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Frontier Boomtown Urbanism in Ordos, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region

At the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the city of Ordos in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region burst into the national consciousness driven by two seemingly discordant reports. The first announced that the city’s per-capita GDP had surpassed that of Hong Kong in 2009 (“Neimenggu guanyuan” 2009). The second exposed a massive and lavishly appointed new-town development scheme described as a “ghost town” (Wan and Du 2010). These reports presented a confounding picture of the peculiar hothouse environment that had taken root in this overlooked corner of the Chinese frontier.

This essay examines the breakneck growth of Ordos Municipality in the first decade of the 2000s to assess a specific process of city building that I term “frontier boomtown urbanism.” While China has undergone rapid urbanization over the past thirty years and property-led development has been a dominant motive force of change in urban areas, I use the term “frontier boomtown urbanism” to refer specifically to the extreme speed, scale, and intensity of urban development in this natural-resource extraction center in western Inner Mongolia. These traits are conditioned by the city’s geographical marginality and the spectral presences of culture, nature, and minority ethnicity, which loom behind the processes of city building and in the built environment. In combination, these forces produce a different type of contemporary city in China that remains unaccounted for by the bulk of urban literature, which continues to utilize coastal cities as case studies and to implicitly position these latter cities as the “dragon heads” of urban development.
The tacit assumption that Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou serve as templates for other cities powerfully shapes the research agenda as well as the concrete practices of city building in China’s interior. By default, cities on the periphery, such as Ordos, are relegated within the contemporary urban system to the minor role of aspirant intimated by its official assignation as a “third-tier” city. This marginality is then reflected in the scant attention paid to cities on China’s periphery in academic discourse. How might the specific experience of a city on China’s margins actually speak to a condition that is more complex than simply a “backward” or “marginal” version of the leading cities? Can the reality of regional uneven development have an impact more profound than simply being the cause of stagnation or motivating a kind of chip-on-the-shoulder development? How does a resource-based frontier boomtown like Ordos try to assert its urbanity? Under what set of constraints does frontier boomtown urbanism unfold as a highly unstable and fraught process of city building?

To address these questions, this study examines three layers of space production, each of which opens a window to the specific character of frontier boomtown urbanism. First, it looks at the production of municipal territorial power through the redesignation of the Yikezhao meng (伊克昭盟) into the prefecture-level Ordos Municipality (鄂尔多斯市). This change echoed shifts in the national system of spatial administration, where prefectures and counties have been dissolved en masse in favor of creating cities as a way to make urbanization and industrialization the twin motors of economic development. Second, it analyzes the identification of emergent problems resulting from rapid economic growth and their proposed urban solutions. In particular it considers the fixation upon a new-town project as the answer to spatial expansion and surplus capital absorption. Finally, it interprets the spatial and formal elements of the city’s new-town development project as a space-production agenda that seeks to tap into multiple up-to-date
codings of urban arrival. Though the phenomenon of frontier boomtown urbanism is unique to the particular circumstances of the geographical periphery, it occurs within a context that is irreducibly national and Chinese. Thus I argue that the extreme mode of city building that transformed Ordos starting around 2000 must be taken not as irrational or exceptional, but instead as exemplary of a ubiquitous tendency on the part of China’s territorial administrations to dream in urban terms and to build with the city in mind. Yet the limited range of those terms do not lead to uniform results, as Ordos vividly demonstrates. Rather the unique experience of a rapidly developing city on China’s margins may serve to qualify the view of developments in the country’s core.

But before engaging the specific process of space production in Ordos, it is necessary to briefly contextualize the discussion with an elaboration of key terms and concepts.

*Boomtowns and the Chinese frontier*

In using the term “frontier boomtown” I am situating Ordos in two spheres of liminality: the uncertain transitional temporal sphere of the boom, and the unstable spatial sphere of the national frontier. The boom, one assumes, is a passing phenomenon, while the frontier is similarly in a state of constant redefinition in response to shifts in politics and economy. This makes the frontier boomtown a slippery object of analysis, as it is defined by instability and change. Perhaps for this reason, boomtowns have only sporadically been the focus of work on cities (Burns 1965; Martinez 1978; Mawhiney and Pitblado 1998; McMurray 2001).

