps imagined but never realised by mid-twentieth-century titans of urban renewal in the West. A striking feature of Burtynsky's *China* project is its manner of zigzagging between images of construction and destruction. Apocalyptic scenes of devastation are juxtaposed with depictions of relentless growth and renewal. Curiously, it is only in the scenes of wreckage that human figures enter the frame. The very picture of abjection, these humans are placed amid rubble in the middle ground, too far for individual features to register, yet too close to ignore as key subjects in the images. The placement side by side of rampant construction and destruction, and of people and communities swept up in a tidal wave of change is, of course, hardly coincidental; it advances *China's* overarching theme of impersonal creative destruction, that catchphrase of capitalist industrialisation transforming China before our eyes and making the country itself a symbol and real-time spectacle of contemporary planetary ruination.
- 12 The emphasis on rubble and ruin in Burtynsky's *China* reveals, I believe, two critical aspects that reflect ongoing debates about ruins specifically and about the ways of coming to terms epistemologically with the ambiguous ontological status of ruins; there is nothing inherent to a material that renders it a ruin. First, the reading of specific material *qua* ruin is inevitably partial and demands, in a critical sense, that it enters into a discourse of ruins; in other words, ruins must circulate in image form. Second, they must follow a certain loose visual grammar, which accounts for the mimicry of global ruin images today from sites around the world. The ideological work of ruins – their capacity to speak in a particular set of codes and for these codes to be mobilised to certain political-cultural ends – is performed in and through such engagements. It is significant, then, that Burtynsky's narration of ruin fixates on a particular scale – that of China – to propose larger claims about change and crisis in the world as a whole. This association of China with global ruination fits, moreover, in a longstanding tradition of ruin images of China from colonial photography documenting the cataclysmic collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) to the widespread embrace by Chinese artists throughout the twentieth century of ruins as figures through which to reflect upon the country's calamitous upheavals pre-liberation in 1949 (Jones 2010; Wu 2012). Ruins, in this sense, do not exist externally from their mobilisation within different claim-making projects.
- 13 Such a conception of ruins privileges an aesthetic or phenomenological approach to ruins, which asserts that selected objects are vested with palpable auras made accessible to broader audiences through different sorts of expertise and photographic technologies: interpretive, pictorial, curatorial, cameras, publication platforms (online or otherwise).

- 14 In contrast to this, recent materialist scholarship has sought to unpack the social significance of ruin and debris embedded in everyday landscapes. The materialist notion of the ruin that has emerged out of these efforts encompasses a range of rubble, debris, and detritus that elite audiences have tended to disregard and thus directly challenges conventional narrativisations of official ruins and sanctioned heritage. It does so by centring quotidian discarded and decaying materials as analytically valuable objects that can help to excavate neglected or marginalised local histories against official narratives developed, in part, through sanctioned ruin objects and heritage spaces. At the heart of the materialist approach to ruin are ground-level, ethnographic encounters with the everyday landscape, including its myriad scattered detritus.
- 15 Ann Laura Stoler's commentaries on materiality and ruination have arguably done the most to broaden the materialist idea of ruin and bring it into wider use. In her seminal article "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination" (2008) and her widely read "'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," the introduction of her book on imperial debris (2013), Stoler recasts the ruin in terms of a material artefact containing overlapping and contending histories and multiple temporalities. "To focus on ruins is to broach the protracted quality of decimation in people's lives, to track the production of new exposures and enduring damage" (*ibid.*: 11). By thinking of ruins less in terms of debris left behind by history open to discovery by trained experts, and instead to think of imperial histories as processes of ongoing ruination that spread wreckage throughout everyday landscapes, material detritus of all sorts then can be seen to weave together different strands and moments of history that continually activate the past as a vital feature of current-day life. This view posits that the debris and ruins scattered around the world by the ebbs and flows of various imperial movements can provide a powerful heuristic. As such it can counter the class-inflected and Eurocentric nostalgic gazes that historically have structured both the popular practices of ruin gazing and the academic modes of ruin interpretation that ratified these selfsame practices and produced a globe-spanning institutionalised fetishisation of the ruin in official tourist-oriented heritage.
- 16 Stoler's idea of ruination can be seen as a way to undermine the ideological historicisation of conventional ruin tropes and the traditional emphasis on ruins as merely aesthetic objects: "To think with imperial ruins," she avers, "is to emphasise less the artefacts of empire as dead matter or remains of a defunct regime than to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present" (2008: 196). Following Stoler, Gastón Gordillo (2014) notes how mundane remnants of decay and destruction can prove highly revealing in ways that are overshadowed by bourgeois conceptions of the official ruin. Rejecting the bourgeois notion of ruin in favour of rubble, he argues that attending to the unremarkable and uncelebrated detritus of our landscapes presents a methodological opening for unpacking social processes in place beyond sanitised official histories and its sanctioned ruins. "The destruction of space and its resulting rubble are constitutive of the materiality of space. (...) Rubble, in short, is the path toward further historicizing and politicizing our understanding of the materiality of space and its immanence: that is, of space as we know it in this world" (*ibid.*: 263). Rubble is conceived here as a form of anti-ruin.

Seeing ruins and ruination in China and its ghost cities

- 17 Both conceptions of ruins – as sanctioned official history and everyday detritus – have powerful resonance in China, where built and natural environments contain traces of long and contentious histories, as well as abundant debris generated by recent and ongoing construction. Scholars of urban development have placed significant focus on the politics of demolition and relocation over the past couple decades (Hsing 2009; Shao 2013; Wu 2015; Shin 2016). This period of rampant urbanisation and the rise of a powerful real estate sector stimulated all manner of conflicts and controversies around the destruction of homes and communities, a process Shao Qin referred to as “domicide” (2013). Research on urban demolition, however, has tended to be on the political economy of land development.
- 18 A more limited number of studies, upon which this special issue builds, focuses on ruin, disrepair, and rubble in contemporary China, using material remnants of physical transformations as a heuristic for understanding social change (Chu 2014; Ulfstjerne 2016a; Arboleda 2019). Michael Ulfstjerne, for example, has shown in several studies of Ordos, Inner Mongolia, how the suspension between construction and ruin embodied by the city’s numerous unfinished buildings – a sort of rubble in Gordillo’s parlance – opens space for controversy and contestation, especially when completion is only one possible desirable outcome for different people (2016a, 2016b, 2019). The contention is that if profits accrue to some people through speculation and performances of construction, as opposed to the actual delivery of finished properties, then the end results matter less than we tend to believe. It is possible, he argues, that “value might be generated from not finishing projects” (2016a: 390). This raises an important question about whether incompleteness or ruin does, or does not, signal failure and its material manifestation as ruin. It further compels us to think about how representations of ruin often strive to convey a sense of failure and crisis, and how ruin discourse about contemporary development and deindustrialisation is often complicit in a moralising discourse of ruins that allows the observer to ascribe failure to certain places and people. Attending to the unanticipated social significances of rubble, then, brings to light the many unexpected possible meanings attributed to material objects that emerge through interactions with material debris in actually existing physical environments.
- 19 In the following passages, I want to lay out how imagery of ghost cities, with the Kangbashi New District in Ordos as a key exemplar but also with reference to other sites labelled as such, operates across different registers of ruin. The new town was at the centre of controversies over ghost cities in China, and depictions of its vast, manicured, but empty landscapes became iconic representations of the phenomenon starting with the first journalistic dispatches.⁷ The Kangbashi New District was initiated in 2004 with the goal to become a new urban growth pole in Ordos Municipality and relieve growth pressure on the municipality’s existing major urban centre, Dongsheng.⁸ Kangbashi, which assumed the name of a village collective that previously occupied the site, was originally conceived with a 2020 population target of 300,000 people and an area size of 32 km² (Woodworth 2015). The enormous ambition behind the new town, hyped by local government and business leaders and buttressed by a massive coal-mining boom, helped to inflate a significant bubble in all types of real estate in the new town throughout the initial construction phase after its inauguration in 2006 until

about 2010. By then, the new town had densely developed its core section, though few people had settled there. A dip in coal prices the same year, coupled with tightening credit at state-run banks, sent shockwaves through the local economy, severely impacting the real estate sector. It was in this context that Al Jazeera⁹ and *Time Magazine*¹⁰ took notice of Kangbashi and coined the term ghost city to describe its eerily empty state. Photographs of the new town sought to portray its condition of arrested development with dramatic imagery of depopulated cityscapes stretching to the horizon.

- 20 These photographic depictions of the new town fit within the pictorial genre of contemporary ruins outlined above. In the following, I present a selection of the most widely circulated images of Kangbashi and other ghost cities and juxtapose these with my own fieldwork images. In the wake of the first reports about Ordos as a ghost city, numerous international and domestic news outlets converged on the site to produce their own dispatches. Professional and amateur photographers similarly began to document the space. As a result, a Google image search reveals hundreds of photographs of Kangbashi under the heading of ghost city produced after 2010. The choice of photos below is therefore selective. Yet they represent, I believe, notable efforts to grapple with the space visually and are emblematic of concern on the part of the image-makers to parse and make claims about what was understood in context as a possible looming economic crisis in China originating in its real estate sector. The photos discussed below show the same new town, Kangbashi, sometimes the exact same sites and subjects, but all produced as parts of differing representational agendas: journalistic, artistic, evidentiary. Of concern here are the ways ruin aesthetics saturate the images and to what ends.

The ghost city in image

- 21 Critical studies of photography have long grappled with the slipperiness of the image and its collusions with power. Susan Sontag famously voiced a deep strain of scepticism toward the “violence” of the photographic image, which she attributed to the capacity of the image to conceal and mislead while claiming to reveal (1973). Some years ago, Gillian Rose (2003) brought these concerns to the fore in academic human geography by asking “How, exactly, is geography visual?” Her point was to highlight the frequently unacknowledged power of visual tools, including photographs, in published academic work and teaching. Too many academic practitioners, Rose argued, used photographic imagery in their work without seeming to grapple with the inherent opacity and selectivity of photos. Scholars may be adept at interpreting others’ photographs but appeared to treat their own images uncritically under the mistaken belief that photos used in academic contexts were straightforwardly faithful representations. Rose’s purpose was to encourage a more critical posture toward imagery used in disseminating academic findings. Following this, I ask here: what about photos taken during fieldwork? How are they, as Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014) suggest, a form of material engagement, rather than merely representation? Their question was raised in the context of ruin photography and debates around so-called ruin porn. Do fieldwork photos of ambiguous ruin sites perform the same critical or ideological work as the formal ruin photograph genre? I illustrate these problems with the following examples.

Example 1: Scale, waste, and ruin

- 22 Among the first photos of China's ghost cities to circulate was a 2010 gallery of images of the Kangbashi New District taken by Michael Christopher Brown for *Time Magazine*¹¹ (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Having commissioned the award-winning Magnum agency photojournalist for the project, the publication signalled a desire to produce striking imagery to accompany a report on financial and real estate bubbles in China. By the time the photos were taken in 2010, a vast landscape of new construction was completed. However, while nearly all the housing built to that point in Kangbashi had been purchased, the apartment and villa complexes remained almost entirely empty, as most buyers already possessed homes in nearby Dongsheng and the new town only had few basic amenities. There were, for example, no grocery stores and only a few eateries catering largely to construction workers. The spacious layout of the new town, moreover, assumed usage of a car to move about. As a consequence, during this phase of the new town's development, the attractively designed vast public spaces and broad boulevards and sidewalks were empty voids at most times, making for striking contrasts with bustling Dongsheng and disorienting bodily experiences for visitors. The scale of the space was especially hostile to pedestrian usage.





FIGURES 2, 3, AND 4. Kangbashi New District, 2010. Credit: Michael Christopher Brown.

- 23 These visible features coupled with the brilliant blue sky and expansive arid landscape typical of this section of the southern Gobi Desert made Kangbashi eminently photogenic. What is striking about Brown's images is the way the physical features of the new town are made a central focus of the photos in order to emphasise the scale of construction and, by association, the enormous waste that it implies. In Brown's images, the urban landscape extends to distant horizons, with cookie-cutter housing stretching built environments to great distances. Figured in this way and with the new town labelled a ghost city, the construction that is inherent to urban development is freighted not with an anticipation of habitation and growth but with a looming sense of catastrophe and ruination. In this way, the photos bring to light an ambiguity around the documentation of an extant or impending crisis in the local real estate sector.
- 24 In my own fieldwork in Kangbashi, which began in 2010 and continued through 2016, I focused on troubles in Ordos' overheated local real estate sector. Informal financial networks that mobilised capital into local real estate began to unravel around 2010, bringing to a sudden halt most construction projects in Ordos and ending the municipality's decade-long building boom. In tracking the pause in urban construction, I took scores of photos of projects in the new town and in Dongsheng that were halted. These images show new urban construction through a variety of framings (Figures 5 and 6). My documentary practice involved a substantial amount of walking through areas under construction and taking photos at ground level from vantage points that attempt to capture the entirety of projects.¹² As fieldwork photos, their aesthetic qualities were not paramount. All the same, the physical effort involved in trying to take photos of these sites raised for me at the time the question of the utility of photographic documentation and was a reminder of the perceived necessity to use photography as part of fieldwork data collection activities. What impulse pushed me to take photos of the sites? Would written descriptions in my field notes not suffice to retain strong impressions of the spaces? These questions arose in my own mind partly due to the physical exertion and effort needed to capture the sites in images and the

sense that visual data effectively captured something of the essence of the site and moment. At a bare minimum, I would need images for future publication purposes, as demonstrated here.



FIGURES 5 AND 6. Ordos, 2011. Credit: author.

Example 2: Emptiness and haunting

- 25 As the ghost city phenomenon became more widely reported after 2010, more ghost cities were located around China and images of the sites drew global attention. Along with the immense scale the images of ghost cities conveyed, a feature of the towns repeatedly shown in photos was their eerie emptiness, as though to confirm the ghostly character of these new urban developments. Kai Caemmerer's photographic series, *Unborn Cities*,¹³ exemplifies this manner of depicting the sites. In his photos, lighting and composition generate a palpable sense of doom in ghost cities. The depicted sites are empty, while buildings appear in the distance through layers of gauzy atmosphere.
- 26 Caemmerer's images of Kangbashi and other ghost cities around China have been displayed in gallery settings and circulated widely online, making them fixtures of the

visual phenomenon of ghost cities. Much like Brown's images, they figure places like Kangbashi and other sites labelled ghost cities as mysteriously abandoned and otherworldly spaces (Figures 7 and 8).



FIGURE 7. No. 21. Credit: Kai Caemmerer.

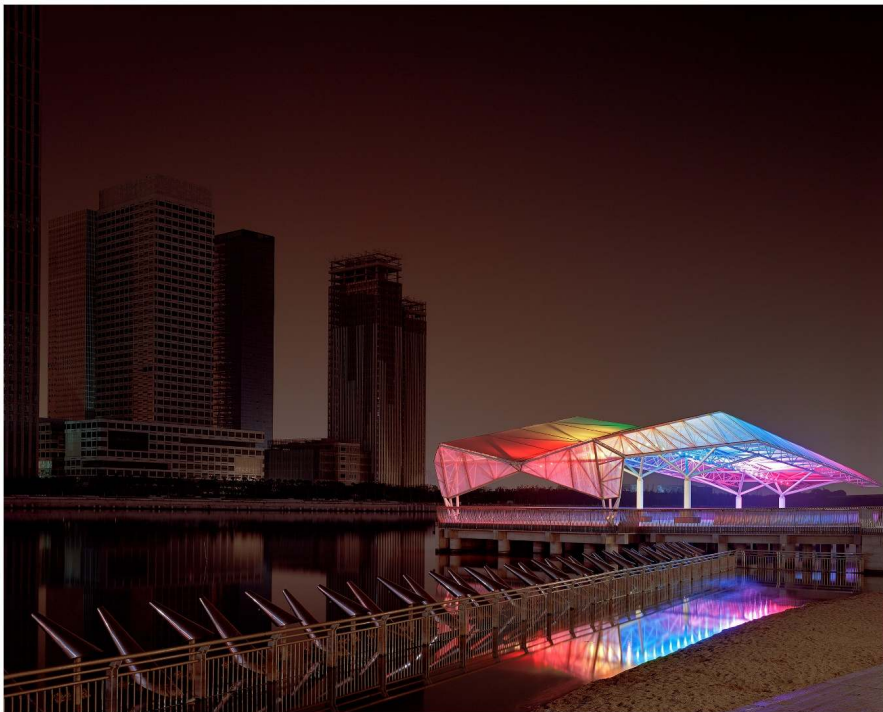
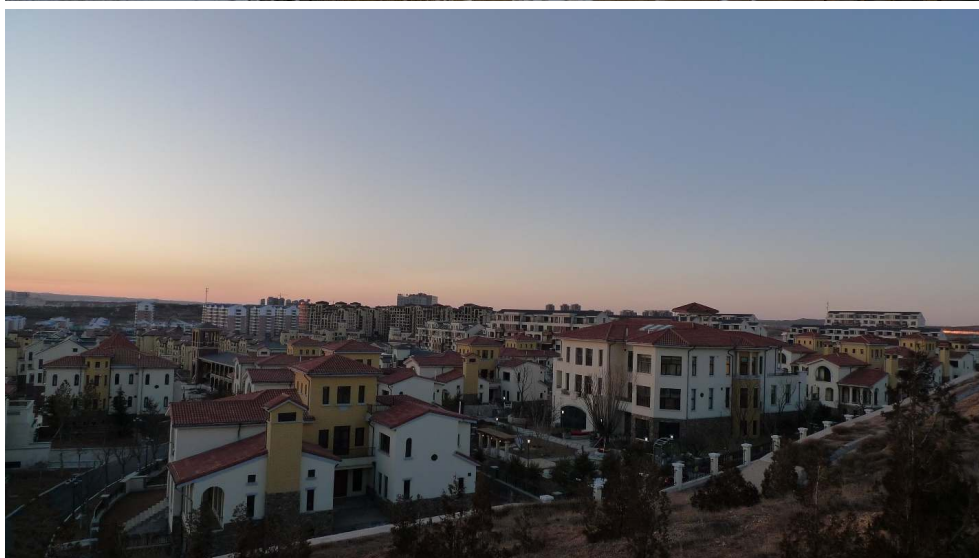


FIGURE 8. No. 7. Credit: Kai Caemmerer.

- 27 My own images of Kangbashi and the Tianjin Binhai New Area, both new towns labelled ghost cities in news reports and featured in Caemmerer's series, also show places that are empty, or mostly empty (Figures 9 and 10). There is an undeniable truth to the absence of population that legitimated much of the ghost city trope. Kangbashi, for example, was believed to have less than 10,000 full-time inhabitants in 2010, when sufficient housing had been built for nearly 200,000 people. A similar pattern whereby construction far outpaced new settlement in new towns produced multiple cases featuring similar landscapes of seeming abandonment and emptiness. The tendency among urban administrations to foster quick urban growth in order to reap political and economic benefits powered this surge in growth, fuelled as well by private capital seeking potentially huge profits in China's burgeoning real estate sector. What I have elsewhere termed China's "urban speed machine" (Chien and Woodworth 2018) describes a growth coalition for which speed is of the essence.



