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ABSTRACT

Ordos Municipality, in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, has emerged as one of China's wealthiest places, with an economy driven by massive expansion of the local coal industry. This essay examines how this formerly poor region has experienced breakneck urban growth, becoming a resource-driven frontier boomtown. The frontier boomtown urbanism of Ordos highlights the impulse toward urban construction of the periphery that aspires to catch up with the metropolitan center and to articulate its own centrality through such urbanity.

INTRODUCTION

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has experienced a historic transformation in recent years driven by rapid expansion in resource exploration and heavy industry. Huge accumulations of wealth and a burst of urbanization have accompanied these changes. This essay examines urban growth in the autonomous region's Ordos Municipality during the first decade of the 2000s within the frame of "frontier boomtown urbanism." As will be shown, China's frontier boomtown urbanism is remarkable for the extreme speed, scale, and intensity of its urban-industrial development powered by

natural-resource extraction industries. At another level, this brand of urbanism is characterized by the production of multiple urban megaprojects that assemble the frontier boomtown as a unique space interweaving the social and environmental conditions inherent to its regional context. Frontier boomtown urbanism also exemplifies the urge, typical among contemporary Chinese urban regimes, to try and build an urban reality according to grand designs, and the ways in which these efforts are challenged by the conditions of change brought on by rapid economic growth.

Perhaps best known as the purported resting place of Genghis Khan, Ordos is surrounded on the west, north, and east by the northern loop of the Yellow River and is bordered to the south by the Great Wall. Nutrient-poor soil, large shifting deserts, and scant rainfall made Ordos one of Inner Mongolia's most hardscrabble and isolated regions, until recently. Starting in the 1990s, massive-scale coal mining, natural gas exploration, industrial cashmere production, rare-earth mining, and heavy industry opened a new chapter in the region's history.[1] After less than a decade of ultrarapid growth, occurring mostly out of view of the media, the city's party secretary shocked the world in 2009 by announcing that the municipality's per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) had surpassed that of Hong Kong (Xie 2009). Overnight, the region was redubbed "China's Dubai," an apt moniker given the frenzy of urban construction and resource exploitation at the center of the city's development.

Yet, despite the evidence of historic change in Ordos and many other cities in the country's interior, contemporary Chinese urban studies inside and outside China continue to focus on the major coastal cities.[2] This essay seeks to contribute to a shift in attention toward the underresearched regions of the so-called hinterland, where development patterns and trends can reveal new aspects of Chinese urbanization. It does not deny the powerful influence of the dominant coastal metropolises over the discursive and material practices of contemporary Chinese city building. Rather, it aims to show how regional distinctiveness gets expressed within the political and economic parameters framing contemporary Chinese urban development. This requires us to pose a series of questions: How might the specific experience of a city like Ordos speak to a condition that is more complex than simply a backward or marginal version of the leading cities? How does a resource extraction-based frontier boomtown like Ordos assert its urbanity? How

does frontier boomtown urbanism unfold as an unstable process of social-spatial change?

To answer these questions, this essay first situates itself in reference to discussion about frontiers and boomtowns, two categories that are not always clearly defined. It then analyzes frontier boomtown urbanism in Ordos, by looking at the establishment of the prefecture-level Ordos Municipality (鄂尔多斯市) via the dissolution of the Yeke-juu League (伊克昭盟). This change was part of a broader shift in the national system of spatial administration, whereby hundreds of prefectures and counties have been dissolved in favor of producing municipalities to stimulate urbanization and industrialization. The essay also examines the frenetic expansion of urban and industrial spaces throughout the municipality as a combination of state projects and private speculative frenzy. It argues that the political, economic, and cultural conditions of the frontier boomtown enable construction with particular intensity, making it especially crisis prone. Finally, it uses the city's showcase new-town development project as a case study to analyze a space-production agenda employing specific codings of power, wealth, and environmental balance.

IN WHAT SENSE A FRONTIER?