The settlement of the American West has been the most richly documented phase of boomtown emergence (Cronon 1991; Brechin 2001; Moehring 2004). In these accounts the frontier boomtowns of the American West helped firstly to solidify the national project of
American empire, initially across the continent and then beyond. As Moehring shows in his account, territories controlled by indigenous peoples were conquered through a complex process of physical occupation and the introduction of new logics of spatial governance based on a network of urban centers. The rapid inhabitation, economic growth, and establishment of local American rule in rural areas and boomtowns, such as Chicago and San Francisco, as well as mining settlements like Virginia City, Nevada, were critical in spreading the spread a web of city-based power across the vast American hinterland.

As Gaubatz has remarked, China’s frontier has long been densely settled and substantially urban (1996). In contrast to the lack of original dense settlements on the American frontier, regions outside the core areas of Han Chinese civilization were historically dotted with major trading centers, large garrison outposts, and centers of imperial administration. In these multi-ethnic contact zones on China’s frontier a wide range of settlement practices existed around both sedentary agriculture and nomadic pastoralism to produce what she calls “frontier urbanism.” The project of Chinese empire, like that which took shape on the North American continent, was also articulated through processes of city building. “Frontier cities represent a considerable effort on the part of the Chinese empires throughout their histories to replicate both archetypical urban forms and, in miniature, the socio-spatial form of the empire itself” (Gaubatz 1996, 3). Cities, in other words, were central to pacifying the realm and instilling Chinese civilization on the empire’s fringes.

Ordos differs from American boomtowns and historical Chinese frontier cities in key respects. Unlike the instant cities of the American West, its boom was not accompanied by a substantial increase in population. The city’s boom is fundamentally driven by rapid economic growth and the substantive effects of its re-assignation from meng to municipality discussed
below. The Chinese frontier itself has also witnessed substantial changes in the last decade by becoming an increasingly critical source of raw materials used in the industrial centers of the coast. Development of regional resource economies has powered spectacular rates of local accumulation that are recycled as reinvestment and in property development. Indeed, Inner Mongolia has been China’s fastest-growing province since 2002, and Ordos has been the star performer in the autonomous region (Deutsche Bank Research 2011). The city’s GDP rose from 15.1 billion yuan to 258 billion yuan between 2000 and 2009 (Kang 2010), with extractive and heavy industries accounting for over 90 percent of local industrial production (Ordos Bureau of Statistics 2009). In Ordos’ case, geographical and cultural marginality are no longer coupled with anemic economic growth. The city’s liminality as a frontier boomtown is thus perceptible in its sudden wealth and its position in a region undergoing rapid and historic transformation.

Ordos is also invariably impacted by transformations to the national urban system. The introduction of a system of liberalized trade in urban land leaseholds in 1988 fundamentally altered the disposition of urban regimes toward land under their jurisdiction. When compounded with sharp reductions in central transfers to cities in support of urban development agendas through the 1980s and 1990s, profit-oriented land development became the driving force of urban political economy (Chung and Lam 2004; Ma 2005; Lin 2009). The single-minded focus on fostering property development in Chinese cities has led to what Hsing calls the “urbanization of the local state” (2010). This theorization usefully points to the reorientation of local state activity as urban regimes relentlessly pursue real estate development. Moreover, their purposes for doing so are not strictly for local accumulation. Land development is also undertaken as a project of territorialization, understood as the rooting of power in land under the local regime’s direct control. Local urban regime territoriality is therefore an encompassing
project of asserting control not just over the trade in land leaseholds, but in the organization, regulation, administration, and design of urban space.

For this reason, local state power and land development compose a mutually reinforcing dynamic. This notion complicates Harvey’s theorization of the “urbanization of capital” in which capital, by circulating through its three “circuits,” produces the space of the city according to capital’s dictates (1985). Under the current political economy driving urbanization in China, instead of capital building the city and consequently shaping the state, an urbanized municipal regime is an entrepreneurial agent that uses, to the highest degree possible, the city as a material and ideological fount from which to derive the resources that sustain accumulation and secure the legitimacy of the local city-building regime.