FIGURES 9 AND 10. Kangbashi New District, 2011. Credit: author.

- 28 While urban development is necessarily a spatial and temporal process, the emphasis on rapid growth as a political and economic necessity in China drives urban build-out at a staggering pace. Such speed in urban construction, abetted by a general build-it-

and-they-will-come ethos, produces discordant temporalities of settlement. Many places are constructed without drawing significant population for some time, despite properties being purchased as investments. The interim between project completion and settlement leaves urban landscapes that appear at variance with the typical bustle of Chinese cities. The ghost city trope was undergirded by a suspicion that these vast new urban projects would never become populated as planned and that they were, in a sense, already failed. With the benefit of longer hindsight, this has not always been the case however (Yin, Qian, and Zhu 2017). Yet, depictions of the sites rely on generating atmospherics of abandonment in order to ratify the claim of developmental failure.

- 29 As speed was a theme in my own research on Ordos and new towns across China, the empty environments captured in fieldwork photos were similar to those shown by Caemmerer, Brown, and other professional and amateur documentarians of ghost cities. In Kangbashi, it was indeed rare to see a pedestrian in the new town's central square. It is worth noting, however, that my efforts to document new towns by walking were physically exhausting due to the enormous scale of the sites, which heavily militated against any pedestrian activity. Ground-level emptiness of the landscape, in other words, was not just an artefact of the absence of residents but rather a logical aversion expressed to me many times in interviews toward walking the large distances from one's home to the nearest store, for example. Quite unlike city centres throughout China, where high density and walking are the norm, the built environments of new towns like Kangbashi are predicated on private vehicle usage. The extreme continental climate in Ordos further discourages walking outdoors for any length of time during much of the year. It was therefore unsurprising to see very few people outdoors in the built environment, and the expectation to see people there reflected a norm with little resonance in these places. Ultimately, acknowledging that walking was not how local residents experienced Kangbashi and surrendering to the futility of this data collection practice, I began to survey the spaces by car, thereby allowing myself to view the new environments through a windshield, as others did. Doing so, however, was both expensive and logistically challenging, reducing the perceived benefits of photographic documentation.

Example 3: Disuse and ruin

- 30 The third important feature of ghost city photography is its staging of disuse. This feature may seem almost too obvious to mention, but upon closer examination we can see how it is vital to the claim-making of the ghost city notion. Across images of ghost cities that have circulated in the media and online, the central subject of the images is invariably the urban landscape. The scale and emptiness of the sites reinforce the claim that the spaces signify wild overbuilding. Yet, the claim of overbuilding must be qualified. Controversy surrounding ghost cities in the media revolved around the spectre of financial crisis and property market collapse, with ghost cities allegedly serving as leading indicators of broader systemic problems. On the one hand, the massive construction seemed to augur crisis in the property market, as it was noted that the cities had few residents and that purchases of multiple homes in ghost cities were commonplace. The implication was that ghost cities were gigantic speculative bubbles.¹⁴ Others countered that the sale of properties was, in itself, a sign that the property market was functioning as expected and that overbuilding was not a concern if there were always ready buyers of properties. This case has been made about Ordos

specifically¹⁵ and, with some qualification, about China's property markets more generally (Fang *et al.* 2015). The contention that overbuilding was a subjective judgment refuted by robust sales was a position repeatedly stated to me by local officials and planners in Ordos. In interviews, these same people took umbrage at the term ghost city. The imagery of Kangbashi was especially irritating, they said, as it misrepresented the new town and, perhaps most importantly, was undermining confidence in the property sector.

- 31 Photographs of ghost cities do not resolve this controversy. However, they highlight the conflict between exchange value and use value by revealing spectacular instances of disuse. The vast landscapes of ghost cities depicted in imagery like that shown here by the Canada-based scholar-activist Tong Lam (Figures 11 and 12) shows sites that should otherwise contain people but do not.¹⁶ Unlike images of crumbling factories prominent in the contemporary ruin genre, photos of ghost cities show spaces that have yet to be used and, one can presume, will never be used. Purposelessness revealed by the disuse of new space connotes waste and ruin and supplies the critical valence of ghost city imagery. In his image of the enormous central square in Kangbashi and the city hall in the distance (Figure 12), this site of interface between the state and citizenry is rendered as a vast, alienating expanse. The popular assumption that urban space should be inhabited and used is undermined in this imagery and makes for jarring and unsettling visual experiences. In place of city spaces used for the variety of human purposes one can associate with the city, the vast assemblages of new government buildings and apartment buildings in ghost cities seem to serve no function at all, save for being built: they generate capital gains for some and little else – citizens have little to no voice in the making of such a space.



FIGURES 11 AND 12. Kangbashi New District, 2012. Credit: Tong Lam.



FIGURE 13. Kangbashi New District, 2012. Credit: author.



FIGURES 14 AND 15. Kangbashi New District, 2014. Credit: author.

- 32 What interests me here is the degree to which my fieldwork images of these same sites level the same politicised claims about urbanisation (Figures 13, 14, 15). In the process of conducting fieldwork and critical scholarship, my own focus on urban development revealed contradictions between the use value and exchange value of new homes in sites labelled ghost cities. Nevertheless, the collected images of urban spaces cannot reliably be said to mount claims of this nature. My fieldwork images were not generated as parts of a visual project; instead, they were complements to other data collection steps. What does it say, then, that images produced within these quite

different critical agendas depicting the same spaces often do so in the same manner? How does one type of image voice a critical claim and the other merely serves as a neutral observational document?

Conclusion

- 33 A central contention of this article is that photographs work in several parallel registers revealed by their intersection with the discourse on ruin. In recent years, theorists have turned to notions of the ruin in order to develop useful heuristics for assessing and interpreting social processes in place (Millington 2013; Gordillo 2014). These new conceptions of ruins originate in a sceptical view of classical ruins and the class-based antiquarian dispositions that have attempted to narrate their meanings. In place of elite practices of ruin-gazing that focus on remnants of antiquity, contemporary ideas of ruin dwell on the mundane and uncelebrated detritus of contemporary life. Yet, not only are both practices shadowed by the impulse to engage in pleasurable melancholy, it must also be noted that ruins of all description, whether new or old, can only exist as a ruin thanks to a socialisation that acculturates viewers to the meanings associated with ruins through a symbolic visual idiom that turns on a creative reengagement with specific sorts of degraded materials.
- 34 The claim-making that sits at the heart of ruin-gazing is given an additional layer of mediation in photography. Much as ruins operate only to the extent to which they circulate as part of a culture of ruins, photos of ruins quite explicitly demand forms of active engagement that are themselves culturally delimited. In this sense, there is little distinction between ruins and their photographic representations. Ruins are always and necessarily elements that emerge out of a process of perception, one that is more or less explicitly geared toward claim-making. Whether one shows ruins through textual description or photos, the existence of ruin requires that they be mobilised and somehow shown.
- 35 In this article, I have tried to illuminate this point by suggesting that photos of the same places work differently, depending on the critical agenda within which they are mobilised. But I have also questioned how photographic practice during fieldwork differs from the popular genre of ruin photography and its diverse claim-making projects. To address the questions posed at the end of the previous section, the pretence of neutrality in photographic fieldwork documentation is untenable and reveals forms of collusion in the aestheticisation of the research subject that demands careful and forthright acknowledgement. The goal for fieldwork perhaps should not be to produce images that eschew a position on the topic it depicts; photographic subjects cannot be captured in image as objective data. Instead, the approach to fieldwork images might more honestly be in the vein suggested by Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014) as a type of active engagement with the material world. In this regard, ruin photography and materialist ruin analysis as ethnographic practices are aligned as modes of critical claim-making through engagements with various material. The forces at work remaking China's cities are invariably opaque and dispersed. Ruins, and ironically photographs thereof, can serve, as this article suggests, as a medium through which to reveal some of these processes by drawing together audiences, however narrow, and constructing the meanings of space actively in and through images and their exchange.

36 **Primary Sources**37 *Exhibition*

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41 *Photo collection books*

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Bill Powell, "Inside China's Run-away Building Boom," *TIME*, 5 April 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1975336,00.html> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
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7. Melissa Chan, "China's Empty City," *Al Jazeera*, 10 November 2009, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2009/11/2009111061722672521.html> (accessed on 4 February 2021); Bill Powell, "Inside China's Run-away Building Boom," *op cit*.
 8. There is, in fact, no town named Ordos, which is an ancient name for the region contained by the giant northern loop of the Yellow River and the Great Wall.
 9. Melissa Chan, "China's Empty City," *op cit*.
 10. Bill Powell, "Inside China's Run-away Building Boom," *op cit*.
 11. Michael Christopher Brown, "Ordos, China: A Modern Ghost Town," *TIME*, 25 March 2010, http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1975397_2094492,00.html (accessed on 23 October 2021).
 12. A limitation of my photo-taking efforts was the fact that I did not possess a wide-angle lens to easily encompass whole projects, which tend to occupy massive tracts of land. Consequently, I needed to retreat some distance in order to capture sites in the frame, and as a result the images include quite massive panoramic scenes of halted construction. Using my 35mm point-and-shoot camera, a result is that the buildings in my photos appear quite distant and small and achieve nothing of the monumental quality of Brown's images.
 13. Kai Caemmerer, "Unborn Cities," <https://kaimichael.com/unborn-cities> (accessed on 23 October 2021).
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 16. For more photos, see Tong Lam, <http://visual.tonglam.com/> (accessed on 23 October 2021).
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ABSTRACTS

This article offers a self-reflexive critique of ruins as method by examining side-by-side the production, circulation, and meaning-making processes around the ruin photography of ghost cities in China and the author's own production of a fieldwork archive of the same photographed spaces. The ruin is commonly understood in recent scholarship to be a deeply ideological artefact with meanings contingent on class-inflected practices of ruin appreciation. In a similar vein, photography of urban ruins has been heavily criticised for allegedly aestheticising social ruin and economic decline. The critique of ruin photography as a practice of ideological claim-making or as a form of critical engagement merits scrutiny in light of this issue's field research practices looking at ruins in China. More specifically, photography is a standard part of fieldwork, including the author's. The aim of this article, then, is to ask how and why photographs of urban ruins in China differ across image-making practices? How are fieldwork photos of ruins, the kinds of photos that generate a data archive and are used in scholarly publications, resonant with other ideological claim-making purposes of ruin photography? How might we account for the political valences of image aesthetics when photographs are a vital part of scholarly efforts?

INDEX

Keywords: ruins, ruination, photography, methods, fieldwork.

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The Yellow Leaves of a Building: Urban Exploration in China and the Cooling Plan Photography Project

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Without yellow leaves, there can be no autumn. Ruins are the yellow leaves of a building. People say that the purpose of yellow leaves is to nurture spring. Yet I say that yellow leaves are beautiful in themselves. (Yu 1992: 362)

- 1 In a meditative essay titled “Ruins” (Feixu 廢墟) published in his 1992 volume *A Bitter Journey Through Culture* (*Wenhua kulü* 文化苦旅), the writer and scholar Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 argues for the positive aesthetic value of derelict architecture. He alleges that Chinese culture has historically been unable to tolerate the sight of architectural degradation, and as a result, the nation “has always lacked a culture of ruins” (*Zhongguo lilai qieshao feixu wenhua* 中國歷來缺少廢墟文化, 1992: 365). This longstanding cultural aversion to the ruin has since been traced by art historian Wu Hung, who demonstrates in his 2012 monograph how visual representations of ruined architecture “virtually did not exist” in premodern Chinese art, and that there was an “unspoken taboo” against their creation (2012: 94).¹
- 2 However, following China’s economic reforms of the late 1970s and its ambitious “urban revolution” (Campanella 2008), Mainland artists have since performed a *volte-face* over the ruin image. Over the past four decades, the country’s physical landscape has been subject to intensive processes of redevelopment, with major demolition and construction projects forming a ubiquitous sight across the country. As Robin Visser

has emphasised in her study of the rural-to-urban shift in the Chinese cultural imagination, this seismic environmental transformation reshaped the arts, and ever since the 1990s, the city has been definitively established as “[an aesthetic] subject in its own right” (2010: 9).

- 3 The human and environmental costs of China’s unprecedented urbanisation drive have been significant, and alongside this, researchers have noted how mental health issues are becoming “increasingly prominent” in large cities (Chen, Chen, and Landry 2015: 9021). Over the years, the population has endured government land grabs, forced evictions, destruction of heritage, irreversible ecological damage, and the largest rural-to-urban migration movement the world has ever seen (Campanella 2008; Hsing 2010; Ren 2013). Some high-profile ruins, such as the Old Summer Palace (*Yuanmingyuan* 圓明園), have been remodelled into nationalistic tourist sites by the state and subjected to a process of “Disneyfication” (Lee 2009). Amidst all this turbulence, artists and filmmakers have sought novel ways to “respond to the cities’ spatial semiotics of memory (and) unearth the scars of urban development” (Braester 2007: 162). Ruins that evoke a sense of trauma and critique the impact of urbanisation have subsequently become a powerful trope in contemporary visual culture (Chu 2010; Wu 2012; Ortells-Nicolau 2017). Representative pieces include the now-classic films of Wang Bing 王兵 and Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯, and artworks such as Zhan Wang’s 展望 *Ruin Cleaning Project* (1994) (*94 feixu qingxi jihua* 94 廢墟清洗計劃), a 1994 site-specific performance piece featuring the “restoration” of a partially demolished house; the *Liulitun* (六裡屯) photographic series (1996-2003) by the duo RongRong&inri 榮榮&映里, which documents their life in the eponymous former artists’ village; and Huang Rui’s 黃銳 2004-2009 *Chai-na/China* (拆那-CHINA) series, which juxtaposes the popular homophonic pun against photographs of demolished Beijing courtyard houses.² These iconic examples reflect how the vast majority of this ruin-related creative turn frames Chinese urbanity in bleak terms, using the ruin motif to invite broader reflection on the destructive social and environmental impact of the country’s urban transformation.
- 4 This article, however, explores a more amateur and everyday dimension of Chinese ruin representation, which is distinct from the critical portrayal of the urban ruin produced by the professional art world and which has been overlooked by the scholarship to date.³ Here, I demonstrate how obsolete architecture in the Mainland has been infiltrated, reframed, and ultimately revered in an alternative urban imaginary produced by a loose network of thrill-seeking hobbyists: China’s domestic “urban explorers.” A thriving online and offline global subculture that has given rise to a unique visual aesthetic of its own, “urban exploration” (also known as “urbex,” “UE,” and *chengshi tanxian* 城市探險) was described in 2005 as an “interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights” (Ninjalicious 2005: 3). More specifically, UE is the exploration of off-limits, abandoned, or hidden man-made structures, and examples of sites might include derelict factories and mines, abandoned hospitals and schools, sewers and drains, bridges and rooftops, and half-built shopping centres and skyscrapers. Emerging as a subculture in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the mid-2000s, urban explorers contribute to China’s contemporary cult of the ruin by seeking out the “yellow leaves” hidden within the everyday city and circulating their findings online.
- 5 According to Yu Qiuyu’s writing in the early 1990s, China’s cultural unease over derelict buildings meant that the fate of the ruin – and, by extension, China’s transition into a

new era of modernity – was trapped between the polarising desires of nostalgia fanatics and those who wanted to demolish and rebuild the ruin entirely (1992: 366). Seeking a third path, Yu argued that ruins should be recognised as “a process” (*feixu shi guocheng* 廢墟是過程, *ibid.*: 362) and organically incorporated into the modern-day landscape. Moreover, Yu insists upon the captivating beauty of the ruin, bound up in the transcendental potency of juxtaposing temporalities:

Ruins can offer us a split reading. They exude a magnetic force that makes people want to linger. Yes, ruins are a magnetic field – one pole is antiquity, the other modernity – and the compass of the spirit responds keenly to this. (*ibid.*: 364)

- 6 A great deal of UE creative culture reflects how the affective nature of ruined space and temporalities brought into dialogue with each other opens the explorer up to the sort of embodied imaginative experience that Yu evokes here. This article is therefore interested in the generative, playful view of the urban ruin that emerges from China-based UE, tracing it through the cultural forms created by some of its more publicly-minded practitioners, in photographs, videos, written accounts, and press articles. Several major academic studies on UE draw on participant observation and are written in the autobiographical mode (Garrett 2013a, 2013b; Bingham 2020), offering deep insights into the everyday workings of representative UE groups. However, as my interest here is on ruin representation and the urban imaginary invoked by cultural traces of the practice, I concentrate on publicly circulated expressions of UE rather than studying the practice itself through an ethnographic lens.
- 7 I begin with an introduction to the practice of UE, sketching out its global development and situating the Chinese example within this. I then give an overview of how the UE scene in the Mainland articulates itself, locating this discourse in accounts of the practice on personal websites, popular media, social platforms, and so on. Finally, I discuss the example of the *Cooling Plan* (*Lengque jihua* 冷卻計劃) photography project, established online by the prominent Chinese urban explorer Zhao Yang 趙陽 in 2006. Concentrating on his *Chaonei 81* (*Chaonei 81 hao* 朝內81號) photo series (2006-2013), I show how he presents the ruin as a creative refuge that helps the explorer build a restorative sense of individual autonomy and mitigates the negative mental impact of the “seen” city.
- 8 In contrast to an artwork such as Huang Rui’s *Chai-na/China* series, which uses the image of ruined courtyard houses to critique the destructive nature of China’s urban development, buildings that no longer fulfil their original purpose have instead been reframed by urban explorers as wild, ludic spaces which enable a psychic retreat from modern-day life. As the geographer Tim Edensor has observed in his extensive work on ruins, it is the defamiliarising nature of ruins that enables them to also function as “spaces of fantasy” and “unhindered adventure” (2005: 25). Yu Qiuyu ends his “Ruins” essay on a corresponding note of excitement, with a utopian vision of ruins and the place they could inhabit in China’s new dawn, as the nation approaches the end of its long twentieth century: “Modernity means tolerance, magnanimity, vastness, and boundlessness. We carry the ruins with us into this modern era” (1992: 368).
- 9 In China, the UE attitude towards the ruin is a similarly hopeful one, and indeed, Yu’s essay is regularly cited by ruin enthusiasts and UE features across the Sinophone Internet.⁴ From this vantage point, ruins are treated as sites affectively charged with multiple temporalities, and as disorderly, wild spaces that can be both beautiful and

creatively liberating in their own right. The worlds contained in these UE images, then, reveal an exhilarating way of mediating China's ruins in its age of urbanisation.