The term *frontier* is derived from the Latin word *frons*, meaning "forehead," and has tended to connote a forward position within a given territory. Along with its forward position, the frontier also connotes a degree of social fluidity on the fringe of cultural systems and normative structures, such as state power. Because the idea of the frontier implies a judgment about centrality and marginality, it is also loaded with historical connections to imperial and colonial agendas. Frederick Jackson Turner, for example, famously described the frontier as the "meeting point between civilization and savagery" (2009). Later scholars have tried to retain the idea of the frontier as a space of civilizational encounter while dropping the intimations of manifest destiny in Turner's thesis. The mid-century political scientist Ladis Kristof, for example, described the frontier in the following terms: "With the development of patterns of civilization above the level of mere subsistence strictly adapted to particular environmental conditions, the frontiers between ecumene became meeting places not merely of different ways of physical survival, but

also of different concepts of the good life, and hence increasingly political in character" (1959, 270). Frontiers, in this view, are therefore spaces of cultural encounter and overlap.

Given China's history of territorial expansion and contraction, this conceptualization of the frontier is evident in considerable work on China's borderlands. Writing in the 1930s and 1940s about the northern border regions, Owen Lattimore documented a vast, culturally hybrid region where no single cultural group or political authority held absolute sway (1931, 1940, 1941). More recent historical and anthropological scholarship has also taken up the theme of the frontier as part of an examination of the complex social and cultural composition of the Chinese empire and modern nation (Harrell 1996; Schein 2000; Rossabi 2004; Gladney 2004). Relatively little work examines cities at China's geographical margins. Nonetheless, Piper Rae Gaubatz reminds us that China's frontiers have featured garrison outposts, administrative centers, and trade entrepôts since antiquity (1996), indicating that the wilds of China's frontiers have, in fact, been urban in character for centuries. Moreover, the importation of Chinese urban form to locations on the frontier was an integral component of Chinese attempts to pacify non-Han populations. This body of work underscores the regimes of accommodation and cultural hybridity that provide the unique characteristics of a long-settled and persistently contested Chinese frontier, in contrast with the purported empty spaces of the New World frontiers.

In the current day, Inner Mongolia is not a seriously contested territory; its Mongol population has been thoroughly overwhelmed by Han migration. Ordos, for example, has a Han population of about 90 percent. So, it bears asking: in what sense is Ordos a frontier? I contend that, despite the reality of the autonomous region's thoroughgoing incorporation, Han and Mongol cultural overlap, no matter how lopsided and impossible to measure, informs locals' sense of place in the current day. Whether in terms of language, cuisine, social networks, holiday observance, or school choice, Mongol communities continue to be very much distinct in Ordos alongside various regional Chinese cultures. In addition, references to Mongol culture are central to the city's place-making strategies. Cultural hybridity, sometimes more symbolic than substantive, remains a striking feature of daily life in Ordos.

Alongside its hybrid culture, the city also has been a place on the edge economically. Until its recent explosion of wealth, Ordos was a rough-and-

tumble place with a tradition of lawlessness. Given this history, and having observed from the sidelines the economic growth of the Chinese littoral during the first two decades of reform, locals exhibit an intense solidarity rooted in the shared experience of exclusion and deep poverty. Ordos's isolation from the cosmopolitan coast is communicated by locals through constant self-deprecating comments about their low *suzhi* (quality) and the derelict condition of the urban centers. Right or wrong, a pervasive ethos in Ordos sees the city's current fortune as overdue and internally driven, rather than a result of central policymakers' close attention. These traits—cultural hybridity and marginalization—frame the city as a persistent frontier positioned on the edge of the Chinese mainstream. The rugged environmental conditions of the municipality merely reinforce the perception of distance from the norm.

There is a third sense, as well, in which Ordos may be conceived as a frontier. In contrast to the term's usage as a borderland between ecumene, the word has also found another usage, as pioneered by Jason Moore in an essay titled "*The Modern World-System* as Environmental History?" (2003). In this essay, Moore develops the concept of the "commodity frontier," which seeks to "[balance] place and space in the geographical expansion of capitalism" (359). By this, Moore means to demonstrate that the fluid and seemingly abstract space of capital circulation is composed of actual material places, and that capital circulation produces shifting frontiers that are themselves distinct places. The commodity frontier represents an outer limit of a dynamic and geographically expansive system of commodity production. Hence, the commodity frontier is not a geographically marginal space per se, but rather a place of relative isolation, which enables unique conditions for commodity production.[3] In other words, the commodity frontier is a prime location for myriad forms of productive and speculative activity, as well as experimentation and innovation in technology and social organization. Leaps in these realms on the frontier are attributable to the fact that in such places the standard rules are readily bent and broken.[4] Equally important, the rush of investment on the commodity frontier spurs the creation of regional boomtowns that function as command centers for commodity production and as sites for speculative urban development.