In the discussion of Ordos below, I emphasize the interconnections between the economic, political, and ideological impulses to build the city in the way it has done so. Boomtown dynamics are strongly informed by the relation between the incipient local urban regime and land development.

Layer 1: Making municipal power in Ordos

China has seen a significant shift under reform in its territorial management of industrialization and economic reform. Centralized and vertical administration of cities in the Mao era was reoriented during the past thirty years in favor of granting greater fiscal and administrative autonomy to municipal sub-units. This was undertaken as part of central-government policy aimed at coupling industrialization and urbanization in order to make cities the primary motors of economic growth. Such changes constitute what Ma terms a “rescaling” of power in China, through which the central government has retained control over key policy
decisions of national import, and cities have emerged as dynamic and powerful entities with substantial say over development in their jurisdictions (2005, 478).

Under the current system of spatial administration, municipalities constitute a privileged sub-unit that concentrates enhanced fiscal and administrative power. Specifically, in the hierarchy of territorial administration a prefecture-level city operates as an independent sub-provincial intermediary empowered to draft regulations and set policy, and able to extract resources from counties (or banners) and districts below it. The designation further permits the city to significantly expand its number of offices and staff (Chung and Lam 2004; 457-460). Cities also represent a modernity to which many local-level officials aspire. Drawn by the allure of city designation, local-level entities have lobbied aggressively for promotion to urban status, and indeed, the number of official cities has risen from 193 at the outset of reforms in 1979 to 670 by 2009 (*China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, 10).

Ordos joined this generalized trend in 2001, having received approval from the State Council to dissolve the Yikezhao meng and establish a new municipality in its place. By doing so it became the sixth municipality in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region to be formally declared under the PRC – the others being Hohot, Baotou, Wuhai, Chifeng, and Tongliao. As Bulag documents, the dissolution of the meng, a prefecture-level territorial sub-unit dating from the Qing dynasty, was cause for celebration locally (2002). It affirmed the meng’s impressive economic growth in the 1990s based on its three leading industries of cashmere clothing, coal, and chemicals, while marking a new cultural strategy to retain the exotic-sounding tribal name associated with the region (Ordos is rendered in Chinese as E’erduosi 鄂尔多斯).

At first glance, however, Ordos would seem an unlikely candidate for municipal status. With a population of 1.5 million living in an area of 87,000km², an area significantly larger than
Chongqing, its overall population density is roughly 18 persons per square kilometer. By contrast, Shanghai’s 2009 population density was over 3,000 persons per square kilometer. Moreover, with about 65 percent of Ordos Municipality’s population located in either Dongsheng District or the urbanized seats of the seven banners, most of Ordos city is, in fact, open grassland and pasture.iii But, according to regulations established at the central level, prefecture-level cities are defined as sub-provincial jurisdictions with a non-agricultural population over 200,000 and with a minimum GDP of 2.5 billion yuan, of which industrial output accounts for 80 percent (Chung and Lam 2004, 950). Notably, population density is not a formal criterion for ascending to city status. As a result, the characteristics of a city under the Chinese urban system can differ substantially from place to place and from the conventional image of a city as a dense agglomeration. The proclivity for making cities out of prefectures and counties based on the criteria just listed has given rise to what are formally labeled cities but which, as Hsing has noted, include within their jurisdictional boundaries vast rural areas dotted with small towns and villages surrounding an urban core administered as a district or several districts (2010). In the frontier regions of China’s interior and West, where territorial entities tend to be larger in areal size, a reconfiguration of administrative space, as took place in Ordos, produces a unique kind of metropolitan region characterized by vast areas of open land and extremely low population density.

Despite Ordos’ general appearance as a predominantly rural hinterland, its municipal designation substantively altered the dynamics of local power. It entailed a streamlining of lower-level administrations, as the number of territorial sub-units was reduced, and the production of a municipal administrative umbrella under which rural-based heavy and extractive
industry would operate. The latter point is especially significant in light of developments within the local resource sector.