Invisible frontiers: An overview of urban exploration

In the shadows of the city waits an invisible frontier – a wilderness, thriving in the deep places, woven through dead storm drains and live subway tunnels (...). Crowds hurry through the bright streets, insulated by the pavement, never reflecting that beneath their feet lurks a universe. (Deyo and Leibowitz 2003: 3)

- 10 So writes L. B. Deyo, leader of the prominent American urban exploration group named “Jinx,” in his 2003 book *Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooftops of Hidden New York*. Co-authored with fellow “officer” David “Lefty” Leibowitz, *Invisible Frontier* consists of twelve dramatic “mission” reports, which narrate Jinx’s infiltrations into various sites across New York City in 2001, from the dank underground tunnels of the Croton aqueduct to the precarious heights of the George Washington Bridge. Throughout, Deyo and Leibowitz frame their group of “agents” as modern-day explorers seeking to channel the spirit of a bygone era of imperial adventure: “The Age of Exploration was gone; we of Jinx had never breathed its vigorous air. Ours was not the compass, the machete, or the duel, but the mouse, the flip-flop, and the Casual Friday” (*ibid.*: 7). Jinx contend that the everyday city is anaemic and effete, and the desire to overcome this inferiority complex gives the group their traction: experiencing New York in urban explorer mode enables these officers and their agents to reframe the city as their “frontier” (*ibid.*: 28) – a challenging but exhilarating terrain that they are eventually able to master.
- 11 The example of Jinx encapsulates many of the traits common to cultural expressions of UE, both globally and in China. These include a deep attraction to the call of the wild, tribalistic affiliations, dissatisfaction with ordinary twenty-first century life, an uncritical enthusiasm for military and colonial metaphors, and the macho self-representation of the explorer. Positioning itself as an antithesis to the mainstream ordering of city life, UE is typically advocated by its proponents as an authentic way of combatting urban alienation and reenchanting the city. In his 2005 urbex manual *Access All Areas*, Ninjalicious (the alias of Jeff Chapman, the late Toronto-based explorer who is widely considered the spiritual father of the movement) writes: “For too many people, urban living consists of mindless travel between work, shopping and home. (...) It’s no wonder people feel unfulfilled and uninvolved as they are corralled through the maze of velvet ropes on their way out through the gift shop” (2005: 3). Adopting the explorer’s mindset, the movement tells us, can liberate the urban drone from the humdrum inauthenticity of the modern-day city.
- 12 Geographer Bradley Garrett, who has carried out leading ethnography on the practice, traces the first wave of UE as an organised movement back to the 1970s-1990s, when groups such as Jinx in New York, the Cave Clan in Melbourne, and the Diggers of the Underground Planet in Moscow began staking out their presence on the nascent Internet (2013b: 5).⁵ From the beginning, there was a clear impulse to document and share one’s findings with a like-minded community, which coalesced into a global network in the early 2000s (*ibid.*). Ensuring their infiltration leaves no physical mark on a site is central to the UE community ethos. Sticking to Ninjalicious’ golden rule, “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints,” ensures that sites are preserved for future urbexers (2005: 20). Urbexers often use photography to document their trips,

and many post their images on websites such as *28 Days Later* and the *Urban Exploration Resource*. Some explorers, such as Troy Paiva or Wigo Worsseling, might formally exhibit in physical galleries and publish glossy photobooks. However, the majority of urbex images are shared and circulated for audiences on the Internet by non-professional hobbyists, many of whom are secretive and deliberately conceal their identities (Fulton 2017).

- 13 Explorers themselves cite a wide variety of reasons as to why they urbex, and, by all accounts, are not a homogenous or united group. A number of urban geographers and social scientists have examined the range of motivations behind urban exploration, which include a view of the practice as a radical political gesture and ethically comparable to computer hacking (Garrett 2013b); heritage conservation and the urge to survey historical sites (Bennett 2011); the pursuit of embodied experience, edgework, and “sneaky thrills” (Garrett 2013a; Kindynis 2017); a romantic appreciation of ruination and decay (Edensor 2005); an enactment of a masculinist form of geography (Mott and Roberts 2013); a desire to practice psychogeography (Pinder 2005); an abiding interest in dark tourism and “ruin porn” (Arnold 2015); and the pursuit of online virality and transmittable media affect (Klausen 2017).
- 14 In general, public expressions of China-based UE are heavily centred on ruin culture and the aesthetics of dereliction.⁶ Unlike many write-ups by high-profile Western practitioners (e.g. Bradley Garrett), Chinese-language urbex accounts rarely foreground the illegality or riskiness of their practice. They instead typically visit accessible abandoned spaces and produce write-ups that are loosely apolitical in tone, favouring a mode of representation that draws more on their individual encounter with the ruin and its affect. This article therefore accepts a broad definition of UE as the exploration of man-made infrastructure that is legally off-limits and/or hidden from public view. This hobbyist understanding is more akin to American light photographer Troy Paiva, who offers a straightforward and inclusive definition of the practice in a popular essay:
- For some [people], it’s about infiltrating a city’s storm drains and subway tunnels. For others, it’s climbing bridges and radio towers. Generally speaking, though, UrbEx is the exploration of TOADS (Temporary, Obsolete, Abandoned, and Derelict Spaces). (2008: 9)
- 15 Finally, often derided as a form of “ruin porn” or “dark tourism,” urbex cultural production has long been criticised for its deliberate mystification of derelict space (Apel 2015; Arnold 2015; Lyons 2018).⁷ In Chinese UE culture, as elsewhere, the sociohistorical context of the ruin is frequently overlooked or ignored in favour of individual thrills and the apocalyptic imagination, setting it apart from the art world discourse of the ruin. To some onlookers, the China-based urbexers discussed here may appear just as self-absorbed as their global counterparts, although I would contend that this misses the point of the endeavour. As Dora Apel has argued in her writing on ruin porn, “no one [denies the popularity of sexual pornography] or its ability to arouse,” and it is more useful “to focus on *why* we are so drawn to ruins and ruin imagery” instead (2015: 24). In the Chinese examples discussed here, we see that urban exploration and the playful self-presentation it facilitates is intrinsically dependent on disassociating a site from its sociohistorical context. Given that explorers typically seek transcendental encounters with the defamiliarised spaces they enter, it is perhaps unsurprising that this comes about in ways that prioritise the subjective experience of the individual over the wider context of the site.

Urban exploration in China

- 16 Through the creative output of China's urban explorers, an alternative view of urban dereliction enters public discourse: the ruin as a wild space that facilitates a mode of imaginative play and an escape from the everyday world of the regulated city. As established, urbexers present the Chinese ruin in a different light to China's professional artists, framing it as a backdrop for ludic narratives of fantasy and adventure rather than as a conduit for sociopolitical critique. This section discusses how this particular imaginary is produced by assessing articulations of China-based UE across public spaces of the Internet, drawn from hobbyist forums, popular journalism, and personal websites.
- 17 Across the Sinophone Internet, the majority consensus is that China-based UE gained momentum as an organised subculture around 2005, taking direct inspiration from the global model.⁸ Stories from Western UE history are scattered across the Chinese web, and Ninjalicious' famous honour code ("Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints") is cited in various subcultural guidelines as a basic principle.⁹
- 18 UE in China has received an increasing amount of domestic media attention over the past 15 years or so, including features in *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中國青年報), *VICE*, and *Sanlian Lifeweek* (*Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* 三聯生活周刊). Alongside Zhao Yang, who I discuss further on, urbexers with prominent public profiles include the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team (*Beijing chihou chengtan zhanshu xiaodui* 北京斥候城探戰術小隊), a group of five middle-aged men who are notable for the military aesthetic they have cultivated, and Hong Tang Miqi (紅唐米奇), a man who is highly active on the Shanghai Ruins Exploration Douban community and who livestreams his excursions on Douyin. Another key figure is Brendan Connal, a British national living in Beijing who uploads UE videos onto the Burbex YouTube channel and who previously ran the (now defunct) burbex.org blog between 2016 and 2020. A rare example of a female urbexer is the Canada-based scientist Pan Ran 潘然, who posts detailed accounts of her trips on various Chinese social media accounts (often under the name "Ran Pan"), and recently released a photobook of American ruins with Guangdong Tourism Publishing House. Beyond the Mainland, the seven-person HKUrbex group are the most prominent explorers on the Hong Kong scene, with a popular YouTube channel, a 2019 print book, and substantial global media coverage. Urbexing locations featured across these profiles include abandoned industrial sites; unfinished construction projects; derelict hospitals and mental health institutions; former Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo sites; exhumed mines, laboratories, and steelworks; defunct transit systems; abandoned theatres and cinemas; and even entire unpopulated villages and towns.
- 19 As well as maintaining personal websites and social media profiles, many urbexers also post on social networks dedicated to the hobby, the main public venues being UERChina.com and various Douban groups.¹⁰ UERChina is the most categorised and comprehensive of these online resources, with a public discussion board that has been active since 2015. It is currently made up of 12 sub-forums, which include sections for community newcomers, a second-hand equipment exchange, ruin photography appreciation, and the discussion of urbex abroad. While the website motto is "Explore ruins, discover history" (*Tansuo feixu, faxian lishi* 探索廢墟, 發現歷史), the community posts are more concerned with the aesthetic appreciation of ruins, feelings of nostalgia, and the practice of UE than with concrete discussion of history. This is consistent with

the self-oriented nature of UE culture around the world; as Dora Apel noted, “the sense of history pursued [by urbexers] refers to an imagined personal connection to the past” rather than to genuine conservation efforts (2015: 60).

- 20 As I briefly mentioned, one way Sinophone UE deviates from the Western model is in its attitude towards the illegality of the practice. In their documentation, Western urbexers often celebrate acts of forbidden trespass, and their write-ups may contain a politically radical or libertarian sentiment akin to what Bradley Garrett describes as “taking back rights to the city from which we have been wrongfully restricted” (2013a: 8). Over the past few decades, as the PRC has moved from a centrally planned economy to a more marketised system, space has become increasingly commodified. However, Mainland explorers comment on this situation far less than Western explorers do, even expressing disapproval over performative acts of transgression.¹¹ On UERChina, for instance, the forum guidelines explicitly state that practitioners should not “break into areas restricted by law” (*bu chuangru falü guiding de jinqu* 不闖入法律規定的禁區); that they shouldn’t “show off by disclosing the specific location of exploration sites” (*bu yi xuanyao wei mudi gongkai tanxian didian de juti weizhi* 不以炫耀為目的的公開探險地點的具體位置); and that one of their aims is to gradually improve UE community behaviour in China.¹² Elsewhere, the urbexer Pan Ran notes that trespassing laws in China is less codified than in Western countries,¹³ a point also made in a 2008 blog post by Chinese law scholar Donald Clarke. He observes that Chinese real property law “does not seem to contain a clear prohibition against trespassing,” and speculates that this loophole goes back to pre-reform era times when all property was owned by the state, and implicitly, by all people of China.¹⁴ Moreover, the fact that state-sponsored media outlets such as *China Youth Daily* and *The Paper* (*Pengpai* 澎湃) run positive UE features encouraging the practice suggests that ruin trespass is regarded by the authorities as a relatively benign activity.¹⁵
- 21 Rather than celebrating the act of trespass as many of their global counterparts now do, Chinese urbexers laud the practice as an effective means of alleviating urban alienation and everyday boredom. The *chengshi tanxian* entry on Baidu, for example, has been edited to claim that Chinese “city-dwellers who have a sense of curiosity and who don't want to be constricted by their boring lives and work are embarking on these journeys of discovery.”¹⁶ Furthermore, urbex narratives often draw links between UE and the reclamation of a childlike sense of discovery, appealing to those who feel dissatisfied with ordinary city life, and the Baidu entry includes an unattributed definition of the practice popular on the Chinese UE Internet, that the impulse to explore “stems from the common eternal curiosity of our youth” (*zhe yiqie dou yuanyu women shaonian shidai gongtong de, yongheng de haoqixin* 這一切都源於我們少年時代共通的, 永恆的好奇心). In his study of adult play within urban space, Quentin Stevens defines play as “a counterpoint to behaviour which is ‘normal’” and that it “stands principally in contradistinction to people’s assumptions about the everyday functionality of the urban built environment” (2007: 26). Accordingly, in China-based UE culture, the urban ruin is predominantly framed as a liberating refuge that facilitates this sort of playful adult transgression.
- 22 In media interviews, the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration members have explicitly drawn links between UE and a desire to get back in touch with their childhoods. An article profiling members of their group notes: “If they now want to recall those childhood memories, they can only do so by visiting those ruins hidden in mountains or

scattered among tall buildings.”¹⁷ The Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration are an example of how some people use the practice to immerse themselves in a ludic experience reminiscent of childhood dramatic play. Their form of UE is driven by a collective enthusiasm for military culture, which they simulate during their excursions (Figure 1). In one of their videos, we see the team unsheathing long knives and donning gas masks as they explore a series of abandoned tunnels, caves, and rooms, dressed in camouflage gear and exclaiming about the danger they supposedly face.¹⁸ Taking military make-believe even further than the Jinx Crew (Deyo and Leibowitz do adopt a self-ironicising tone at times), the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team projects a form of urbex that is comparable to immersive roleplay. Within the diegesis of this play, they transcend ordinary city life and take on militaristic hero identities.



FIGURE 1. Extract of the video *Originating from the Catacombs of Paris, and Popular in Europe for Many Years, Chinese Urban Exploration is Now on the Rise* (0:23), Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration, 2017. Credit: screenshot by the author.

- 23 Another manifestation of ludic UE from the China region can be seen in the video content of HKUrbex. They are particularly interested in using ruinous space to experiment with videogame aesthetics, incorporating a first-person shooter (FPS) interface into some of their accounts (Figure 2). Their 2014 video titled *HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital* features a programme loading screen, a loose narrative based around mission objectives (e.g. “explore Siu Lam Hospital”), site information fed to the viewer through a computer-generated voiceover, and a soundtrack lifted from the videogame *Battlefield 3*.

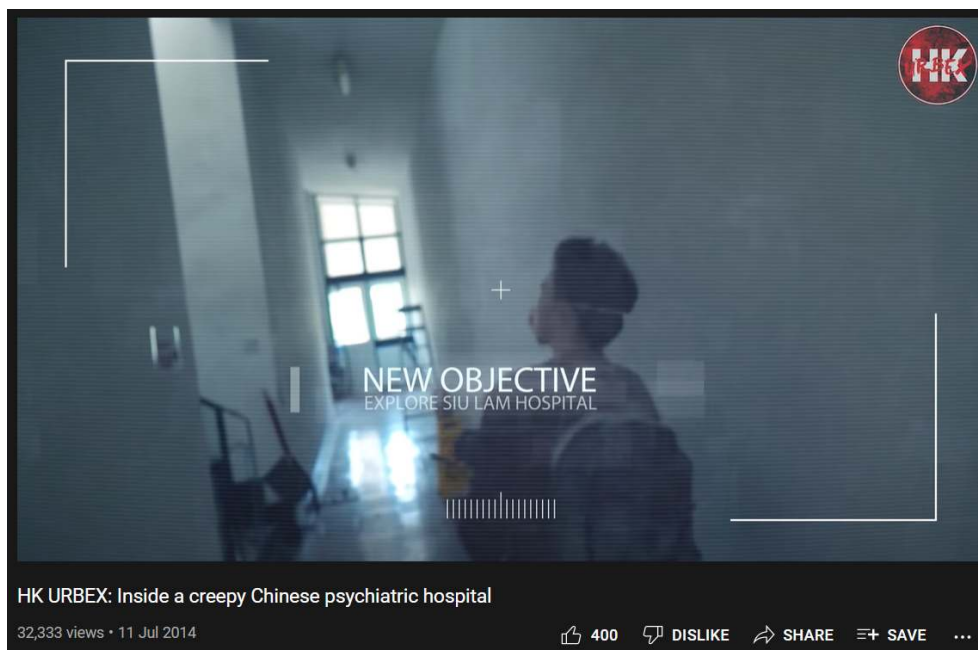


FIGURE 2. Extract of the video *HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital* (1:13), HKUrbex, 2014. Credit: screenshot by the author.

- 24 Elsewhere, HKUrbex states: “To many of us, urban exploration is like living inside a videogame. But the stakes are real” (2017). They are not the only ones to draw this link between UE and video gaming culture: in her *China Youth Daily* profile, Ran Pan compares the practice of urbex to an “immersive adventure videogame that races against time” (*chengshi tanxian shi ge yu shijian saipao de jinru shi AVG 城市探險是個與時間賽跑的浸入式AVG*).¹⁹

Spaces of solitude: The *Cooling Plan* photography project

- 25 Imaginative play also shapes the creative output of lone explorers, although in the examples covered here, highly developed alter egos and narratives are most consistently sustained when produced by a like-minded group. The journalist who profiles members of the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team, for example, observes that they always address each other by their aliases, even when dining together in the “real” world.²⁰ This high level of engagement with the distinctive fictional world they have created is reportedly stoked by their urban ennui. Using the metaphor of a vinyl record, group member Dahui describes how UE facilitates a mental retreat from the “A-side” of the city (*women shenghuo de chengshi A mian 我們生活的城市A面*) across to the overlooked “B-side” (*chengshi B mian 城市B面*).²¹ This sentiment is shared across the wider community: urbexers often cite the sense of authenticity generated by their practice and the difficulty of cultivating solitude in China’s overcrowded urban environments. Elsewhere, the explorer Li Fei 李飛 is reported as saying:

The fun of urban exploration lies in it always being a psychological sort of pleasure. Conquering one more building, discovering one more secret, seeing another thing lots of people don't ever get the chance to see – there's a feeling of exclusivity in that. At some point in the day, you'll feel as if the entire building belongs to you.²²

- 26 These statements reveal how UE helps its practitioners construct a strong sense of identity in an urban imaginary that makes them distinct from ordinary citizens.
- 27 The individual search for solitude in urban China is an abiding theme in our final example, explorer Zhao Yang's online UE gallery *Cooling Plan*. Here, ruins are framed primarily as spaces of mental reprieve, and Zhao has discussed in interviews how he loves "the feeling of running away from crowded, noisy urban life."²³ Elsewhere, he says that when he's "at abandoned sites, [he] feels [he is] the only person in the world (...). [He] likes this sense of solitude."²⁴ For Zhao and other practitioners, UE is presented as a way of psychologically managing the pressures of everyday urbanity in China. This struggle over personal autonomy within the city also resonates with similar impulses expressed in the wider realm of Chinese urban aesthetics, as shown in Robin Visser's discussion of individual identity and "the heightened desire for privacy" in postsocialist urban fiction (2010: 228).
- 28 Zhao's *Cooling Plan* gallery was set up in 2006 to showcase accounts of his trips into abandoned sites. Born in 1986 and based in Beijing, he is one of China's most prominent urbexers, and has been profiled by an array of international and domestic media outlets, including *The Guardian*, *VICE*, *Southern People Weekly* (*Nanfang renwu zhoukan* 南方人物周刊), and the *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao* 環球時報). The majority of his featured excursions on the *Cooling Plan* website are from the Beijing area and include trips into the former Shougang steel factory, the Xiaotangshan SARS hospital, the Baroque-style mansion known as Chaonei 81, Shangyi Catholic school, Wangping coal mine, and an aircraft boneyard. The title of the project brings to mind the cooling towers in the Shougang factory, which are the subjects of some of Zhao's most striking photographs, and gestures towards how once-lively sites are now in a "cooled down" state – the opposite of the urban social ideal, with its "hot and noisy" (*renao* 熱鬧) qualities.²⁵ Furthermore, the word "plan" indicates an ominous vision of premeditated ruination, reflecting the general enthusiasm for apocalyptic fiction within UE culture (Apel 2015).
- 29 Framing himself as a solitary outsider even within the niche scene of Chinese UE, Zhao aligns himself with global rather than domestic articulations of the subculture. Other urbexers, such as the live-streaming Hong Tang Miqi and the UERChina forum users, are open about their methods and regularly acknowledge the broader UE community in their output. In Zhao's project introduction, however, the term "Urban Exploration/ Urbex" is hyperlinked to the English-language "urban exploration" Wikipedia entry, and no Chinese-language definition of the practice is offered at all, although his website is clearly aimed at a Chinese-reading audience. His introductory text is accompanied by a photograph of a human figure (presumably, a self-portrait) standing in a commanding "hero shot" stance²⁶ in a derelict washroom. Selected from the 2014 *Military Hospital*²⁷ series (*Jun yiyuan* 軍醫院), the photo shows the room saturated with a jaundiced yellow light cast by a head torch, the bright beam obscuring any identifying facial features. Secrecy is a key part of Zhao's self-presentation: we are only given a clear shot of his face in a 2015 behind-the-scenes video account of a trip into the Shougang factory,²⁸ and while his videos are generally smoothly edited, he uses the shaky cam trope here to signal that the viewer is being taken backstage.
- 30 Zhao's stated purpose in the "About" section of the website is to "present our past" (*chengxian women de guoqu* 呈現我們的過去) to his audience through the medium of photography. Accordingly, each visual record is accompanied by a brief textual

commentary, ostensibly about the historical background of the site. However, as with many other urbexers, the prevailing narrative is Zhao's affective encounter with the ruin, and the historical detail given is often cursory and vague. Instead, we are shown evocative images that raise more questions than answers: a fiery ring of golden light illuminating the brick tunnel in an abandoned school, with Zhao at the centre; forgotten instruments sounding once again in a derelict theatre; or a ghostly human figure reflected in the glass panels of the Xiaotangshan hospital doors. These stories have an incomplete feel, captured in the process of initial conception and then quickly abandoned.

