Keep on dreaming

Art in a changing Beijing

Deng, L.; de Kloet, J.

Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)
President Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’, promising prosperity and progress, is by and large mapped onto the city. In the case of this dream, this can primarily be found within the fifth ring road, with its cultural heritage sites and fancy buildings designed by ‘starchitects’. But what about the people, most of whom migrant workers, living beyond this significant demarcation? Are they allowed to partake in the China Dream too?

---

**Keep on dreaming: Art in a changing Beijing**

The 2011 Song of the Fifth Ring Road by MC Hotdog, together with comedy actor Yue Yunpeng, has become an unofficial anthem for Beijing. This is not only because of the song’s funny lyrics and MTV video, but also because the ring roads really do play a pivotal role in how people perceive and experience the city. Together with landmarks such as Tiananmen square, the CCTV TV Building and the Olympic Bird’s Nest, to name but a few, the ring roads are part of the mental map people have of Beijing: they help us locate where we are in this immense city.

In his work Beijing 2013, maverick artist Ai Weiwei spent 16 days driving along every street inside Beijing’s fourth ring, driving a total of 2400 kilometers. Most of the city’s key landmarks are located within and around the fourth ring road, but 51% of its residents live beyond the fifth ring road.1 There, we find urban villages, mostly occupied by migrant workers, alongside luxurious villa parks for expats and the new rich. The fifth ring road forms a class boundary, in the words of journalist Jiang.2 The fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopeless choice of new immigrants in the city because of the house prices of the core region. It is thus no wonder that MC Hotdog selected this road for his song. What is located beyond it is generally rendered invisible and unknown, despite the number of people living there.

**How does art intervene?**

Indeed, China’s global rise is epitomized by the changing living there. The 2011 generalization of its residents live beyond the fifth ring road.1 There, we find urban villages, mostly occupied by migrant workers, alongside luxurious villa parks for expats and the new rich. The fifth ring road forms a class boundary, in the words of journalist Jiang.2 The fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopeless choice of new immigrants in the city because of the house prices of the core region. It is thus no wonder that MC Hotdog selected this road for his song. What is located beyond it is generally rendered invisible and unknown, despite the number of people living there.

**How does art intervene?**

Indeed, China’s global rise is epitomized by the changing living there. The 2011 generalization of its residents live beyond the fifth ring road.1 There, we find urban villages, mostly occupied by migrant workers, alongside luxurious villa parks for expats and the new rich. The fifth ring road forms a class boundary, in the words of journalist Jiang.2 The fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopeless choice of new immigrants in the city because of the house prices of the core region. It is thus no wonder that MC Hotdog selected this road for his song. What is located beyond it is generally rendered invisible and unknown, despite the number of people living there.

President Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’, promising prosperity and progress, is by and large mapped onto the city. In the case of this dream, this can primarily be found within the fifth ring road, with its cultural heritage sites and fancy buildings designed by ‘starchitects’. But what about the people, most of whom migrant workers, living beyond this significant demarcation? Are they allowed to partake in the China Dream too? **Dong Liwen (Zoénie) and Jeroen de Kloet**

---

5 is the fifth ring roads that are part of the regime of the sensible, the +1 points to the intervention, which suggests that it wants to add something – new visions, new sounds, new smells, new words, from the artists and also the people living there who exercise their agency. How does the work of Ma Lijiao do that?