The round of administrative reshuffling occurred soon after massive deposits of coal and natural gas were discovered in fields located throughout the Yikeyzhao meng. These fields contain a sixth of China’s total proven coal reserves and a third of its natural gas. Not only was this immense supply of resources discovered at a pivotal moment of surging demand for coal to power the industrialization of China’s coast economies, it was also a period of changing national energy strategy. On the one hand, the central government liberalized prices for coal in the late 1990s and encouraged consolidation of mining operations, leading to rising prices and higher profits for upstream producers (IEA 2007, 278-280). On the other, improvements in extraction technology and cargo transport infrastructure began to permit a new spatial division of labor in primary energy provision in which Shanxi, Sha’anxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Xinjiang are to form a new domestic energy commodity bloc. With its huge reserves, Ordos is de facto a major center in the shifting map of primary energy production (E’erduosi shi meitan xiehui 2010). Reflecting this centrality, coal production in the municipality soared from 26 million tons in 2000 to 500 million tons in 2010 and is behind Inner Mongolia’s emergence in the past two years as the country’s top coal-producing province (Yang 2010).

Ordos’ municipal designation thus produced a formal legal apparatus empowered to derive tax revenues from booming extraction industries and lower-level territorial units. It is not, however, a typical municipality. It is characterized by three defining traits on the frontier: enormous spatial scale, low population, and the presence of a few choice industries providing commodities essential to China’s continued industrialization. The articulation of frontier boomtown urbanism in Ordos is traceable to historic spatial-administrative change, which
created a spatial colossus that fortuitously encompassed some of the country’s most productive sites for primary energy commodity production and exploration. A result was the rapid rise in municipal revenue, which by 2005 was derived by more than half from land taxes levied on local coalmining firms (Zhang 2007, 30). Production of the municipal scale served to bring under a single territorial authority the highly contingent and unstable benefits of sudden resource wealth. Changes in domestic coal prices, production technology, or trade terms with foreign coal producers could radically alter the city’s fiscal landscape.

Layer 2: Producing spaces of urban growth

Ordos’ sudden industrialization and wealth raised the question of how to manage the city’s growth. By the early 2000s, the municipality’s core urban area of Dongsheng faced pressures to its local industrial structure, which was ill equipped to handle the torrid pace of growth. In addition, the city faced surging demand for new commercial space, residential building, industrial sites, and infrastructure. Local environmental conditions were also seen by planners to present imposing obstacles to expansion. The built-up area of the city was a densely populated thicket of narrow roads and ramshackle low-rise buildings. Moreover, the immediate area around Dongsheng suffered a severe lack of water and local topography and soils were poorly suited to large-scale development (Wang 2007). These conditions promised to make the redevelopment of Dongsheng difficult and expensive. This section considers the municipality’s response to these pressures as a territorializing project via spatial expansion.

In response to pressures for expansion, the municipality utilized its new planning authority granted by virtue of its recent designation as a prefecture-level city to commission the commercial planning arms of research institutes at Tsinghua University in Beijing and Tongji
University in Shanghai to draft detailed land-use plans (Yeh and Wu 1999). The centerpiece of the comprehensive development plans was a new-town project intended to serve as “a new vehicle for the future economic and social development of the city” (Wang 2007). With the new town, according to the plan, Ordos would be given a chance to start anew in a rationalized and planned urban space without the burdensome spatial legacy of inadequate infrastructures and unsightly architectures that characterized Dongsheng.

Reflecting its new wealth and the availability of abundant sparsely populated land, Ordos’ new-town project was conceived in superlative scale and was executed with astonishing speed.

A site for the new town was chosen in a basin 25km south of Dongsheng. It provided space for an envisioned 35km$^2$ built-up urban area called Kangbashi designed to hold 300,000 residents. According to the municipality’s master plan, Dongsheng and Kangbashi are conceived as two poles of an intensively urbanized core area (hexin qu), making a bi-polar metropolitan region governed by the municipality and two district governments (see Figure 1). In the plan, Kangbashi is touted as an expedient solution to spatial restructuring in the municipality. Dongsheng is to retain basic functions as a space of “traditional commerce and industry” and residence. Kangbashi, meanwhile, is a targeted zone for municipal government administration, logistics, culture, high-technology industry, and ultra-high-end residential space (E’erduosi guihua ju 2009). The new town, in other words, is specifically designed to concentrate municipal state power, favored industries, service-sector employment, and wealthy residents.