- 31 Throughout the body of Zhao's visual material, the theme of identity in formation becomes apparent: we see the explorer-subject playfully experimenting with different character types. For example, in *White Room* (*Bai fangjian* 白房間, 2009-2010), Zhao poses in a hazardous materials suit and gas mask.²⁹ In *Shangyi Normal School* (*Shangyi shifan xuexiao* 上義師範學校, 2012), he stands on a dark stairwell, wearing the iconic Guy Fawkes mask from the *V for Vendetta* film.³⁰ Unlike the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team, who have clearly defined militaristic alter egos that remain consistent across their public output, Zhao experiments with a variety of different guises but never fully commits to one. In his work on the multiple temporalities held in ruins, Tim Edensor reminds us that "ruins do not merely evoke the past," but that they also contain a unique sense of the present, "a shadow realm of slowness in which things are revealed at a less frantic pace" than in the everyday city (2005: 125).
- 32 Accordingly, in Zhao's images, we see ruinous space charged with possibility and thereby enabling leisurely experiments with the self-presentation of the explorer. His *Chaonei 81* photo series, which depicts a foray into a derelict Baroque-style mansion in Beijing, is an apt example of this.³¹ Made up of 19 images in total, it opens with a "Dear Photograph" style shot³² of the photographer's hand holding up an old print of a derelict house and a set of gates, aligning it with the site in its much smarter present-day state (Figure 3).

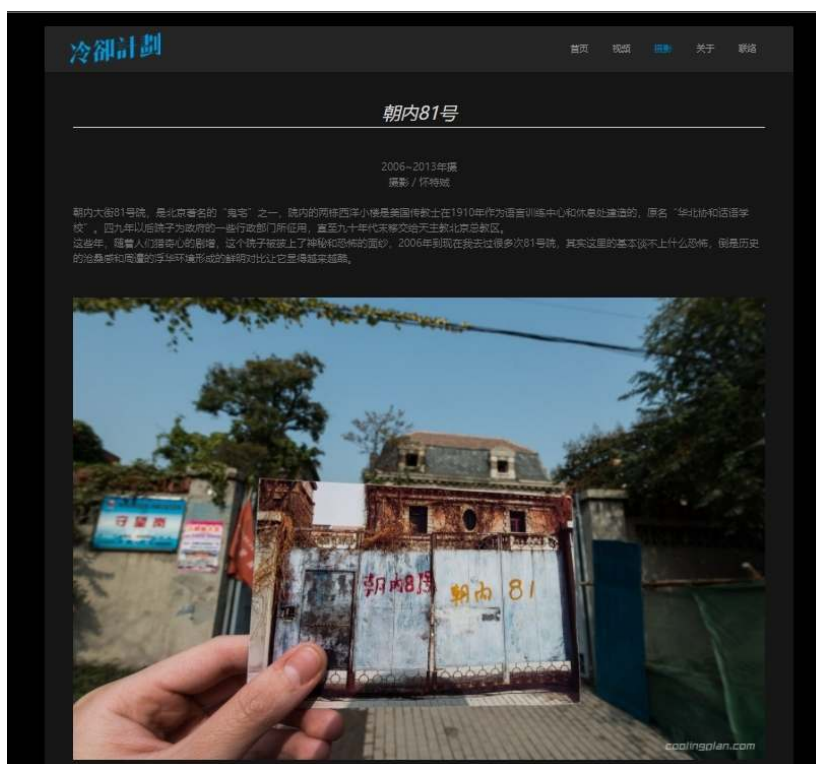


FIGURE 3. Image 1 from the *Chaonei 81* photo series (2006-2013) on the *Cooling Plan* website, Zhao Yang. Credit: screenshot by the author.

- 33 Using two temporalities to frame one setting, the composition typically aims to evoke pangs of nostalgia in the viewer. We are guided into realising that the setting “marks a spatial and emotional reference point (*nostos*) projected in the idyllic world of the photographer’s past, invoked by the visible hand” (Munteán 2016: 8). We also infer from the renovated exterior of the present-day house that the following account of Zhao’s infiltration took place some time ago and is therefore being presented to us as a memory. Zhao has clarified elsewhere that *Chaonei 81* holds special significance for him as his first UE site. In a 2015 article published under his alias *Huaite Zei* 懷特賊, he writes:

In the autumn of 2006, I was a second-year university student who had nothing to do other than turn up to a few useful and not-so-useful classes. One day on an Internet forum, I came across an article full of rumours about Beijing’s famous “haunted house.” The article contained a photograph of a blue door, marked with a few characters in red paint: “Chaonei 81.”³³

- 34 Accordingly, Zhao’s “Dear Photograph” rendering of *Chaonei 81* encapsulates his nostalgia both for the site in its once-derelict state and the days of his own youth.
- 35 The *Cooling Plan* repeats the widespread belief that the house was built as a language training centre by American missionaries in 1910, but according to Beijing historian Wang Lanshun 王蘭順, it was actually built in 1921 for the French engineer Georges Boulliard and his wife Zhu Derong 朱德容 (2014). Zhu continued to live in the house after Boulliard’s death in 1930, renting out rooms to foreign missionaries and eventually selling the property to a Catholic priest in 1948. It subsequently came into the ownership of the Beijing Catholic Diocese, and in 1994, it was flagged for demolition. However, this was never completed, and the house fell into disrepair.³⁴ *Chaonei 81* subsequently became known on the Internet as one of the “Four Haunted

Houses” of Beijing, and grew especially popular as an exploration site after it inspired Raymond Yip’s 2014 horror film *The House That Never Dies* (*Jing cheng 81 hao* 京城81號).³⁵ Wang Lanshun has dryly noted that the high number of “novelty seekers and exploration fans” (*Lieqi zhe, tanxian mi* 獵奇者, 探險迷) turned the supposed ghost house into a “noisy house” (*naowu* 鬧屋) (2014: 51).

- 36 In the accompanying text to the photo series, Zhao distances himself from the ghost tourist crowd, channelling the authority of his explorer persona and telling his viewer that “there is ultimately nothing frightening about this place” (*Qishi zheli de jiben tan bu shang shenme kongbu* 其實這裡的基本談不上什麼恐怖). His photographs endeavour to demystify the building as far as ghosts are concerned, although they are still far more invested in the affective aura of the ruin than in actual historical investigation. They are loosely arranged as a house tour, taking the viewer back in time to the old entrance gates and then through the various chambers and levels of the building. They revere the site as a space of decay, but also recognise the role of the house as an alternate thoroughfare for those in the know. For instance, some rooms contain paraphernalia left behind by other visitors, and the walls are covered in graffiti. Zhao writes that, in lieu of horror stories, he is most drawn towards the “sharp [visual] contrast” (*xianming duibi* 鮮明對比) between Chaonei 81 and the ostentatious Chaoyangmen neighbourhood where it is located. Accordingly, his final image situates Chaonei 81 within the mainstream city, revealing the everyday architecture and cars scattered around the secret world of the ruin and evoking the sense of exclusivity characteristic to the UE experience. Zhao’s images also contain staged scenes of imaginative conjecture: in two photographs, he gives the space a surreal and uncanny quality through the use of coloured lights, and in another, he poses in a gas mask costume (Figure 4).

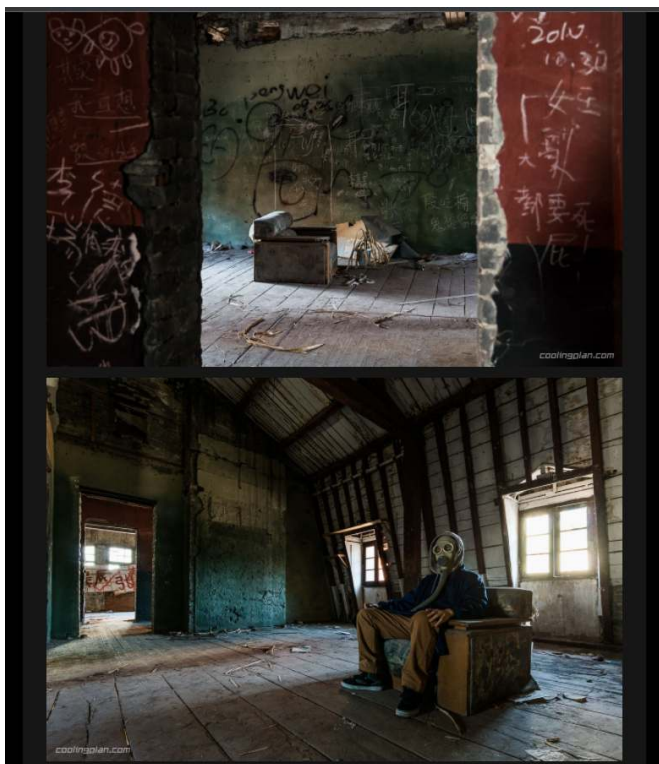


Figure 4. Images 6 and 7 from the *Chaonei 81* photo series (2006-2013) on the *Cooling Plan* website, Zhao Yang. Credit: screenshot by the author.

- 37 Like the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration group, Zhao's shadowy explorer-self is a performative construct, and could be regarded as a form of adult simulative play, defined by Quentin Stevens as "the fabrication of a different character or situation" (2007: 39). He continues by explaining how "simulative acts create the impression of the logic of a world, but a world which is never real, because the simulated actions do not carry real consequences" (*ibid.*). For Zhao, the ruin enables him to retreat from the everyday city and into the state of imaginative play captured in this mediation of fantasy and reality. It may be precisely because of this that Zhao and other urbexers display little genuine interest in the historicity of their sites: to know too much would upset the fantasy.

Conclusion

- 38 Zhao depicts his relationship to the city as one that enables him to flit between peopled and unpeopled space, catching moments of personal respite in the urban heart of Beijing. Recalling Yu Qiuyu's vision of ruins as a symbol of becoming, Zhao's visual narratives, in their semi-complete yet creatively charged states, show a private world captured in its moments of drafting and construction.
- 39 There is far more research waiting to be carried out on subcultural urban practices in China, particularly on related pursuits such as rooftopping, parkour, and drone photography, which have seen increasing levels of public interest over the past decade and have developed a distinct aesthetic of their own. An ethnographic study of the Chinese urbex scene would also provide valuable insight into the interior workings of the subculture. By concentrating on personal accounts and creative articulations of the practice here, however, I have set out to show that the practice of urbex has been positioned in the Sinosphere as a unique coping strategy for city dwellers struggling with boredom. The ludic nature of UE is used to mediate the impact of the seen city, creating a rich inner world and alter ego that, in turn, enables the explorer to cope with the psychic pressures of urban modernity in China.
- 40 In contrast to the prevailing art world vision of the ruin, which typically concentrates on traumatic representations of the ruin, UE articulations present the ruin as a wild, exhilarating environment that lends itself to creativity and play. Moreover, it is a subcultural movement that is theoretically open to everyone, seeking to inspire participants and offering new ways of engaging with urban degradation and redevelopment. With a form of creative output aimed at browsers on the Internet and community insiders, rather than audiences in gallery spaces and arthouse cinemas, China's urbexers seek to draw their viewers into the alluring B-side of a city that exists in a collective imagination.

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NOTES

1. Wu Hung attributes this view of the ruin to two main reasons, the first being that Chinese buildings were traditionally made out of ephemeral materials such as timber that, unlike stone, would fully disintegrate if not cared for; and secondly, that loss in premodern Chinese art was represented metaphorically rather than pictorially, and an actual ruin image "would imply inauspiciousness and danger" (2012: 8, 94).
2. *Chai na* (拆那) means "demolish it/there."
3. To my knowledge, the only study on China-based urban exploration has been Judith Audin's ethnographic article on Chinese ruins and urban exploration as method (2018).
4. See, for example: Liu Xinwei 劉馨蔚, "罕有人踏足的廢墟 - 帶你領略廢墟之美" (*Hanyou ren tazu de feixu - dai ni linglüe feixu zhi mei*, Rarely Trodden Ruins - Bringing You to Appreciate the Beauty of Ruins), *Xinhuanet* (新華網), 13 August 2017, http://m.xinhuanet.com/2017-08/13/c_136517981.htm (accessed on 11 November 2021).
5. However, it has become standard for practitioners themselves to trace the origins of the hobby back to Philibert Aspaire, a French doorkeeper who died while exploring the Paris Catacombs in 1793 and whose body was eventually discovered in 1804 (Ninjalicious 2005: 229). This origin myth, which is noteworthy in its framing of the hobby as for the everyman, is cited regularly across Chinese UE forums and in journalistic features on UE. For example, Cheng Sai 陳賽 and Shang Jin 尚進, "城市探險: 人人都有一顆少年般的好奇心" (*Chengshi tanxian: renren dou you yi ke shaonianban de haoqixin*, Urban Exploration: Everyone Has a Child-like Curiosity), *Sanlian Lifeweek* (三聯生活周刊), 8 August 2005, <http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2005/0808/12736.shtml> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
6. The Chinese example does not resonate well with Bradley Garrett's view of UE, which argues that "Urban exploration is not about aesthetics of decay," but rather "a praxis that challenges dominant hegemonic spatial control through tactical urban infiltration" and is "about experiencing the world in the here and now" (2012b).
7. The term "ruin porn" was reportedly first coined by the photographer James Griffioen as he railed against the exploitative behaviour of "outsider" photographers flooding into postindustrial Detroit, seeking gratuitously derelict shots of a city now synonymous with ruin for

their blog content. See Thomas Morton, “Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff,” *VICE*, 1 August 2009, <https://www.vice.com/da/article/ppzb9z/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

8. The year 2005 is cited on the *chengshi tanxian* entry on the Baidu Encyclopaedia entry, across UE forums, and in media features, e.g. Bao Xiaoxia 鮑曉霞, “圖片故事: 靈魂廢墟” (*Tupian gushi: linghun feixu*, Photo-essay: Soul Ruins), *Southern People Weekly* (南方人物周刊), 1 June 2015, <https://www.nfpeople.com/article/4111> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

9. C60, “新人必讀: 城市探險者基本準則” (*Xinren bi du: chengshi tanxianzhe jiben zhunze*, Newcomers Must Read: Basic Guidelines for Urban Explorers), *UERChina*, 21 October 2016, <http://www.uerchina.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=629> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

10. Due to the intrinsically secretive nature of UE, it is unfeasible to accurately determine how many hobbyists participate across any country. However, as a general indicator of interest levels, the UERChina forums had over 11,000 registered users; the Fotiaoqiang Ruins Exploration Douban group had over 40,000; and the Beijing Ruins Exploration Group Douban group had over 15,000 followers at the time of writing.

11. Outside the Mainland, UE groups such as HKUrbex operate in a different political climate and position themselves accordingly. For example, HKUrbex are quoted in a *New York Times* profile as saying, “[Their] videos are visual expressions of the ‘localist’ political movement that has recently gained support in Hong Kong and reflects a conviction among many younger people that their city’s identity is distinct from that of the Chinese Mainland.” Mike Ives, “Using Stealth, and Drones, to Document a Fading Hong Kong,” *New York Times*, 7 February 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/world/asia/hong-kong-historical-preservation.html (accessed on 11 November 2021).

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13. Ran Pan 然潘, “我是廢墟探險者然潘, 在城市廢墟中探險是什麼體驗, 問我吧!” (*Wo shi feixu tanxianzhe Ran Pan, zai chengshi feixu zhong tanxian shi shenme tiyan, wen wo ba!*, I am the Urban Explorer Ran Pan, Go Ahead and Ask Me about What One Can Experience while Exploring Urban Ruins!), *The Paper* (澎湃), 30 July 2018, https://www.thepaper.cn/asktopic_detail_10013023 (accessed on 11 November 2021).

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17. Xu Ye 許曄, “厭倦城市? 逃離北上廣? 詩和遠方? 可你從來沒有真正了解這座城市” (*Yanjuan chengshi? Taoli Bei Shang Guang? Shi he yuanfang? Ke ni conglai meiyou zhenzheng liaojie zhe zuo chengshi*, Tired of the City? Want to Escape Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou? Thinking of Poetry and Far off Places? But You've Never Really Understood the City), *ifeng culture* (鳳凰文化), 20 June 2017, <https://iculture.ifeng.com/51286731/news.shtml> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

18. Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration 北京斥候城探戰術小隊, “起源巴黎人骨洞, 風靡歐洲多年, 國內城市探險運動正在崛起” (*Qiyuan Bali rengudong, fengmi Ouzhou duonian*,

guonei chengshi tanxian yundong zhengzai jueqi, Originating from the Catacombs of Paris, and Popular in Europe for Many Years, Chinese Urban Exploration is Now on the Rise), Tencent Video (騰訊視頻), 9 June 2017, <https://v.qq.com/x/page/w0512tyxt2z.html> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

19. Jiang Shan 江山, “城市廢墟探險家(...)” (*Chengshi feixu tanxianjia (...)*, Urban Ruin Explorer (...)), *op. cit.*

20. Xu Ye 許曄, “厭倦城市? (...)” (*Yanjuan chengshi? (...)*, Tired of the City? (...)), *op. cit.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Cheng Sai 陳賽 and Shang Jin 尚進, “城市探險 (...)” (*Chengshi tanxian (...)*, Urban Exploration (...)), *op. cit.*

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24. Tom Phillips, “Crouching Trekker, Hidden Buildings: China’s Urban Explorers,” *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/oct/29/china-urban-explorers> (accessed on 28 January 2021).