**Becoming a migrant worker, journalist and student**

Ma Lijiao participated in 5+1 in November 2014 for 10 days in the Xiaojiaka Village (Xiaojiaka dong cu), located in North West Beijing. In his project, Ma Lijiao morphed into different roles; he acted as a migrant worker, a journalist and a student. Through these enactments, he succeeded, in our view, in rendering parts of life in the urban village sensible that remain otherwise insensible. Whereas in global discourse, migrant workers are often represented as a horde of nameless and faceless rural people working in urban areas, Ma Lijiao tries to give them a face, a life and aspirations, by participating in their social media groups. In Ma’s words in an interview with us: “social media platforms can gather people from different locations of the real society to internet and make their voices heard together. There are anonymous social apps like Youmi which allows users to hide themselves behind their words. I think this (way of expression) is more real.” For example, he joined Wechat groups of the village such as the ‘Xiaojiaka Community Youth Group’ on which Chen Yan, a young lady, said: “I’ve enrolled in a vocational school (...) I have some regrets.” Two other members of this Wechat group encouraged her to re-take the college entrance examination the next year in order to get into a college. It turned out that Chen Yan was not a fresh graduate from high school – she had worked for a year already. The screenshot of this conversation was part of the exhibition. It shows the mundaneness of their conversation on social media, it brings to light the aspirations of the migrant workers, their hopes of moving upwards in the social hierarchy by attaining a higher education, and their mutual encourage-ment within an online community – it creates a convivial online space. For the 5+1=6 Project exhibition in summer 2015, Ma printed out all the screenshots of chats for the audience to read. In this part of the work, the artist, acting as a migrant worker, saw things and heard voices that would otherwise not be visible or audible to him. Migrant workers emerge as individuals with feelings, and as people with critical voices and ambitions.
The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented development and construction, this project was suspended.14

Mer Beijing mayor Chen Xitong who was later jailed on charges projects in China are mainly due to economic and financial buildings are symbolic of the frictions of China’s alleged lack of any proper legal land use documentation, would present as to confront the audience with the flip side of Europeanness, which has now faded into a ghost; her private space Ma questions the possibility of public space in China, an inquiry enhanced by the audible argument. To escape the confrontation Ma proclaims to be a student, rather than a journalist. Once the police are called in, Ma tells them he is an art student who finds the ruins interesting and beautiful. He told us, “He (the police captain) ordered me to delete the video so that I could go away. (...) So I did. But afterwards asked someone to recover the video.” In his work, Ma renders visible the confrontations between contractors’ versus land renters versus journalists, and the conflicting power relations embodied by these three parties. In addition, he raises questions about urbanization – who can use the land illegally with impunity and who cannot, what is public space and who has the right to govern the public space, who profits most from construction and demolition?

No more dreams?
Through his acting as a migrant worker, migrant workers emerge not as an anonymous horde of people, but as individuals with voices, thoughts and feelings. In his acting as a journalist and an art student, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land and the conflicting ideas, if not possibility, of ‘public space’ in urbanizing Beijing. Ma thus renders visible and audible the contradictions and tensions that come with the rapid growth and urbanization of Beijing. The work is a critical intervention in the narrative of urban growth in Beijing, given that it foregrounds how the top-down, capital driven urban development does not bring the China Dream to those who are rootless in the city. It is not the first work to do so, as we have shown already, but the work strikes us as significant in two aspects. First, in the ways the artist enacts different roles to allow migrant workers to reproduce their everyday urban life, Ma’s work is a critique of urbanization. In the second, the work is deeply embedded in its specific site; it is a case of what Minna Valkajärvi calls ‘site-responsive artwork’. The work unfolds itself in a complex interaction between the site, its social relations and the representations of both.15

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redetermination of the site may stimulate critical questions about urban progress in China, there are also questions left unanswered. The work is primarily exhibited in art spaces, which are usually sanitized spaces in Beijing, quite removed from the everyday lives of most people. What impact can such a work have? Also, by acting in different roles, and not revealing himself to be an artist, ethical questions arise: who is using whom in this work? And what do the migrant workers gain in the end? Does not the artist benefit the most from their work?16

While the work challenges an unrealistic celebration of urban progress in China, a position that is shared with many artworks in China, these ethical questions about the involvement of migrant workers, and other communities in works of participatory art, remain unanswered. Let us as a way of a more hopeful closure return to MC Hotdog. He sings “Regardless of anything, I just want to drive on the 5th ring”. The artists of the 5+1=6 project may respond with “please, look further than the fifth ring road, drive outside, take a detour, walk around, and experience a Beijing that may shatter the China Dream, but that may also allow for other dreams, other futures”.17

Deng Liwen (Zoénie) and Jeroen de Kloet, Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies, Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam. [l.deng@uva.nl, BJ.dekloet@uva.nl]

This project has been supported by a consolidator grant from the European Research Council (ERC-2013-CoG 618082-ChinaCreative). We would like to thank Ma Lijiao for sharing his work with us.

Fig 2 (below) Steel bars of the unfinished villas. Images courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

References