The municipality was able to acquire its tract of land for Kangbashi at minimal cost and with few relocation hassles. It acquired the site by removing 376 rural households at a cost of 112 million yuan (Wang 2007, 17). When compared with the volatile politics surrounding urban
relocation and its high cost in more densely populated coastal cities, Ordos was able to proceed with relative alacrity. As part of the relocation package, adult heads of household were steered toward jobs in the local trucking industry, shipping the coal produced in the mines to the factories and power plants to the east.

In addition, using acquired land as collateral, the municipal government established a development company to manage the development of Kangbashi. Ordos’ vice mayor was named chief executive officer of the development company. Through its connections to the provincial government and by leveraging the development company’s credit status as a subsidiary of the prefecture-level city, the Kangbashi project was initiated with a three billion yuan loan in 2003 that readied 23,000 mu of land for lease within two years (“E’erduosi kangbashi xinqu” 2006). Against a backdrop of triumphal pronouncements about the bright future of Ordos and Kangbashi, the municipal government became the new town’s first tenant by moving into its massive new headquarters in 2006.

Triggered by massive accumulations of surplus capital and projections of continued rapid growth, a speculative frenzy gripped Kangbashi, as Ordos’ contingent of newly wealthy residents and investors from around the country rushed to purchase real estate in the new town as speculative investments (Lu 2010; Chovanec 2010). Without the need for rental income, however, the vast majority of homeowners allowed most homes to sit empty (“E’erduosi fangchan paomo” 2010). The new town’s palatial new residential complexes and freshly paved avenues presented a bizarre empty landscape led to the embarrassing coverage labeling the city a “ghost town.” Officials were forced to admit in 2010 that fewer than 30,000 residents live permanently in Kangbashi.
How might the construction of Kangbashi and its alleged failure be interpreted? As a means to stem the flow of accumulated surplus capital out of the municipality toward the more developed coastal economies, and in order to free space to realize surplus capital’s growth capacity through property development and industrial expansion, the production of the new town presents a seemingly clear case of a “spatial fix” as theorized by Harvey (1982). Under these terms, Kangbashi represents a resolution of the problems raised by spatial configurations rendered obsolete by the sudden advance of industry and surplus capital accumulation. The new town provided a ready outlet into which investors were invited to sink accumulated savings. Its large lots, more stable soils, and greater availability of water also seemed to provide a more rational space for long-term development.

However, seen through the lens of territoriality, understood as the rooting of power in control over land, Kangbashi comes into view as more than a mere result of the rationalization of urban space through the process of capital circulation. Instead, it can be viewed as functioning as a proving ground for a multi-faceted municipal development strategy that is political and cultural, as well as economic. Specifically, the genuine pressures on the original spatial configurations of industry and commerce, as well as local infrastructure, were processed through a local regime with substantial control over spatial planning and in the thrall of China’s generalized tide of urbanization. Kangbashi thus represented an occasion for municipal aggrandizement through the creation of the new town where it would place its impressive new headquarters. Not only would the municipal government orchestrate its relocation out of Dongsheng, where its original headquarters was located, to a new site under its control, but it would use its monopoly over the primary land market to establish an exclusive base of fiscal resources the revenue from which would accrue solely to it. By no longer needing to cohabit the same space as the Dongsheng
District Government, the new municipal government was able to stamp its authority into a freshly cleared site in a way that symbolized its control. Further, the new-town project constitutes a visible manifestation of urban stewardship and vision with which to impress its new authority upon residents. Kangbashi is a manifestation of urban dreams and the need felt within urban regimes to construct a space commensurate with municipal power. This radical mode of expansion was facilitated in crucial ways by the unusual circumstances that obtain in a frontier boomtown where neither space nor cost were seen to pose significant restraints.