25. For more on *renao* as a desirable urban trait in China, see Farquhar and Zhang (2012: 306).

26. A ubiquitous pose in UE photography, Bradley Garrett’s definition of a hero shot is “a highly stylised photo of an explorer looking smug about an accomplishment in a location” (2013a: 269).

27. Zhao Yang 趙陽, “軍醫院” (*Jun yiyuan*, Military Hospital), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/視頻/視頻-軍醫院/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).

28. Zhao Yang 趙陽, “首鋼冷卻幕後” (*Shougang lengque muhou*, Behind the Scenes of Shougang Cooling), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/視頻/視頻-首鋼冷卻-幕後/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).

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30. Zhao Yang 趙陽, “上義師範學校” (*Shangyi shifan xuexiao*, Shangyi Normal School), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/攝影/上義師範學校/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).

31. Zhao Yang 趙陽, “朝內81號” (*Chaonei 81 hao*, Chaonei 81), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/攝影/朝內81號/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).

32. “Dear Photograph” is a composition style that went viral on the Internet in 2011 (Munteán 2016).

33. Huaite Zei 懷特賊, “攝影師趙陽跟我們談談‘朝內81號’如何讓他成為了一名廢墟探險愛好者” (*Sheyingshi Zhao Yang gen women tantan “Chaonei 81 hao” ruhe rang ta chengwei le yi ming feixu tanxian aihaozhe*, Photographer Zhao Yang Talks to Us About How “Chaonei 81” Turned Him into a Keen Urban Explorer), *VICE*, 8 September 2015, <http://web.archive.org/web/20160422091920/www.vice.cn/read/cooling-plan-20150908> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

34. Wang Lanshun attributes delays in the process to bureaucratic reasons, e.g. problems with the economic compensation to residents (2014: 55).

35. The Baidu Encyclopaedia entry for “*Chaoyangmennei dajie 81 hao*” provides several examples of some of the ghost stories associated with the building, e.g. on a full moon night, one can hear the sound of glass bottles being thrown about inside. See Baidu Encyclopaedia 百度百科, “朝陽門內大街81號” (*Chaoyangmennei dajie 81 hao*, 81 Chaoyangmennei Street), <https://baike.baidu.com/item/朝陽門內大街81號> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

ABSTRACTS

Ruins and rubble have become a ubiquitous feature of the urbanising Chinese landscape. They have also become key motifs in Chinese visual culture, and artists have used the ruin image to critically comment on post-reform urban development. This article, however, seeks to bring an overlooked dimension of ruin representation to light: the creative culture of China's "urban explorers," who infiltrate obsolete architecture for their own recreational purposes. It shows how the derelict spaces portrayed by the explorers' visual and textual accounts have a ludic potency of their own, with the urban ruin depicted as a site of embodied and aesthetic pleasure. The article ends by discussing the example of urban explorer Zhao Yang and his *Cooling Plan* photography project, which frames the ruin as a creative retreat from the pressures of the lived city.

INDEX

Keywords: urban exploration, urbex, ruins, ruin photography, Zhao Yang, the Cooling Plan, Chaonei 81.

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In the Midst of Rubble, Bordering the Wasteland: Landscapes of Ruins and Childhood Experiences in China

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Introduction – Following Chinese children far from urban centres: The trail of ruins

There exist many areas in China today characterised by their decaying buildings, at one and the same time the underside and corollary of the gigantic urban building site that is transforming the country (Audin 2017). This article sets out to explore these landscapes of ruins through the links that the children who experience them in their daily lives forge with them. We are mainly acquainted with the tribulations of Chinese only children, the “little emperors” (Chicharro 2010) about whom much has been written but who are essentially city children, since the law was very soon made more flexible for rural areas. The ruins, which are not all in the countryside, far from it, but which are almost all at a distance from the urban centres in one way or another, have led us to pay attention to other varieties of childhood in China.

In fact, the childhoods dealt with here have already attracted a great deal of attention from the Chinese social sciences, but in a generally negative way. These are the children of “migrant workers” (*nongmingong zinu* 農民工子女) and children “left behind” in the countryside (*liushou ertong* 留守兒童). The former, accompanying their parents who have come to seek work in the city, cannot attend the public schools financed by the local authorities (Froissart 2003), although the situation has evolved in small cities. In Chinese literature specialising in the subject, produced by psychologists and specialists in the sciences of education, these children are, in addition, supposedly victims of a poor upbringing by their families and suffer from severe psychological problems linked to low self-esteem (*zibeigan* 自卑感, a keyword in this type of literature) (Shen 2007). The psychological portrait painted of the second category of children does not fundamentally differ from the first: suffering from the absence of their parents, left with uneducated grandparents and attending backward rural schools, they are said to develop all manner of “deviant behaviour” (Duan *et al.* 2013). These problems, disseminated in the Chinese media and around which a great consensus exists, are familiar to most educated Chinese. Where a social sciences pluralist vision would seem to call for a variety of accounts and representations, the scientific approaches I have been able to study so far on these children seem on the contrary to be unequivocal. It is also prescriptive, leaving little room for a reflexive position where the researcher’s values and norms are the first to be questioned. Lastly, it is top-down – the same questions appearing each year in the funding orientations of Chinese research – and as a result, locked into the same issues. As we can see, it is not so much the categories of debate that are open to question here, like they do in the work of “deconstruction,” as the *modes of determination* used, that is, the logic by which certain characteristics are attributed to these categories. Psychological and educational problems are associated with specific populations (children of migrants and rural children), which are defined by political categories (“*nongmingong zinu*” and “*liushou ertong*”) and inscribed within a fixed geography (the country and peripheries of cities where the migrants have settled): everything is already in place, the debate seems to be closed in advance.

The aim of this article is not to study in detail this closure of the debate – which depends as much on the particularity of the children’s social position, scarcely able to utter a discordant word, as on the limits of pluralism in social sciences in China and on current globalised models of research funding – but rather to open it out by taking the experiences of these children as a starting point in a bottom-up approach. Stepping aside to observe what interests the children themselves, and follow them in their wanderings, instead of starting with the educational problems that we – the adults who worry about them – perceive, allows the emergence of the parts of their experience that cannot find a place in the current discourse. The ruins offer a privileged entry point for this project that is both modest – it cannot be more than a side entrance into these childhoods and cannot paint a complete picture – and ambitious, since it is the very modalities of the discourse on these children that are being questioned. What do these ruins mean for the children? What type of “affordances” (Gibson 2014), that is, what tangible possibilities do they offer? What do they allow, what constraints do they exercise, what quality of experience do they accompany? And conversely, what does the nearby presence of children, or lack of same, mean for these landscapes? It is a question of revealing the variable architectures of the links that humans forge with the

places they inhabit or leave, and which create very different environments for the children.

This research is based on two ethnographic surveys, each of which highlights these differences in environment. The first was in Shanghai, in a dilapidated industrial neighbourhood between 2006 and 2008 before the complete renovation of the neighbourhood. It was inhabited solely by *nongmingong*, sometimes hired on the spot to demolish the old buildings where the families themselves lived. To gain access to the site and to be identifiable by the children and their parents, I was their English teacher in a poor-quality private school, where I also lived for a term. I gave private lessons in some families as well. The second survey was carried out amongst country children in a town (*zhen* 鎮) in the mountains of Guangdong Province, about two hours from Meizhou, the city (*shi* 市) on which this town depended. The town had just over 20,000 inhabitants, but most of the young people, here as elsewhere, had left to look for work in the city. The town's primary school was attended by around 700 children from surrounding villages that had previously had their own schools. I was an English teacher there for four months, from September to December 2019. The gap of ten years between the two surveys can be explained by the difficulties inherent in accessing this type of area for fieldwork in China but does not detract from the demonstration. Whilst not timeless nor covered by the Chinese media's topical events, it is part of fundamental demographic, educational, and social trends that slowly evolve and, in fact, have become increasingly pronounced over the last ten years. In both sites, the children of the primary school where I taught are the privileged protagonists of the survey.

This approach intends to be distinctive both in its theoretical tools and in its methodological particularities (first section). A dynamic of concentration will then be studied (second section) followed by a dynamic of dispersion (third section), in which the children's relationships with the very different ruins that surround them are bound up. In conclusion, I will return briefly to the limits of the current modes of determination in the scientific discourse regarding these children and the conditions under which an opening up may be possible, issuing notably from the fields of geography and demography.

Theory and method: Determinations, structural dynamics, and ethnography of the children's independent journeys

The issues raised in this article were inspired by Gilles Deleuze. It is a question not of understanding "the" environment of migrants or "the" rural environment but *an* environment that the children explore or pass through at a given moment, and *some* of the environments into which they find themselves plunged one after the other – with the indefinite article serving as a first prompt in moving towards another way of considering the question of determination (Deleuze 1993: 81). The expression of this question in social science terms involves both finding theoretical landmarks within these traditions that leave room for this plurality and using a methodology that can reproduce this exploration empirically. The scene that follows makes my position on these two points clear. It takes place during the Shanghai fieldwork, in the very dilapidated neighbourhood in the process of being demolished, and where only

migrants live. The year is 2008, shortly after the particularly deadly earthquake of 12 May that shook Sichuan, of which images of devastation were played continuously on Chinese television. I had just given an English lesson to Ni Zheng, who was in the fifth year of primary school. It was already dark outside:

Stroll through the neighbourhood in the evening after the lesson – Ni Zheng insists on accompanying me back to the bus station, a quarter of an hour away. He spontaneously suggests we enter the area of wasteland, taking us a little out of our way. As we walk through the very heart of the demolition zone, he remarks: “Here is like Sichuan after the earthquake.” We go to the house of one of his friends, another pupil from the old school, but it is also the place where he used to live before – as we are climbing a little staircase to enter his neighbours’ room which is upstairs, he says, “My house was there,” pointing out a place right next to it that had been destroyed. Then he pushes open the door, hesitantly nonetheless, at the same time as he glances inside and announces his arrival. The mother is getting ready to wash her son and they are watching TV. The mother greets me very graciously, and when Ni Zheng tells her I give him lessons, she asks me if I live nearby. (...) I’m on my way, out of politeness Ni Zheng asks me if I can find my way. I leave, all three come out onto the doorstep to say goodbye before going back in to watch TV. (Field notes, Friday 6 June 2008)¹

Three fundamental acts in the way children organise their “spatial practices” (de Certeau 1980) emerge from this scene, three acts that exist in varying degrees in other analogous scenes and that I will take account of here without, however, placing them on the same level or bestowing the same importance upon them. The first act is *positioning* oneself: it occurs when Ni Zheng places his own living environment in relation to that of Sichuan in a brief comparison. The second consists of *directing* oneself within the immediate environment: this occurs when the child chooses to change our route, based on his former landmarks (“my house was there”). The third consists in finally *accommodating* oneself to an environment, with the constraints that it implies and what it allows: accommodating my presence, for example, coping with the absence of his former house, taking advantage of the presence of another family that he knows, etc.

Yet, these three acts each throw down a bridge towards different forms of determination. When the child positions themselves within a fixed frame of reference, their act is superimposed upon that of an outside authority positioning them in that they are in such a region rather than another, in the city or in the countryside, in *such* an environment, *such* a type of family, etc. It represents an opening for reflection on determination in the classic sense of the term (an individual is determined by their position on a geographic or social map). When the child directs themselves within their immediate environment, on the other hand, when they give a direction, follow their own wishes, pursues their objectives, it is less a question of external determination than self-determination. Lastly, the act of accommodation reveals a third register that is neither that of external determination nor that of self-determination, but that of a form of reciprocal, multiple determination between the children and their environment. It is this that I would like to follow in more detail here. However, the three acts and the three registers of determination identified here are all essential. Therefore, the theoretical framework I suggest here takes into account, in its way, the question of external determination through a structural stance (i). The methodological approach, for its part, integrates the determination that children can demonstrate if one let themselves be guided by them (ii).

How one can express, in theoretical terms, the differentiated experiences of the ruins by the children? The landscape of rubble and demolished houses around us was not the result, unlike Sichuan, of a natural disaster that had happened in the present. It was the result of a sharing of the urban space, in which certain individuals saw themselves relegated to housing in residual spaces unwanted by others. The position of some is thus linked to that of the others: this is a question of *structural geography*, the name of a theoretical current I am drawing on here (Desmarais 2001), which follows two axes. The first concerns the political control that shapes the trajectories of individuals: in simple terms, certain people can decide on the arrival point of their trajectory (referred to as “endoregulated”). These are the “selective nomads” who converge towards what might be called elective spaces, the urban hyper-centres where everyone wants to live. Others, “sedentary persons” and “residual nomads,” are forced to live in abandoned and denigrated spaces (“exoregulated” trajectories) such as rural areas or the type of urban peripheries we are concerned with here – with a spectrum of circumstances ranging from one extreme to the other. This political line, originally developed in historical geography research in France and Canada (Desmarais and Ritchot 2000), can be applied very easily to contemporary China, with its system of administrative registration (*hukou* 户口) that differentiates individuals by classing them as “rural” or “urban,” and under which their social benefits are dependent upon their place of origin, a system that is no less important today.

The second axis regards the collective form of these trajectories, which are “polarising” (when many trajectories converge on regions or places) or “diffusing” (when, on the contrary, the trajectories of individuals lead them to draw apart from one another, creating a dynamic of living together completely different).

Table 1. Desmarais’ four settlement dynamics (2001)

Trajectories...	... endoregulated	... exoregulated
... polarising	Gathering	Concentration
... diffusing	Escape	Dispersion

The third column especially applies to the fieldworks here.

The two dynamics of *concentration* (exoregulation and polarising) and *dispersion* (exoregulation and diffusing) thus give the framework through which one can understand the different types of ruins the children encounter. This framework makes it possible to consider structural logic that is not in play here and now, without, however, being determinist and fixed.

This geography of childhood is here based on innovative material: the *ethnographic account* rather than the map, completed here by photographs. The children knew me as a teacher and a neighbour and were usually happy to see me, to chat, and sometimes to have me take part in their games. In my work of participatory observation, there were privileged moments such as the one I have described with Ni Zheng that emerged during *independent outdoor journeys* and would seem to be a real little research protocol in themselves. Sometimes I accompanied the children when they already had a destination in mind, while at other times I asked them to show me round the

neighbourhood, but in every case, I endeavoured to allow myself to be guided by them. Even though my presence obviously influenced the events that followed, these scenes nonetheless reveal the interests, the repertoires of actions, and the landmarks of the children themselves. The subjects of focus, the concern to leave the initiative to the children, amount to taking account of what Anglophone childhood studies call the children's *agency*, and which is one of the main contributions claimed by this movement (Bühler-Niederberger 2010). Although the insistence on attributing *agency* to the children sometimes takes on an ideological turn (Lancy 2012), this school of thought has nonetheless radically transformed the way in which the relationship of children to surveys is seen in the social sciences, including the methodology. In this case, following the children's unrestricted outdoor wanderings is a particular example of this tendency, suited to fieldworks where children are often outdoors, with greater freedom and less homework or extracurricular activities than other children in China, and consequently a more obvious participation in public life (Breviglieri 2014).

Concentration and dilapidated habitat: Organising space under collective pressure

Concentration designates the areas of relegation where many migratory trajectories converge, most often linked to economic imbalances. They are the trajectories of "residual nomads" who settle where they can. These dynamics can be found, *mutatis mutandis*, everywhere in the world and in different forms: slums, migrant camps, rundown suburbs in France, or the downtowns in the United States. In China, the urbanisation goes along with the multiplication of offset areas, threshold areas, and enclosed spaces where subsist the remains of former villages, workshops, warehouses, or wasteland from previous eras. In Shanghai, these spaces are deemed the "intermediary zones between the city and the country" (*chengxiang jiehebu* 城鄉結合部). Enclaves where newly arrived migrants can lead a "life amidst rubble" (Richaud and Amin 2020), at least temporarily, are therefore becoming more numerous. With its buildings inherited from the workshops and warehouses of the industrial period that can be found in many of the modern landscapes of ruins (Mah 2012), its half-demolished houses, the frequent passage of lorries, the dust, the noise from the nearby ring road, and the building sites on all sides that represent the horizon line and punctuate the removals, the neighbourhood where I conducted my research provided a striking example of this type of environment.



FIGURE 1. A child shows some fruit, which he has just picked up in a neighbouring garden, to his mother, who is cooking at the doorstep on the second floor of a temporary house. Credit: author.

The following scene is centred on Ni Zheng's classmate Mao Feng, to whom I also gave English lessons:

As I am approaching his home to give him a lesson at around 5:20 p.m., I encounter Mao Feng who is going in the opposite direction without seeing me. He is holding two badminton rackets and nibbling a stick of sugar cane. I call out to him, he replies that he will be back in half an hour, I ask him if I can come with him. Interesting walk across the whole neighbourhood in an area that I hardly know, where another school for migrants had been demolished more than a year ago. What strikes me is, on the one hand, the greater number of children playing there, and on the other hand, the extent of the destruction, with particularly impressive landscapes. Yet, order seems nonetheless to exist in this chaos for Mao Feng, who stops twice in small shops to buy an ice cream and a shuttlecock. Finally, we arrive in front of a large door in rusty metal – he shouts out to call a classmate who lives upstairs, but who is clearly absent. After ten minutes, we set off in the opposite direction. During the entire trip, he encounters classmates who call out to him; he also encounters a neighbour who asks him what he is doing (in a strict voice, but which does not alarm Mao Feng for one second), and an aunt. Once home, the mother tells me I can give my lesson after eating and encourages me to “play” (wan 玩) a little with Mao Feng in the meantime. But he has already settled down in the backroom to watch a film. (Field notes, Friday 21 March 2008)

Where my stranger's eyes only see chaos, order emerges via Mao Feng's journey, demonstrated by the great sense of ease shown by the child throughout it. It is an order performed in several acts: the organisation of the familiar environment is reasserted by a set of actions that punctuate our progress, through little supports – rackets, purchases, sweets – and familiar landmarks – the shops, his aunt's house, his friend's. It is also a collective order, directly involving other players: the school friends who call out to him and exchange a few words along the way, reaffirming a form of mutual acquaintance and raising the possibility of games; the adults – the aunt, the neighbour,

and the researcher-teacher – who, at the same time as they provide support, also exercise repeated micro-control, thereby supervising the child's walk. This is the essential characteristic of the environment of concentration: daily activities are carried out under the pressure exercised by the presence of others. Even in the final moments of the scene, the moment of withdrawal when Mao Feng is watching a film, the others are never far away since he is in the backroom that serves as a cybercafé, equipped with several computers where people come and go, and in addition, his mother expects him to look after the guest in some way.

In this respect, the dilapidated buildings that characterise the neighbourhood represent both proximity to others through the porosity of boundaries, and repeated attacks on the strength and durability of separations, evident in the cracks, the damage, and collapse visible almost everywhere; and the constant erosion – the rubble and rubbish – that takes over the common space. The outdoor environment was thus marked by the dust, pollution from lorries, rubble, and various pieces of debris. This environment seems to correspond to the image of dirt long associated with migrants, despite the efforts of researchers to denounce this stigma (Davin 1996; Florence 2006), that the players, great and small, must accommodate (Zhou 2016; Wu and Zhang 2019). There is, however, a logic of *fold* (“*pli*,” Deleuze 1988) at work in which the interior is organised on and against the exterior, and which serves to protect oneself from this harmful environment. School, for example, is a pleat (“*repli*”), weakened by attempts to encroach on its space by all those who do not belong to the world of education (Salgues 2012b: 135-6), but which allows order to be imposed on the outside. The following scene that took place during “Childhood Day” (celebrated on 1 June in China) highlights this collective dimension through the management of cleanliness:

Celebratory atmosphere in the primary school: an extremely cheap ice-cream is given to all the children. I go and take a look at the fifth years: the tables have been organised to form a square, leaving a big space in the middle, where a large heap of rubbish, ice-cream wrappers, sunflower seed shells and so forth, is accumulating – at the end of the day the children will sweep the dirt floor, and everything will have been cleaned up. In the sixth-year classroom the tables are organised in the same way but without the rubbish: in the middle of the room, a group of pupils, girls, are putting on a show. (Field notes, Thursday 1 June 2006)

The clean and the dirty are the subject of an *agreement in situ* here – this is different from an external norm that might disqualify the individuals, as when the school is subject to health checks by the local authorities, who might conclude by citing these problems to justify closing the school. The agreement is not either just a simple *habitus* applied mechanically by individuals: there might be a rural *habitus* transmitted by the parents, but at least it has been reactivated in accordance with the agreement that has been arrived at – the way to manage things changes in the class next door. The perimeter of this agreement may vary and these folds and pleats be repeated at other levels: the street as a fold, for example, when space and traffic allow. Hair-washing, washing children in the street in basins, bears witness to an agreement on what can be shown as well as on the way to manage what the body produces as waste, such as dirty water, etc. Water, in fact, plays an essential role in the common concern for hygiene, both because access to it is common (an outside tap supplies several houses; there are also sellers of boiled water), and because it is the water used for washing or cooking meals that will then be thrown out to carry away the waste thrown on the ground. The limits of the common agreement are therefore the limits of the environment in which the child finds themselves at any given moment, the former vary along with the latter:

the ring road, after which starts an urban neighbourhood that corresponds more closely to Shanghai's cleanliness norms, or where the wastelands that mark the edges of the space where migrants are concentrated, represent the frontiers between different milieus governed by different agreements, but between which the children constantly navigate.²



FIGURE 2. Some women gather at a water point. In front of her house, a girl in primary school does her homework. Credit: author.

The architecture of life in common in these living spaces marked by concentration is not solely vertical in a logic of folds and pleats. It is also horizontal, gradually transforming surrounding people into neighbours whose presence is truly felt in this closely packed environment. In these conditions, a household will organise the sharing of its space in a way that does not exclude the other from an intimacy that has been barely invested in these temporary lodgings, but on the contrary, always maintains an open door to them (literally). Against a background of constant comings and goings, the need to create a place for everyone in addition to a network that spreads out across the neighbourhood and beyond the family, place of origin or province, is a concrete implementation of the “right to the city” (Harvey 2008), of which Ling Minhua (2019: 199) recalls the importance when considering the integration of young *nongmingong* in Shanghai. Amongst the children, ethnography thus highlights many everyday acts of *hospitality* that demonstrate this concern. The two scenes described above with Ni Zheng and Mao Feng end with a moment of hospitality. On both occasions, the child deferred to an adult woman to welcome me. Therefore, in this case hospitality was shared between ages and genders. At the same time, there is a common repertoire that the children learn to master very early: every pupil, if they saw me in the street, suggested I come to sit down in their house, even in the absence of an adult – and would pour me some hot water and a little tea if they had any, and offered me some sunflower seeds. This is certainly an ordinary everyday gesture, even though in this

case it is highlighted by the extraordinary presence of a foreigner – but it is a characteristic of the position of ethnographers doing a distant fieldwork, to raise, by their very presence, the question of the forms that hospitality takes in the places they are invited (Stavo-Debaugé 2017: 12).

We can compare the political architecture that emerges from this picture to that of a different type of Chinese childhood, that of “gathering,” of which the ideal type is the only child under permanent pressure to succeed at school and living in the high tower blocks of a much-coveted neighbourhood – although the situation of most urban Chinese children lies in a hybrid arrangement somewhere between the two extremes. In the migrant neighbourhood, everyone was simply renting or even occupying at no charge, sometimes for a very short period, a dwelling that is often summarily converted from former dilapidated industrial premises. Conversely, space in neighbourhoods where property prices are soaring is thought of from the outset as *private property*. This difference cannot but be essential. The “right to the city” previously mentioned is indeed fundamentally incompatible with the right to private property. The former considers that space should primarily be organised and arranged for everyone; the second, on the other hand, has as its starting point the appropriation of a place by an individual. There is conspicuous order in gathering spaces, order that is paid for in hard cash (street cleaning by professionals, landscaping of the gardens in private homes) and where external *norms* take precedence over the *agreement in situ*. In these urban centres, the very organisation of the space increases the number of partitions (moreover, apartments in China have two superimposed front doors) and maps out divisions in the very configuration of the apartments, and even before they are occupied by a family. For the children concerned, this signifies a world mainly organised away from the public eye, with grandparents playing an important role in anchoring their activity within the family home. There is obviously no longer any question of everyday gestures of hospitality in this context. The “bedroom culture” (Glevarec 2009) described by childhood and youth anthropologists in European and American fieldworks is therefore occupying an increasingly large place today in “gathering China.” This goes hand in hand with a great interest – valuing and concern – for the inner life of the child, displaying a modern childhood concern for psychologists. It is this concern that we find in the literature on the children of *nongmingong*, where their “inferiority complexes” are analysed in detail.

In my fieldwork, however, even when the children had their own bedroom – which was sometimes the case in the families I followed, depending on where they moved – they did not invest in them, leaving them completely empty. Living amid the rubble of a neighbourhood that is in the process of demolition does not mean that they crave urban order and private spaces that tend to shape lives of children at this age in the newer allotments and more privileged strata. Instead, it means another architecture of life in common where the permanent presence of many other people is one of the main affordances – inseparably both resource and constraint. At the same time as it differs from the gathering dynamics of the city-centres, this dynamic of concentration also differs from that of *dispersion*, which gives rise to the exploration of very different milieus.

Dispersion and abandoned places: The unpredictable marches in childhood experiences

Dispersion reveals less occupied, commonly empty spaces where the ruins are characterised by abandonment rather than by temporary occupation. The Chinese countryside frequently presents this type of landscape. In the rural fieldwork in the mountains near Meizhou, there is plenty of space (as testified by the many new houses, paid for by those who have left, always very spacious and three-quarters empty, even when occupied). The pace of life is slow (together with the quality of the air, this is the first thing mentioned by the inhabitants when vaunting the qualities of their environment) and there are mountains everywhere, synonymous with a certain degree of isolation. In demographic terms, it is children and above all elderly people who are the most numerous, since adults of working age have mostly left for the city. Here, the abandoned buildings are often houses or schools. The former can serve as storage places – this is the case with the collective houses of the Hakka people who live there, the *tulou* (土樓) dwellings famous in nearby Fujian but which have not enjoyed the same success among tourists here. The latter remain the scene of various activities: playgrounds for children, places to hang out washing, or where elderly adults meet to chat and play cards, in a context where time, which is not monetised, or very little, is plentiful. These landscapes of ruins therefore seem profoundly “aged”: shaped by the question of age, as in other contexts a question might be described as profoundly *gendered*.

However, even the rural areas should be considered dynamically. To see in them merely a logic of dispersion is understandable when viewed from the cities, but the children’s experience cannot be interpreted unilaterally from this distant point of view. The following scene took place one Saturday morning when I went out into the centre of the town:

I come across Yuanyuan, a third-year pupil. She was going to her grandparents’ house, but they were sleeping. We stroll about together, talking all the while. She takes me to the edge of the town, to a friend’s house who is not there, then in a completely different direction, to look for another friend. These are very old houses, we could be in a village; moreover, at my request we make a detour at one point through a little village on the edge of town. Yuanyuan complains that her slippers (she is wearing slippers!) are not suitable, that they will get dirty, and in fact they are getting wet. At one point, between the earth houses, she loudly remarks whilst holding her nose that there is a bad smell: from a local point of view, she really is a little “city-dweller.” We meet nobody. We also go through a little square equipped with play apparatus for children. Its situation on the periphery is significant – apart from us there are two small children driven there by their father on his motorbike.

We have some tea at her friend’s house. The mother is there as well as her elder brother who is in his second year of middle school. The mother explains that their *laojia* [老家, village of origin where each family possesses some land by right] is in the mountains, but that they rent this house so that the children are near their school. The rent is 50 *yuan* a month [less than 7 euros]. I ask what they have planned for their son when he finishes middle school. She answers me somewhat indirectly, telling me that he will certainly not be able to attend the big county (*xian* 縣,) high school. “If he studies in middle school, it’s better that he goes on to high school,” she says, but “we’ll have to see if he wants to or not; if he doesn’t like studying, there’s no point.” (Field notes, Saturday 14 December 2019)

We are in a town (*zhen*) that belongs to the world of rural China from an administrative point of view. Yet, this fixed, administrative cartography does not correspond to the children's everyday experience, still relative, of a lively, familiar centre and empty, potentially unsettling peripheries. For Yuanyuan, who lives in the town centre, her perceived configuration of the village where we make a detour (the mud, the smells, the absence of familiar landmarks) seems hostile, far from the more urban places where collective activities are concentrated – my casual remark about her “city-dweller” side in relation to the situation is completely justified. For her friend's mother, on the other hand, a house on the edge of a rural town that other people no longer want (and rented for almost nothing, even in the eyes of the locals) represents a move towards a more urban centre. However, the education of her son, if he wants and can continue it in high school (which is not compulsory after middle school and requires passing an exam), would suddenly reposition them in a different cartography, sending them back to their rural position far from the county's administrative centre (*xiancheng* 縣城). The final remark reported in the extract leads one to suppose that she would not willingly envisage this.

On the edge of public life and lively centres of childhood experience, wastelands thus emerge, the “marches” of common life – to use an old term that conveys the idea of these unfamiliar, largely uninhabited peripheral areas that are both disturbing and intriguing at the same time and limit the landscape of childhood. Abandoned buildings themselves are just one aspect of these spaces that are relatively difficult to define and as such, to circumscribe. However, there are signs, landmarks, “connectors or disconnectors of zones” that mark the “thresholds,” passages, and changes of milieu (Deleuze 1993: 82). Although the extract above mentions a small playing ground for children that is little invested because of its location, the children also take me twice to another, bigger park, which is isolated by the road and by its location on the other side of the river that borders the town, and where we cross paths with no one. My attention as a childhood ethnographer is immediately attracted by a derelict basketball pitch with rusted baskets – a vestige, observable in other areas, of a more active youth policy when the youth in question remained in the area. As for the children, they pay it no attention whatsoever; instead, it is the bust of a statue, in this constantly empty park, that interests them: a face carved into the stone but partly worn away, giving it a disturbing look that solicits their comments – “*hao kongbu!*” (好恐怖!, too scary!) (Figure 3). The semi-abandoned park and its basketball pitch are therefore part of a geography of vaguely worrying places for the children that I note in the course of our wanderings: during a stroll in a neighbouring village to the town, the eight-year-old child leading me indicates the limits of his field of exploration at a place where reputedly dangerous dogs are usually barking, even though we do not meet any on that particular day. One evening, I am walking back from the village towards the town with an eleven-year-old boy – he is there partly to accompany me and partly to run an errand, taking advantage of my presence to go out at night. However, he is keen to avoid the new, recently built road between the town and the same village, which is already in use but not yet equipped with lighting. “There may be snakes at night,” he explains. Rural areas today, experiencing the effects of Chinese growth, see the building of many roads, houses, and parks, but even in these new environments, the lack of any human presence gives these places their uncanny atmosphere, underlining the essential role of demography in the constitution of different milieus. Structural geography has suggested thinking in terms of the “oecumene”: an anthropised,

inhabited everyday world where social and common activities take place as opposed to the “ereme” – classically the forest or the desert, a world where humans are less obviously at home (Berque 2010). If we transpose these categories, it could be said that the buildings abandoned to a certain extent, the wasteland, the serpents, and the semi-wild dogs that are features of their neighbourhood, indicate something like the limit between the oecumene and the ereme in this childhood experience.



FIGURE 3. The scary statue. Credit: author.

The dynamic opposition between concentration and dispersion is not designed to reproduce the administrative opposition between urban and rural areas. Whilst it is true that within the rural world of the mountains, these “marches” of public life are particularly numerous, exacerbated by the departures and abandonment of a great number of houses, this type of environment is not unknown to the children, who, like those who live in Shanghai, have migrated to the cities. In these zones “between city and country,” urban life was concentrated in zones that were still habitable, but these were surrounded by many wastelands. The photos taken one afternoon with three sixth-year girls behind the house of one of them gives a glimpse of these wastelands all around. We wandered at random taking turns to take photos on which we can see the energy liberated by this environment – the water and mud, the wild vegetation, room to play, and lastly, the freedom, that these empty spaces confer (Figures 4 and 5). Even though we were not alone – other inhabitants of the neighbourhood were passing nearby and came to talk to us – the afternoon would have been very different if we had remained in the lanes around the houses themselves where everybody mixes. However, these wastelands are also places of vague disquiet – the girls told me they were not allowed to go there alone and spoke of rumours of organ theft.



FIGURE 4. Playing in the wasteland. Credit: author.



Figure 5. In the wasteland surrounding the last houses, there is always someone near. For this photo, the two girls have “borrowed” a baby from a passing mother. Two children are watching us in the background. Credit: author.

The situation of these borders of public life and the general disinterest towards them opens up a space for subjectification different from that shaped by human

concentration, but also limits their investment by children, and these abandoned places have never been a subject of lasting interest. Some children once took me to a closed park, on the outer edge of the neighbourhood beyond which wastelands stretched far out to a zone of buildings in the process of demolition. In this hostile environment next to a highway where vehicles and dust made the air unbreathable, the park offered a more hospitable landscape: certain zones were being demolished but others were still green, a waterway ran through it, and there were little stone pavilions where one could shelter. One only had to step over the gate to enter, and I went back alone several times in the hope of finding children playing there. The park itself was never empty: men and women were coming there to practice *tai-chi*, for example, as is very common in China. Nevertheless, it was not a landmark or a playground for children and adolescents (I noted just once, in my notes: “two children pass by but quickly leave”), and I soon abandoned this observation post. However, there was graffiti on the walls, rare indications of an adolescent or youth culture when young people were seldom present in the area: declarations of love, jokes, and complaints. It was clearly the abandoned nature of the park that allowed these inscriptions, forbidden elsewhere, to appear.

The special bond that can be forged between abandoned spaces and playful explorations during childhood has captured the imagination of specialists in both childhood (Clope and Jones 2005) and ruins (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). In my fieldworks, the abandoned spaces, linked to dispersion the phenomena, provide isolated places, suitable for secrets, exploration, and activities that, if not secret, are at least sensitive in areas that are more densely occupied, and therefore are more subject to control. They also provide more intense experiences, linked mainly to fear and its strange attractions. As a result, they are not unknown to the children, who willingly share impressions and stories on these matters. Abandoned, ominous places (“the scary statue,” “the places where there are organ thieves”) occupy a privileged place, next to the nursery rhymes and a pool of shared jokes, in the oral culture typical of that age. However, rather than occupying these abandoned areas where they could find a space of freedom, everything encourages them to turn towards more populous places to which everyone gravitates and to involve in activities that are socially valued by their elders, thus confining these ruins to their stories designed to frighten and to the margins of their everyday explorations.

Conclusion – Towards an alternative demo-geography of China: The trail of children

The aim of this article was to organise material collected through the ethnography of the children’s wanderings by following the dynamics that emerge from a structural analysis of the trajectories of families, between concentration and dispersion. Where the Chinese refer in an undifferentiated manner to “backward” environments (*luohou* 落後; which the French would label with an equally all-encompassing term, “disadvantaged” – “*défavorisé*”), a vision reinforced by the presence of buildings in ruins almost everywhere, plural dynamics of differentiation emerge. In each fieldwork, there are moments of centring and decentring, synonymous for the children with a plurality of milieus and experiences, between familiar territory and peripheral and sometimes disturbing marches, as well as other more urban territories, more or less

distant and structured to a greater extent by a dynamic of gathering. Above all, where the specialist literature in China reports scenes of moral bankruptcy with regard to education, or of humiliation, the children's experience reported here appears in a very different moral and affective light: concern for others and oneself, curiosity, games, activity, and all this even though this experience takes place in an environment that the adults, often including their parents and grandparents, would not wish for them – which was the starting point for the approach –, drawing away from “elective” urban territories occupied by the “selective nomads” who can. One must even go one step further and say that the interest and richness of the experiences reported here – participating in outdoor public life or the moments of hospitality, in the midst of temporary dwellings in areas of concentration, or exploration mingled with anxiety and moments of freedom in abandoned places in zones of dispersion – are *based on* this poor, dilapidated, or abandoned environment, and its special affordances. Such scenes, which naturally do not exclude other moments of boredom or closure, nonetheless contrast with the image commonly given of these children and this type of environment. Highlighting them does raise a question, however: do we not risk minimising the scandal represented by these children living amongst these damaged buildings next to brand-new neighbourhoods, and by the demographic and social crisis experienced by the rural world of which the abandoned buildings are a tangible sign?

This is a key issue. The frequent act of being scandalised by the living conditions of impoverished children provides a basis for, and incitation to, a political demand for justice and change. However, the activation of moral affect that accompanies this is not without harmful consequences, since it often leads to painting a picture of these populations that is one of wretchedness. In doing so, to what extent are we rendering a service to “the vast majority of left-behind children” by stating, with the worthy aim of drawing attention to their problems of education, that they are “introverted, troubled, pessimistic, asocial, more or less apathetic, poor at interpersonal communication, self-centred and blinkered, authoritarian, unthinking, have little self-control and are egocentric” (Guo 2005)? Moreover, this line of thought produces a mediocre geography and demography of childhood that reduces the environment relevant to the child to its family (when they are “left-behind”) or administrative (when they do not have the urban *hukou*) situation. This brings us back to the question, raised in the introduction, of the limits of the very rigid modes of determination characteristic of a certain configuration of knowledge/power. Yet, differences in citizenship and the considerable, scarcely justifiable economic inequalities should in themselves provide a sufficient motive for demanding greater social justice, *even when they are not necessarily accompanied by moral distress*. Only then can the opening up of a discursive space draw attention to other facets of these Chinese childhoods and to other modes of existence for a whole set of entities to which the children are linked – the ruined *buildings*, as well as the *populations*, with their variable densities and architectures of the common, the *wastelands* with their affects and areas of freedom, etc. Following these children far from urban centres, relying on a structural geography and qualitative demography, would open up alternative perspectives on China, rather in the manner of travellers who choose to distance themselves from the crowded streets where, at the risk of limiting their vision, almost the entire attention of visitors is concentrated.