Layer 3: Producing an urban vision on the frontier

A third layer of space production is discernible in the urban form of Kangbashi. Working on a blank slate of cleared and platted topography, the municipal government’s strategy for the new space was to first implant the municipal government, a central plaza, and a host of cultural institutions to anchor the space. With a critical mass of governmental and cultural functions rooted in the new town it was expected that residents and commerce, as well as industry, would follow. To see this plan to fruition, the new urban core needed to accomplish two goals: first, it needed to make itself an attractive site while also, secondly, affirming the municipal government’s authority in a way that would lend credibility to the enterprise as a whole. This required attention to spatial layout and beautification, which the municipal government saw as being of paramount importance (Li, Jia, and Zhang 2007; Kong, Zhao, and Huang 2010). The resulting urban form, its landmark architecture, and statuary on the central plaza produce an aesthetically hybrid space that merits a close read for its insight into the local cultural politics of urban form. These reveal the ambitions and inherent tensions at the center of the production of space in Ordos. I argue here that the vision of municipal power embodied by the new town’s
central zone extends from an accumulation-oriented construction agenda to a legitimization-oriented aesthetic one.

Kangbashi’s spatial layout is based on a basic grid design at the center of which were concentrated the new town’s core institutions. The municipal government expended considerable effort and money to make of the space a marker of its ascendance and wealth. The space shoulders a disproportionate burden for the city as a space for the display of monuments and appropriate forms of culture and leisure. In doing so Ordos followed the efforts of Chinese urban regimes over the past two decades that have sought to transform urban built form with one eye to boosting revenue and another to impressing upon local residents and competitor cities the capabilities of the local state. Thus, as shopping malls and condos have proliferated across urban space, there has been a parallel profusion of landmark urban structures and high-design municipal buildings. Boosting a city’s visibility through landmark architecture has become a strategy of economic development and a means to communicate wealth, modernity, and power among peers in government and between the local state and urban residents (Kong 2007; Broudehoux 2007; Ren 2008).

Ordos has sought to follow this trend in place-making strategies but the specific method of coding built form in Kangbashi lies behind its uniqueness as a material expression of the frontier boomtown.

To begin, the municipal government awarded itself pride of place at the top end of the new town’s central axis. The siting of the city government headquarter is not coincidental. Its location at the head of the axis places it at the base of a minor hill, which rises in the north behind the three governmental headquarter buildings, and in front of a large man-made lake to its south. The two lateral buildings of the three-building compound are set at obtuse angles to the
center building creating a southward-facing orientation that focuses on a plaza before it called Genghis Khan Square (Chengji sihan guangchang). This positioning is relevant for its two references to historical city-building practice. First, it replicates the traditional north-south axis of classical Chinese cities exemplified by Beijing. The north-south orientation, it has been argued, links urban form to cosmological principles in which the city is an abstract representation of universal principles of order and harmonious hierarchy (Steinhardt 1984). Within that order, social hierarchy is built into city form by locating official power at the center of the city and with greater height. The Ordos Municipal Government placed itself not at the physical center of the city, but at an elevated spot on its central axis. Second, the headquarter sits in the most auspicious site, according to traditional geomancy precepts, with water to the front and mountains at the rear (menqian you shui, wuhou you shan) (Gaubatz 1996, 132-145). Evidence in Kangbashi of ideal siting based on geomantic principles integrates the contemporary new town into the traditional Han Chinese practice of arranging built form in order to channel propitious energies to specific places, in this case the government compound. According to geomantic practice, the government compound is designed to face the man-made lake in order to capture the vitality and prosperity believed to flow from water.

Despite the functionalist character of the new town’s grid, the disposition of the streets and the new town’s central axis, which serves as a vast open public space, focus lines of sight on the municipal government headquarters atop its purpose-built rise. Care was paid to situate the base of local state power in a highly visible, central place framed by large avenues and the dramatic central plaza leading to its front door.

With the municipal government occupying the dominant position at the head of the new town’s axis, the rest of the central plaza is further divided into three sections: Genghis Khan
Square directly in front of the municipal government, Sun Square in front of the new town’s four main civic structures, and a large park space that stretches to the man-made lake. I briefly describe these in the space below before assessing their significance as constitutive parts of the Kangbashi’s built form.

Genghis Khan Square fills an entire block immediately south of the municipal government. The square’s theme is forwarded by a set of four massive statuary sculptures, each about 5m tall and up to 15m long, set on brick plinths. Together the statues narrate an idealization of inter-ethnic relations between the Han and Mongols, who make up only slightly over ten percent of Ordos’ population. By reducing the representation of Mongolian ethnicity to the Yuan dynasty and its key figurehead, Genghis Khan, the statuary’s depiction of historical glory and ethnic reconciliation in the shadow of the municipal government symbolizes a local strategy of ethnic appeasement and co-optation, as identified by Bulag (2002). Yet it also represents a branding strategy in the process of local place making, as Ordos seeks to capitalize on tourism to the Genghis Khan Mausoleum located about thirty kilometers east of Kangbashi.

Directly south of Genghis Khan Square, Sun Square is comprised of a massive floral arrangement that fills the entire block. Various types and colors of flowers are used to create an intricate pattern of the sun to represent the slogan of the new town’s design, which is the title of a popular song titled “The grassland on which the sun never sets” (Taiyang shengqibu luode caoyuan). Due to the floral arrangement’s size and horizontality, viewing it from the medium-height buildings that line the central plaza is not possible. Its intricate detail is visible only in two-dimensional representations or in aerial-view. Viewers on the ground are impressed most immediately by the obvious cost of the flowers and their upkeep in the arid setting.
Flanking Sun Square are Kangbashi’s four major cultural institutions: the museum, the library, the cultural center, and the performing arts center. These structures, built two side-by-side, are positioned opposite each other on the central plaza two blocks south of the municipal government headquarter. Despite the symmetry of their positioning, each of the civic buildings was built using different materials with distinct architectural programs, two of which offer nods to Mongolian ethnicity. The library, for example, was built to represent three upright volumes of Mongolian literary classics. Also, the performing arts center is designed to evoke traditional Mongolian headdress. The Ordos Museum is the standout architectural element of the central plaza. The museum was designed by Ma Yansong, a leading contemporary Chinese architect, who designed an aluminum-clad blob that now serves as Ordos’ iconic landmark structure. The museum helped put the city on the cultural map by drawing domestic and international architectural reviews. It thus marks the city’s pursuit of a global strategy for municipal distinction through high-design museums pioneered by the post-industrial Portuguese city of Bilbao and its Frank Gerhy-designed Guggenheim Museum.

South of Sun Square, the remainder of the central plaza stretches for nearly two kilometers to the lake. Thousands of trees have been planted in the park space, which is traced by multiple meandering stone paths. Positioned in clearings throughout the park space are permanent installations of public art commissioned by the city for the First International Asian Sculpture Festival, which it hosted in 2008.

As stated at the outset of this section, Kangbashi’s urban form presents a hybrid aesthetic that draws from different modes of city building and that carefully negotiates a relation between ethnicity, culture, and nature. In a single comprehensively designed space it contains references
to classical Han Chinese urban form developed within a framework of modern local state-centered urban planning while situating landmark public buildings in such a way as to create an urban core out of key cultural institutions. The large open space of the central plaza, moreover, constructs access to carefully scripted encounters with nature in the shadow of state-backed cultural institutions. Monumental statuary of Genghis Khan further reinforces the Han-dominated local state’s power over representations of ethnicity that label the Mongol as relics of a distant past whose reconciliation and integration with the Han has brought both prosperity and civilization.

The assemblage of government buildings, squares, cultural institutions, and statuary produces a symbol-laden monument out of Kangbashi’s central area. However, it is far subtler than a base celebration of the socialist state apparatus, as one might argue in the case of Tiananmen Square (Wu 2005). The clues it broadcasts represent sensibilities unique to the economic, cultural, and geographic conditions of the frontier. In a reflection of the master plan’s emphasis on building a modern (xiandai), comfortable (shushi), natural (ziran), and livable (yiju) place, the municipal government loaded the space with the hallmark symbols of these ideal elements: wide streets, parks, green belts, a sizable man-made lake, and a full complement of cultural institutions. It did so, moreover, with an eye to achieving distinction through spectacular architectural forms. The Ordos Museum was especially effective in signaling the upstart city’s integration into a global standard of high-end design that would help it to leap from the shadows of China’s cultural margins and onto the world stage.