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NOTES

1. I give more details of this passage elsewhere, where I analyse it from another perspective (Salgues 2012a).
 2. The agreement should not necessarily be thought of as a contract or a negotiation, which are just one very specific way in which human beings reach agreements amongst themselves, albeit a very important one in modern societies (Laugier 2008). Neither should it be thought of as necessarily horizontal. In the scene described here at school, the agreement on the forms that the dirty and the clean take mainly depends on the decision of the adults, the teachers. Speaking of an “agreement” does not assert a horizontality between players negotiating with each other but leads to reflect on ways to live in common that cannot be reduced to “a single model of social norms that cement groups of people” (Thévenot 1997).
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ABSTRACTS

Drawing from two ethnographic studies of children, one in a former industrial neighbourhood in the process of demolition in Shanghai, and the other in a rural town in Guangdong, this article explores the relationships children form with the landscape of ruins as they wander about with the aim of identifying the opportunities these offer in terms of games, freedom, and sharing, etc. The article analyses two different dynamics in the types of ruins and the experiences associated with them: *concentration* and *dispersion*. The structural geography and qualitative demography that emerge from this are barely mentioned in Chinese public debate, in its categories (children of “migrant workers” or “left-behind” children), its problems, and its very negative representations, but whilst they underline the unequal divisions in society, they also reveal a richness of experience that is far from being necessarily unhappy.

INDEX

Keywords: childhood, Shanghai, Guangdong, migrant workers, left-behind children, ruins, structural geography, qualitative demography, Deleuze, ethnography.

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Reconnecting Spatialities in Uninhabited Industrial Spaces: Ruination and Sense of Place in a Coal Town (Datong, Shanxi)

Judith Audin

EDITOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

An abandoned coal town: Kouquan

- 1 Located on Datong's outskirts, Kouquan Town used to be an important coal centre, surrounded by mines and miners' settlements. Today, the coal town looks deserted, with more abandoned buildings and houses than occupied ones. In a cinematic narrative, Kouquan Old Town is one of the locations of the film *Ash is Purest White* (*Jianghu ernü* 江湖兒女), directed by Shanxi-based Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 and released in 2018. The film, set in 2001, tells the story of a woman's love for an outlaw. The coal transition is an important background: the heroine is the daughter of a coal miner. She is seen visiting her father at a moment when the mine, targeted for closure, is the site of miners' protests. The heroine is then filmed walking with her lover in an abandoned street of Kouquan Town.

- 2 There she smells the hollyhocks that grow along the sidewalk. The abandoned buildings constitute a romantic setting. During their conversation, the man says, “Datong will develop and demolish very quickly,” a hidden reference to Geng Yanbo’s 耿彦波 plan for the city centre’s redevelopment. In 2008, the Geng Yanbo administration initiated a strategy to redefine the city, from “coal capital” (*meidu* 煤都) to “historical and cultural ancient city” (*lishi wenhua gucheng* 历史文化古城). In contrast to the intensity of urban demolition in the city centre, the filmed footage in Kouquan Town immortalises another process of ruination in a narrative of slow rhythms, silence, and intimacy. The film was praised by the local press¹ and recent press reports mentioned another film being shot there.² Jia Zhangke’s film inspired fans to visit the place and publish their short films and photos online.³ However, when I mentioned Jia Zhangke’s film to a group of local residents chatting in Kouquan’s main street, they had never heard of it. This discrepancy between Chinese cinema’s cultural scene and local residents’ experiences suggests that the narratives of the abandoned town are not unified and deserve closer study.

Ruination in Kouquan: An entry into uninhabited industrial spaces

- 3 The development of Datong, a medium-sized city in Northern Shanxi, has been based around the coal mining industry since the early twentieth century. Kouquan Town (*Kouquan zhen* 口泉鎮) is located 20 kilometres from the city centre in the southwestern outskirts, where coal mining settlements formed a dense network of villages near the mines. Kouquan grew in size and in population as the centre of the coal mining industry. In the 1990s, new urban infrastructure emerged around the coal economy, and Kouquan Town became less relevant for consumption and services. In recent years, anti-pollution and de-capacity measures contributed to profound change both in the landscape and in the structure of the coal industry (Audin 2020). Issues of pollution, poor living standards, and land-subsidence impacted the local villages for decades. In 2007, a large-scale urban renewal operation was implemented by the public authorities and by Datong Coal Mine Group (hereafter Tongmei), the state-owned enterprise in charge of most mines, displacing most families of coal miners from shanty towns (*penghuqu* 棚戶區) to new relocation buildings. The coal mine area is now much less densely populated, and old Kouquan has lost most of its functions as a town centre. The ruination process in Kouquan is due to the population moving out, the lack of maintenance of old buildings, and mining-induced land-subsidence issues. Yet, while most residents have moved away, about 200 people still live in Kouquan Old Town. How do they relate to the deserted space? Is ruination only a process of unmaking? Can decay stimulate specific forms of dwelling and recreate a sense of place? Ruination in Kouquan is conceived as a social process that does not follow the temporality of fast urban redevelopment and heritage-oriented planning; nor does it correspond with full decline and abandonment. I consider ruination as a socio-spatial process producing various spatial experiences and articulating unrelated discourses, and allowing both local residents and other actors to remain connected to Kouquan.
- 4 Apart from an important range of research on ruination in the field of cultural studies (Wu 2012; Ortells-Nicollau 2015), visual studies,⁴ and history with Li Jie’s investigation of the “utopian” ruins of Maoist memory (2020), qualitative research and fieldwork on ruination in China mainly revolve around the violent experience of “demolition-

relocation” (*chaiqian* 拆遷) (Ren 2014) and the resistance of residents in large cities (Ho 2013; Shao 2013). Uninhabited Kouquan Town shows another reality of contemporary ruins: the reality of slow ruination in industrial spaces located far from the main axes of circulation and urban density.

- 5 Existing research on industrial spaces mainly focuses on the work unit (*danwei* 單位), urban poverty in Northeast China (Cho 2013), and shrinkage (Long and Gao 2019), but less on ruination in context.⁵ Kouquan is an industrial space, but the work unit is no longer visible. Among existing studies on the varied forms of industrialism (Lean 2020), on industrial spaces (Gillette 2016; Lam 2020), and on coal mining (Yu, Zhang, and Zhou 2008; Zhang 2013; Yang, Zhao, and Ho 2017), there are few social studies on ruination, dwelling, and memory in mining villages and towns. This article details the spatial features of ruination in Kouquan, where the former spaces of miners’ everyday lives are rooted in the local landscape.
- 6 Moreover, most of the research on industrial spaces focuses either on shrinkage and decline, or on the strategies of revitalisation through cultural heritage: from the “creative city” to “urban branding,” industrial spaces in Chinese cities have transformed under “artistic urbanization” (Ren and Sun 2012) and “creative industry” (Yung, Chan, and Xu 2014). However, Alice Mah explains that “not all cities can succeed in a competitive model. (...) These stories tend to be overlooked in the interest of a progress-oriented view” (2012: 7). Marie Boyd Gillette states that China’s governments “have not seen industrial heritage as a marketable resource for redevelopment and have instead removed remnants of China’s socialist past” (2017). In Datong, the city administration promoted an ambitious urban planning project in order to change the coal stigma.⁶ Datong became the object of an ancient city theming operation through architecture. Datong was the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty from 398 to 493 C.E.⁷ The city administration branded the ancient past as a means to develop a new, marketable image. Datong’s post-coal identity appears in its administrative restructuring. On the eastern city outskirts, far from the mines, a new district was created, attracting the local population and investors around new poles of development. A university, a high-tech zone, and the new high-speed train station have spurred the creation of new residential compounds, amenities, and services. In 2018, the Mining District (*Kuangqu* 礦區) was cancelled. It is now part of Yungang District (*Yungangqu* 雲崗區), putting the Yungang Grottoes – a cultural heritage site listed by UNESCO – at the centre.⁸
- 7 While Geng Yanbo’s project to redefine Datong has been studied (Cui 2018; Fu and Hillier 2018), moving away from Datong’s city centre, I decided to study the social and spatial structure of the city’s southwestern outskirts, more precisely workers’ neighbourhoods and villages near the coal mines. There, the imprint of the work unit is strong, with the company logo and banners in both the workplace and the residence place. Because they are “marked” by the work unit, these industrial spaces constitute corporate industrial spaces. Kouquan used to be a key location for the coal industry. The local mining government was located there: in the 1950s, the mining district was officially named “Kouquan Mining District People’s Government” (*Kouquan Kuangqu renmin zhengfu* 口泉礦區人民政府) and then “Kouquan District” (*Kouquanqu* 口泉區) before it took the name “Mining District” (*Kuangqu* 礦區) in 1970, which discloses that Kouquan was originally at the centre of the coal production. Official reports presented Kouquan in the 1980s as “a historical (*gulao* 古老) yet newly emerging (*xinxing* 新興)

industrial site (*gongye diqu* 工業地區).”⁹ The circulation of coal passed through the coal hub of Kouquan via roads and railways, but today, the town no longer appears as a space of production. State-owned enterprises such as Tongmei are not directly involved in local governance. The city administration governs the town from afar. Few residents remain, waiting for their relocation, and most of the built environment is in disrepair. These circumstances lead to pressing questions: how do residents interact with their space and how do they perceive ruination? What type of local narratives do they produce?

- 8 While much research has focused on the “ghost city” (*guicheng* 鬼城) phenomenon in coal regions – new districts characterised by a large number of vacant brand new buildings and infrastructures, produced by anticipatory urbanism and real estate speculation as in Ordos (Shepard 2015; Sorace and Hurst 2016; Ulfstjerne 2017; Woodworth and Wallace 2017; Yin, Qian, and Zhu 2017) – ruination in Kouquan corresponds more to the image of the “ghost town”: a former mining boomtown urbanised during the early period of the industry that became less relevant at a later stage. Such abandoned mining towns exist in other contexts, including the United States (DeLyser 1999), Zimbabwe (Kamete 2012), and Russia (Andreassen, Bjerck, and Olsen 2010): “Not only do things become more present, more manifest, but in some ways they also become more pestering and disquieting” (*ibid.*: 23). In China, for example, in “instant cities” that developed during the Cold War in Sichuan Province (Lam 2020), the population is completely gone and the visitor is left alone with abandoned buildings and infrastructure.¹⁰ In this case, Kouquan is not a fully abandoned industrial space. Although the town seems empty, it is connected to the city via the public bus service. It is also still inhabited, although it has lost most of its population and the mark of the work unit is gone.
- 9 There are no Chinese expressions equivalent to the “ghost town” image, but terms such as “abandoned” (*huangfei* 荒廢), “uninhabited” (*wuren* 無人), or “hollow” (*xinkong* 心空) often qualify villages and towns that have not been redeveloped for tourism, as well as their “left-behind” (*liushou* 留守) population. Abandoned buildings in decay constitute the background in Kouquan. Yet, beyond the lenses of postsocialist and postindustrial disconnection, Kouquan remains invested by actors who reinvent local practices and meanings in and with the ruins. These social perceptions and appropriations of the local space reveal reconnecting spatialities – that is to say, socio-spatial experiences of the built environment. In order to better grasp how ruination can produce a sense of place in this “uninhabited” industrial space (following Boudot, Delouvrier, and Siou 2019; Raga 2019), I study how local practices and narratives produce a specific sense of place. This article shows that in Kouquan, different spatialities – of dwelling, religious practices, art forms, memory, and heritagisation efforts – constitute reconnecting experiences that maintain and recreate a sense of place. Because these spatialities result from interactions with the buildings in decay, ruination constitutes an important connector. The rubble acts “not as self-contained relics of a specific time and space or as mere stones, rocks and walls devoid of meaning, but as marks of the landscape that make it possible to draw connections between their past and present” (Raga 2019: 19). Ruination is thus a process happening in uninhabited industrial spaces, allowing them to keep a strong local identity. The notion of uninhabitedness carries a critique to the paradigm of “disconnection” (Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016). Ruination in Kouquan develops as a different process than the fast and violent demolition processes – studied by Shao Qin (2013) under the concept of “domicide” – in Chinese cities,

suggesting that other dynamics of ruination exist in less urban, less central, and less dense spaces. Indeed, such uninhabited industrial spaces experience slow decay where the built environment does not attract real estate actors. As one resident told me, “This place has not been developed by the government” (*zhengfu meiyou kaifa ne* 政府没有開發呢) (informal discussion with a few residents, 22 June 2019). City officials also stated in 2018 that there was no plan to redevelop Kouquan (interview with Datong City officials, September 2018). It reveals a lack of attention that results in the slow ageing of the town, preserving it partly from demolition and keeping available the opportunity for future heritagisation. As Tim Edensor explains, “A far more multiple, nebulous and imaginative sense of memory persists in everyday, undervalued, mundane spaces which are not coded in such a way as to espouse stable meanings and encourage regular social practices” (2005: 139). The mining industry in Shanxi has produced what Alice Mah calls “place-based communities” (2012: 4), deeply rooted in the local territory: “Despite their state of disuse, abandoned industrial sites remain connected with the urban fabric that surrounds them: with communities; with collective memory; and with people’s health, livelihoods, and stories” (*ibid.*: 3). Kouquan Town has lost most of its inhabitants, but the buildings in ruins maintain various interactions with the population, both local and non-local. Studying the connection between ruination and sense of place in Kouquan thus provides insight into how left-behind residents relate to their own urban spaces in decay, and how multiple on-site and off-site actors interact with the ruins.

Urban exploration as method for the ethnography of China’s abandoned places

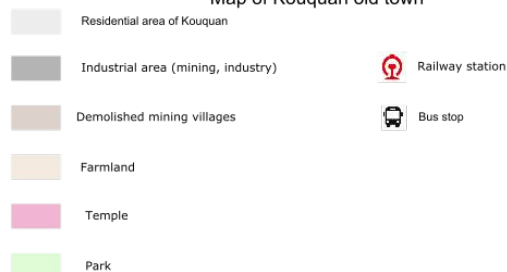
- 10 This article on ruination in Kouquan Town is part of a larger ethnographic research on Datong’s urban development and spatial restructuring after the coal boom. I lived in Datong for 15 months corresponding to six field trips from 2015 to 2019. From April 2016 until June 2019, I went to Kouquan Town and its surroundings on a weekly basis. Understanding how ruination in Kouquan imbues the practices and narratives of local actors sheds light on Datong’s social and spatial configurations in the post-coal era. While being confronted with several challenges,¹¹ the main one was the difficulty in conducting in-depth interviews due to the lack of population in the old town. I chatted with 15 residents and workers (in a residents’ committee and at the train station) encountered during my visits. These residents had grown up in Kouquan and were farmers, unemployed, or retired, the youngest being over 40 years old. I had informal discussions with them, sometimes turning into longer, more in-depth discussions. I could not record the discussions because they mostly took place in the street and because it made them uncomfortable. Yet, I was able to memorise and write down some of their quotes in my journal immediately after walking away and sitting down around the corner.
- 11 Many of the residents did not remember precisely the stages of ruination: “It has been abandoned for several decades (*ji shi nian* 几十年), I don’t remember exactly,” were common comments. They also did not know or did not remember the functions of unidentified abandoned buildings. They did not have old street photos, and they had few physical archives or objects in their small houses. Precise information, such as quantitative data on this ageing mining town, was not available.

- 12 My investigation was also based on direct observation during 13 on-site visits, each time during at least half a day, trying to grasp the relationships between the residents and the abandoned buildings. Considering the strong proportion of abandoned houses and buildings, I used urban exploration (urbex), an activity that consists in visiting and documenting abandoned sites and buildings. I studied the material “traces,” “clues,” and “signs” (Ginzburg 1980) of Kouquan’s abandoned buildings and their effects on the people that lived near them, as well as on more distant actors. I drew maps and took notes directly in the streets. Because human occupation only partly fills the space, Kouquan’s identity is also architectural, embodied in the town’s layout and its buildings in decay. Writing descriptions in my journal and photographing both the buildings and how people invested them with activities and representations provided a more complete image of the place.¹² Exploring abandoned buildings allowed me to analyse the structure and texture of ruination, not only from outside, but also from inside and from the emic perspective of their social worlds. Many elements were observed during field visits, written down in my journals, and analysed at a later stage.
- 13 In parallel, I carried out fieldwork in other mining villages around Datong, as well as in a relocation neighbourhood for coal miners. This larger perspective on coal mining villages and towns gave me more insights into the ethos of miners, their history, and their everyday lives. For this research, I also did a review of official government regulations (from the provincial level to the local level) since the early 2000s, news reports, and online publications by ordinary citizens (blog posts, etc.), additionally using other cultural materials (films).

Map. Kouquan area



Map of Kouquan old town



Credit: author.

- 14 The first section of this article documents the materiality of Kouquan Old Street’s ruins, based on urban itineraries and fieldnotes collected between 2016 and 2019, bringing out the spatialities of such uninhabited spaces. In a second section, I study the last residents’ living conditions and interactions with the abandoned buildings. Finally, the article discusses the various narratives, which, while disunited, contribute to producing a sense of place and memory in Kouquan.

The texture of ruination: Dust and silence in Kouquan

- 15 Kouquan Old Town is located at the crossroads between Datong’s minefields and Datong urban area. Bus line No. 1 operates as one of the oldest bus lines reaching Kouquan from the city centre. Just before arriving to Kouquan, the landscape becomes less urbanised and finally turns into a succession of derelict buildings on both sides of the road: abandoned restaurants and hotels, half-demolished houses. Through the town, most buildings and houses are disused and uninhabited. The upper road to the mines displays architectural elements from different periods. At the entrance of the town, there is an abandoned building dating from the Republican era (observation in Kouquan, May 2016). Some buildings carry historical traces from the Mao era, such as political slogans engraved on the facades: “United, intense, serious, active” (*tuanjie, jinzhang, yansu, huopo* 團結, 緊張, 嚴肅, 活潑) can be read on the walls of a former grain station. However, there is no visible presence of the mining company’s signs on the building’s walls.
- 16 The old town has slowly lost its commercial and service functions and it continues to lose both its residents and amenities. As an illustration, the train station for passengers closed in 2012. This train station was formerly of major importance. When the mining economy was booming, the railway line was in constant use, as Mr. Zhang explains:
- There used to be so much passenger traffic, over 100 years, along with the development of the coal mines. The train for passengers cost only 1 yuan to go to Datong train station, and coal miners did not need to pay. (...) Many coal trains used to pass here too. Now, today, we count only 400 or 500 coal trains, but before, the daily traffic was 1,200! As for passengers, there used to be around 1,000 people per day. (Discussion with Mr. Zhang, director of the train station, 25 June 2016)
- 17 Today, the train station has been converted into a badminton sport field, and the building now serves as a community space for the railway staff. My discussions with local residents indicate that the town started declining in the 1990s, when new infrastructure and services emerged closer to Datong’s city centre. The area carries visible scars of mining on the local landscape and other industrial wastelands: an abandoned cement factory, small derelict factories overgrown by nature, food cooperatives from the Mao era. Near the train station, the streets are covered in a thick layer of coal dust. Up in the hills, collapsed buildings carry signs with the warning “Dangerous house” (*weifang* 危房). These signs indicate that part of the local architecture is now “unsafe,” due to land-subsidence: “This place is subject to land-subsidence, pedestrians keep safe” (*cichu you dixian, xingren zhuyi anquan* 此處有地陷, 行人注意安全) can be seen on several buildings in the main street. The issue of mining-induced land-subsidence (Zhang 2013; Yang, Zhao, and Ho 2017) is part of the reason why the town is uninhabited. A major urban renewal operation was launched in 2007 to relocate the residents living in shanty towns into residential compounds (*xiaoqu* 小區),

but a proportion of residents has not been able to move out yet. While the work unit took care of the coal miners, Kouquan's non-mining population was not included in the relocation policy at first.¹³ Some people also did not have the financial means to move out, hence the presence of retired families in Kouquan.