I contend that the elaborate urban form in Kangbashi represents something more than an extravagant form of real estate promotion, though that was surely a consideration. It was instead an earnest attempt to materialize certain up-to-date ideals of urban living, such as green-ness,
globalism, leisure, and modern comforts. By these standards, Dongsheng and the former Yikezhaomeng were sorely lacking. Kangbashi was thus an opportunity to build with those ideals in mind. Doing so, however, entailed creating fantasy representations of Mongol ethnicity for tourist consumption and monumental investments in planting and maintaining flora in a desert setting. Critically, all visible traces of the municipality’s coalmines, places stigmatized as dirty and backward, are entirely banished from the space. The environmental despoliation of the countryside, including hundreds of out-of-control subterranean fires and large areas of uninhabitable subsided land, is nowhere in sight.

Making the frontier boomtown

The limelight cast on the coastal metropolises of China has kept the dramatic changes taking place in interior cities in relative darkness. But it is the metropolitan regions of the interior that have shown the superlative measures of economic expansion for nearly a decade. Building on this growth, cities dotted throughout the interior have seen historic transformations. More recently, minor cities like Ordos are gradually drawing media attention as the country’s new high-growth centers and places to witness the extreme dynamism of Chinese urbanization at work. But cities of the interior remain under-researched and generally poorly understood.

This essay is intended to be part of an effort to address that lacuna. It does not claim to speak for Chinese urbanization in general. Rather, it aims to flag the experience of a culturally and geographically peripheral resource extraction-based city undergoing rapid economic growth. By considering the intensity, pace, and scale of growth, and through an assessment of the cultural politics of urban form in its new-town project, it proposes that Ordos represents a new development in contemporary China: the emergence of the frontier boomtown.
As with any boomtown, the radical transformations in Ordos are highly unusual. They occurred as a result of the convergence of multiple factors that few places are poised to replicate. The juridical entity of Ordos Municipality was created by state fiat as part of a broad national trend toward the eradication of prefectures and their replacement with municipalities. By doing so, Ordos became a mega-city overnight, though strictly in areal terms, as its population is low and its population density is a fraction of that of coastal cities. The size of the city gained special significance when it was discovered that the jurisdictional boundary enclosed rich and shallow deposits of key natural resources, such as coal and natural gas. With coal projected to provide over sixty percent of China’s growing energy demand in the coming decades, and with natural gas as a “clean” energy source targeted by the central government for prioritized investment, Ordos has stood to catch sequential waves of old and new energy sources alike (IEA 2007). Based on these promising projections, a subsequent boom in exploration and production activity had profound repercussions for the city.

I have argued that Ordos’ rapid growth stimulated a mode of city building that I term frontier boomtown urbanism. As Ordos demonstrates, this involves exaggerated expressions of common themes in contemporary Chinese urban space production. Firstly, this includes a proclivity for making metropolitan centers of power. Second, the urban regime responds to the powerful pressures on local spatial configurations with municipality-driven modes of spatial planning with an emphasis on creating large, rationalized, and spectacular urban spaces. This serves a dual function of broadening the material base under municipal control and thereby cementing the local regime’s territoriality via land development. Finally, the process of etching authority into the land produces specific urban forms. Results of that process in Ordos show careful orchestrations of display and selective elision, which confine inter-ethnic tensions to the
benign realm of cultural tourism and that mask the rapacious local exploitation of natural resources in the process of building a modern urban space with a high degree of “livability” and “green-ness.”

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ii Article 10 states: “Land in cities is owned by the state. … The state may, in the public interest and in accordance with the provisions of law, expropriate or requisition land for its use and shall make compensation for the land expropriated or requisitioned. No organization or individual may appropriate, buy, sell, or unlawfully transfer land in other ways. The right to the use of land may be transferred in accordance with the law.”


iv Estimates of coal reserves under the surface of the municipality amount to 763 billion tons, while proven reserves exceed 171 billion tons. Proven natural gas reserves total 800 billion cubic meters. See municipal government website at “Zou jin E’erduosi,” http://www.ordos.gov.cn/zjee dx/.


vi The books are: *Menggu mishi* (*The secret history of Mongolia*), *Menggu yuanliu* (*The Origin and Development of Mongolia*), and *Menggu huangjin shi* (*The Golden History of Mongolia*).
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