- 18 The traces of the planned economy are visible. The layout of the industrial town follows a standardised plan. The main street has a diversity of shops and services: a restaurant (Figure 1), a cinema (Figure 2), convenience stores (Figure 3), a public bath, a clinic, a barber's shop (Figure 4), the former town government, a large Xinhua bookshop, and a Christian church. These abandoned shops stand right next to one another, confirming Kouquan's former commercial density. All the shops have been closed for decades, except for the barber's shop. This alignment of abandoned shops reinforces the impression of decay and desertion. Because they have been left untouched since being closed down, these abandoned storefronts participate in the image of a ghost town. The uninhabited nature of the space is confirmed by the absence of any logo of the mining company. The facades carry the name Kouquan, engraved in stone, maintaining a spatial identity.
- 19 The diversity of functions of the shops and their rather large surfaces suggest that this place was "developed and prosperous" (*fada yu fanhua* 發達與繁華). Kouquan is characterised by small lanes with abandoned self-built houses in various architectural styles, from the typical Shanxi-based *yaodong* (窯洞) dwellings – cave dwellings – to simpler village houses (*pingfang* 平房) and yards as well as Buddhist temples.



FIGURE 1. The abandoned restaurant, Kouquan, May 2016. Credit: author.

- 20 The architecture of abandoned buildings contains evidence of the former organisation of Datong's mining communities. While the industrial era stimulated Kouquan's urban development, the process of abandonment redefines its urban-rural nature. The town is still connected to the city by public buses, but rural activities are now more visible than industrial ones. As an example, Figure 1 shows that the former restaurant on the main

square is now used for stocking corn plants. As for Kouquan's former Workers' Cultural Palace (*Gongren wenhuagong* 工人文化宫) built in 1952 by the Mining Bureau¹⁴ that served as a cinema, it is now used as a wood-cutting workshop (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. The Workers' Cultural Palace, Kouquan, June 2016. The Chinese characters “文化宫” (*wenhua gong*, cultural palace) have faded away but still appear on the left side of the building. Credit: author.

Dwelling amongst ruins and ghosts

- 21 Ruination in Kouquan Town is an important element of the uninhabited industrial space. I now explore the interactions between the residents and these abandoned buildings. In old Kouquan, there is still a residents' committee in charge of the population, two small barber's shops, one tomb maker and one shop for alcohol and tobacco (*yanjiu* 煙酒). The employees told me that the population was shrinking because younger generations moved to other places in Datong or to other cities. Additionally, the last residents are not only retired miners but also farmers (*nongmin* 農民) who rely on minimum welfare (*dibao* 低保), far from the social benefits provided to coal miners: “The last residents have very heavy social difficulties. They have no retirement pension, unlike Tongmei miners. Most of them are *dibao* recipients” (discussion with three residents' committee employees, 25 June 2016).
- 22 Just as the buildings have been ageing in place, Kouquan's last residents have aged with the town since the early Mao era. Their housing conditions are simple: small single-storey houses or “*pingfang*,” and village houses with a yard. In the street, people's routines consist in resting, chatting with neighbours or playing cards, growing vegetables, sitting outside while sewing or knitting, getting a haircut: “We don't have hobbies, we have very simple activities here” (informal discussion with residents playing cards, 22 June 2019). A combination of two types of feelings emerges: feelings of

attachment and rootedness, but also feelings of isolation and exile, as people feel left-behind in poverty, not being able to access better living conditions. While many interviewees were aware of the large-scale relocation policy implemented in Datong's coal mining settlements, they said they were not included in the programme: they “did not have any money” to move (*meiqian* 沒錢), they “did not belong to the category of coal miners” (*bu shi kuanggong* 不是礦工), and “nobody cared” (*mei ren guan* 沒人管). The people who still live here have not been able to move because they are not Tongmei workers, and because they are stuck between the administrations of two districts – Nanjiao District and the Mining District: “None [of these two administrations] cares” (*shei dou bu guan* 誰都不管) (informal discussion with a resident, 2 May 2018).

- 23 Most of their descriptions of Kouquan started with the uninhabited landscape, not so much in a material but in a social dimension: “Most people moved out many years ago;” “People are gone.” A second statement points out to the lack of services: “All the shops are now closed;” “There is nothing here anymore” (*zheli shenme dou meiyou le* 這裡什麼都沒有了). The sense of being poor but also becoming “minor,” the sense of a reduced community, and the sense of loss were emphasised. These descriptions dominated the description of the landscape: instead of talking about the materiality of ruins, either as “historical sites” (*yizhi* 遺址), “rubble” (*feixu* 廢墟), or “buildings” (*fang* 房), they spoke of the people who had left, the lost “liveliness” (*renao* 熱鬧) and the current emptiness of the spaces devoid of people. The sense of uninhabitedness was stronger than the sense of decay. Many interviewees considered it important to describe the present by reminding the visitor of how the town was in the past: “There was Kouquan before there was Datong!” was a recurrent statement. Their local narratives emphasise the past “flourishing” times of Kouquan: “The gravity centre of this area was here and not in Datong” (informal discussion with a local resident, 30 April 2017). According to the hairdresser, the town used to have a population of 30,000 residents at its peak of prosperity.¹⁵ In the 1990s, “Kouquan was the commercial epicentre of the area, from Huaiyuan to here. (...) There was everything, from restaurants to hotels and shops; there was even an ice-lolly factory, next to the water fountain!” says the hairdresser.¹⁶ The residents’ historical narratives about Kouquan “being there before Datong” contrast with the narrative on Datong’s ancient history promoted by the city government.
- 24 Many of Kouquan’s last residents feel “left-behind” (also noted in other contexts, e.g. Mah 2012: 7) witnessing the town fall into decay, in the context of a larger restructuring of the coal industry in Datong that created a lot of uncertainty and worry for families (Audin 2020). They also feel left-behind by the urban renewal programme: the relocation programme aiming to solve the problem of land-subsidence due to decades of aggressive industrial mining has not been fully implemented in Kouquan.



FIGURE 3. A group of elderly male residents sit on the threshold of a closed convenience store, Kouquan, May 2017. Credit: author.



FIGURE 4. A group of elderly female residents spend time in front of the barber's shop, Kouquan, May 2018. Credit: author.

- 25 While the last residents are marginalised from urban lifestyles, ruination in Kouquan contributes to reinventing their local spatial practices, especially dwelling. Abandoned buildings offer a familiar space for the long-term community, with close-knit networks of people spending time chatting with one another. There is a close proximity between

the residents and the abandoned buildings. Because their self-built houses are small, there is not much space available for gathering inside. Residents thus spend time sitting by the closed shop entrances (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Although there is a gendered division of space, typical of coal mining neighbourhoods, both groups of male residents and female residents use the abandoned buildings as their daytime meeting spots. Far from being avoided, the abandoned buildings provide new spaces for their daily discussions and games, hence the appropriation of porches with chairs, sofas, and stools.

- 26 In general, although many residents are eager to leave for better living conditions and hope that relocation will represent an opportunity to escape poverty, they are used and attached to their houses in the town. One resident, Ms. Zhu, a middle-aged woman living with her son in a small room in a narrow alleyway, told me that even if the relocation policy was implemented in her street, she would not want to leave her house:

The houses here are more than 100 years old! Can you imagine how strong they are, they are very strong of course! They say the ground is unsafe but I don't believe that my house will collapse. I want to stay here. (Discussion with Ms. Zhu, 30 April 2017)

- 27 Ms. Zhu also told me she lived off the public welfare system and her time was dedicated to taking care of her disabled son. She had gotten used to her routine in the village and did not easily project herself moving out of her Kouquan home.
- 28 According to Mr. Li, another middle-aged resident living in a courtyard house from the Ming-Qing era, everybody else in the yard left “many years ago,” and some of them even left everything in place. He was proud to show me the different corners of the house, talking about the valuable quality of traditional architecture, a courtyard house with *yaodong* components. He told me that several families used to share the courtyard. Each one used to live in different rooms. Interestingly, he told me I could visit this house: “But not too often, because the house has a ‘ghost’ (*gui* 鬼) and (...) you could get in trouble” (informal discussion with Mr. Li, 25 May 2016). While he warned me about the ghost in the house, the man did not appear to be bothered by the ghost himself and continued to enjoy living alone in the house. He simply did not touch the other residents’ former rooms. By emphasising the difference between insiders and outsiders in relationship to ghosts, Mr. Li described an intimate relationship with his home (*jia* 家) and the double identity of this historical house: between a haunted house and a home.
- 29 Finally, the connection to Kouquan is perpetuated by former locals who maintain their visits even after having moved out. Family members visit their relatives or keep a house in Kouquan even after moving away, maintaining social networks that gravitate around Kouquan. Mr. Xi, for instance, worked in a coal washing unit at the time of the interview (informal discussion with Mr. Xi, 2 May 2018). His wife was a housewife. He had lived in Kouquan for 40 years before moving out. He earned a monthly salary of 3,000 RMB “because the coal value has dropped below its original value.” With his family, he moved to Tongmei’s relocation neighbourhood a few years ago. He still owned a house in Kouquan, so he was going back every week on his day off work. He still had friends in Kouquan and he continued to grow vegetables there.
- 30 Such relationships to the buildings by locals and former inhabitants suggest a form of connection through “‘living memory,’ (...) defined as people’s memories of a shared

industrial past, as opposed to ‘official memory’ or ‘collective memory’” (Mah 2010: 402). Moreover, although most residents miss the former social life and density, ruination opens spaces that allow the remaining residents to dwell in place and to enjoy calmness in the current site.

A sense of place without a shared narrative

- 31 Beyond the reinvention of dwelling in Kouquan, ruination also creates a sense of place through the interactions and narratives produced by various actors, from journalists and cadres of the government to ordinary people. The narrative of decline seems dominant in scope and in scale, spread both through visual reports by news agencies and by administrators. News reports in English and in Chinese warn that the mining land in Shanxi has become dangerous and many villages are sinking.¹⁷ At the same time, the cultural narratives studied below enrich and complexify the representations of uninhabited Kouquan, as they emerge from the experience of ruination and contribute to reshaping a sense of place.

The abandoned landscape in Kouquan reveals a strong connection between space and memory. The way the last residents value the long history of this area creates a sense of place that does not relate to the main space of production, but that characterises this uninhabited industrial area. A form of living memory is also enacted in the many online reports posted by former residents about their hometown. Indeed, individuals and groups contribute to narrating its memory from their own experiences. Although they did not have photographs of ordinary life in the village – people mostly owned marriage photos and family pictures – they had “deep” memories of growing up and living in Kouquan. Several blog posts found online express the nostalgic recollections of former residents returning to old Kouquan for a walk, now posting photos of their urban explorations in the ruins and commenting on their feelings towards the abandoned buildings. For instance, under the photo of an abandoned convenience shop, one blog post reads, “This used to be a shop full of shelves filled with goods and things that were a feast to the eyes (*linlangmanmu* 琳琅滿目).”¹⁸ Such nostalgic discourses recount other forms of consumption and dwelling, when people had “no money” yet would still go out to the shops as a leisurely practice. Other visitors, mostly coming from Datong City, also explore and comment on Kouquan’s ruined buildings: in one video, one person comments that the public toilets are in better condition than the houses in the lane.¹⁹

As representatives of the town’s past, among other residents, the 70-year-old hairdresser and his wife are eager to tell Kouquan’s history and to narrate the town’s trajectory. They are indeed proud of their old objects and furniture. The barber showed me the chair “from the late Qing Dynasty” and other hairstyling tools from the early Mao era. Their efforts to keep their shop open is a living proof of place appropriation and local commitment to the remaining residents, by offering a cheap service and maintaining both their appearance and social ties.

Kouquan is also a source of inspiration for Datong-based painter Yu Xiaoqing 于小青, who grew up there. ²⁰According to him, people who were born there had a deep connection to the place: “Each shop, each person (...) we particularly remember this [place] (*jiyi youshen* 記憶尤深).”²¹ In 2017, because he was afraid the old town would be demolished and no trace would remain, he decided to paint abandoned buildings and

street scenes: “Some people use photography to document the place. I use painting as a way to record the memories.”²² On his webpage, a few comments by former Kouquan residents express gratitude for his memorialising effort.

- 32 Beyond the individualised narratives of nostalgia, there are groups of local residents of Datong and Kouquan that unite to push for the heritagisation of Kouquan. In April 2018, a public comment was addressed to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.²³ The text mentions that the Kouquan area displays precious architectural features from several historical periods:

In the east-west street, there are buildings, shops, cinemas, restaurants, hair salons dating from the planned economy of the 1950s – 1960s, as well as architectural features of the Cultural Revolution era, with residential houses displaying various architectural models such as courtyard houses of the Ming and Qing Dynasty, terraced houses, *yaodong* etc. (...) Kouquan Old Town kept exemplary architectural features from the early PRC, the Cultural Revolution, and the reform era, with a train station, a theatre stage, a governmental office, a theatre, residential houses, and other popular historical remains with a rather high preserved value, worthy of filming movies, or for photography.

- 33 It also mentions the vulnerability of the last residents:

Following the exhaustion of the exploitation of Kouquan area through coal mining, the old days of prosperity (*xiri de fanhua* 昔日的繁華) are now far away (...). The ones who stayed in the old town are mostly elderly people. A lot of them experienced the War of Resistance against Japan and the Civil War. A lot of them are also coal miners from that period. Although the former popularity of the place has slowly declined, the old architecture reminds anyone of the old town’s former brilliant history.

- 34 Local residents and external actors hope that the government will value the town’s diverse historical architecture and memory. However, the response of the Mining District government expresses another narrative. It states that the Mining District does not have authority in matters of planning or building refurbishment, nor in heritage preservation. The Mining District government acknowledges the principle of industrial heritage protection while justifying the narrative of modernisation through demolition, as it is the case in most Chinese cities: demolition aims to “improve the residents’ living conditions” (*gaishan minsheng wenti* 改善民生問題).

Journalists also produce a narrative on Kouquan’s “cultural” value.²⁴ In one report, a journalist explains that “Kouquan Old Street is like an old man, lonely (*gudu* 孤獨) and sad (*guku* 孤苦).” He wishes that this place could become a “cultural street” (*wenhujie* 文化街).²⁵ Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction, Shanxi-based filmmakers use Kouquan as a movie set. Its abandoned streets inspire cinematic narratives.

- 35 Not only is the living memory of the town and its history still strong, the area is also valued for its religious character with the strong presence of temples. Each time I walked across the village, residents always assumed that I was looking for the “Temple of the Thousand Buddhas” (*Qianfosi* 千佛寺), one of the Buddhist temples located on the hills, and started pointing me in the direction of religious sites. Local rituals are still practiced by Datong residents and by the remaining residents in Kouquan. Next to the Workers’ Cultural Palace, one Buddhist temple seems active from outside, but when I visited it, the couple who guarded it told me not much happened on an everyday basis. The temple pavilions were in poor condition, and traces of cement on the ground suggested a failed attempt to restore them: “There was an effort to renovate the temple eight years ago, but in fact, there was no money to restore it. It stayed half-finished,

like you see now” (discussion with Ms. Ning who guards the temple, 2 May 2018). Yet, the couple was proud of the one important event of celebration of the 8th day of the 4th month of the lunar calendar. During the traditional festival of *Siyueba* (四月八), the local temple holds a fair that attracts a crowd of locals.²⁶

- 36 The entanglement of these various narratives draws together in a collective sense of place, following the emergence of a clearer line of governance by the new district in charge – Yungang District. In April 2020, the Datong City Yungang District government announced that an association to study the history and culture of Kouquan had been founded.²⁷ This case thus calls for more research on the future development of the town memory.

Conclusion

- 37 This article examined the ruination process and its material and social effects in uninhabited industrial spaces. Ruination develops specific spatialities – of dwelling, memory, religious and cultural practices – that maintain and recreate a sense of place. The public authorities have introduced new norms of governance for the coal mining land, and former mining settlements, considered “dangerous” due to land-subsidence and lack of maintenance, have been depopulating since the mid-2000s. Yet, ruination in Kouquan perpetuates and renews the social and spatial practices of left-behind residents as well as the representations of non-locals who continue to visit Kouquan. From a coal hub to a town neighbourhood on the urban fringe, ruination in Kouquan reveals various active interactions between people and their built environment. This case expands the study of uninhabited spaces, the destiny of which is often viewed through a frame of disconnection. Ruination in Kouquan is a process that suggests reconnecting spatialities, not only in the way remaining residents integrate the ruined buildings into their dwelling experiences, but via the varied narratives associated with place: from intimate representations to political, journalistic, cultural, religious, and cinematic narratives, Kouquan reconnects with other publics. Uninhabited spaces – industrial spaces in this case, but also left-behind villages and towns – therefore constitute important objects for the study of Chinese society. In a rapidly urbanising China, ruination in such uninhabited spaces shows how new meanings and identities are shaped by the material texture of decay and dust in the street.

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NOTES

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2. “尋訪老口泉” (*Xunfang lao Kouquan*, Searching for Old Kouquan), *Datong ribao* (大同日報), 19 January 2021, <http://www.dt.gov.cn/dtzww/mldt/202101/d0b731659e0b4ad5836bc15bd09a3daa.shtml> (accessed on 8 September 2021).
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ABSTRACTS

Far from dense Chinese cities that experience fast demolition, ruination in Kouquan, a coal town in Datong, is a slower process that generates new practices and meanings. Uninhabited industrial spaces continue to produce a sense of place where large industrial corporations no longer operate and where most residents have moved away. This article brings out new perspectives on the effects of ruination in an industrial area by moving away from the lenses of the work unit, demolition, heritagisation, or decline. Based on direct observation, informal discussions with local residents from 2016 to 2019, and an online review, this article shows that ruination produces spatialised narratives and practices closely entwined with the local population's experiences, as well as with other actors' direct and indirect interactions with places: these actors reconnect to the uninhabited town through dwellings, artistic production, religious practices, or simply through their visits to Kouquan, becoming urban explorers themselves. Ruination leads remaining residents, former locals, visitors, government actors, journalists, and artists to the production of new representations of the uninhabited town.

INDEX

Keywords: coal mining, land-subsidence, ruination, Shanxi, memory, art, industrial spaces, urban fringes.

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