Ordos represents an internal commodity frontier within the space of the Chinese national economy. The domestic distinction in this case, in con-

trast to Moore's vision of globalized early capitalism, is based on the fact that Ordos's dominant sector—coal—sells almost exclusively to domestic markets and is produced by large local conglomerates and nationally operating state-owned enterprises.[5] Indeed, foreign direct investment and trade barely register in the local economy.[6] Coal production levels rose dramatically following discoveries in the late 1990s of enormous deposits containing one-sixth of China's coal reserves along with one-third of its natural gas.[7] Coal production in 2010 reached 433 million tons, up from 25 million tons a decade earlier, which placed Ordos at the top of the list of national coal producers by jurisdiction (*Meitan Wang* 2011).[8] Recent delivery of natural gas from the extra-large Sulige gas field has opened a second front for investment as well. On top of this, petroleum was recently discovered in Ordos. Investments in the production of these vital commodities have utterly transformed Ordos, powering not just the economies of the East, where most of these resources are consumed, but also driving the growth of a major new boomtown in Ordos.

Ordos is therefore a frontier in a dual sense: it is a cultural contact zone beyond the Great Wall with a distinctive hybrid culture, and it is also a relatively isolated region where environmental and social conditions enable the hyperexploitation of essential resources and the sudden emergence of a major new urban center.

A BOOM AMONG BOOMS

Cities rise and fall in a rhythm that cannot be reduced to a single, or even a few, causes. Some cities develop over centuries, maturing into major metropolises over periods of relative somnolence interspersed with fits of rapid growth, whereas others seem to appear overnight only to fade from prominence just as quickly. This latter type of city, given the name *boomtown* or *instant city* by various scholars, is a peculiar type of city, with specific social and developmental traits (Barth 1975). In the United States, boomtowns emerged all along the routes westward across the continent as settlers pushed into new territories or were lured to specific places like San Francisco by rumors of easy riches. As historians have shown, boomtowns tend to feature extremely high rates of immigration compressed within sometimes only a few years (Burns 1965; Cronon 1991; Moehring 2004; Brechin 2006). More often than not, boomtowns are focal points for the production and trade

of certain products: lumber in the case of Chicago, gold in San Francisco, rubber in Manaus, silver in sixteenth-century Potosi, and so on. A secondary feature of these cities is the rapid coalescence of burgeoning finance and property development sectors that take root in the boomtown. Boomtowns have become synonymous with speculative frenzies.

China arguably has many boomtowns. For decades, observers have wondered at the growth of Shenzhen, Dongguan, Kunshan, and many other cities. Shenzhen is the most dramatic example of such a Chinese boomtown, having morphed from a sleepy fishing village into a megacity in the three decades since its founding as a special economic zone (SEZ) in 1979 (Chen and de'Medici 2009). The opening of the Shenzhen SEZ was a deliberate attempt by the central government to engineer a trade and manufacturing center that would leverage the twin benefits of proximity to Hong Kong, with its command over global capital flows, and cheap migrant labor from the Chinese interior.

Ordos's boomtown transformation has been of a different kind. Unlike Shenzhen's boom, Ordos's boom has taken place on a razor-thin industrial base producing for domestic markets within China's standard urban-administrative system. Ordos's boom is rooted not in an exceptional regulatory regime, nor in the manufacture and assembly of consumer products, but in a single commodity with a peculiar recent history that played out on the commodity frontier: coal. Liberalization of coal prices in the late 1990s, surging energy demand in the 2000s, fortuitous discoveries, and the introduction of capital-intensive production techniques are part of why Ordos could leapfrog from obscurity. Because Chinese coal production is geared toward domestic markets, Ordos's economy is far less globalized than, say, that of Dubai, another resource-driven boomtown that has sought to position itself at the heart of global finance and the market for petroleum products. Ordos also differs from other boomtowns in that the inflow of low-skilled workers reverses itself seasonally, as the winter cold halts construction projects.[9] Compared with the exponential increases in population characteristic of Shenzhen or Dubai, Ordos has seen a relatively modest 50 percent increase over the past decade in the year-round local population. Also in contrast to the concentration of major global financial players that converges on places like Shenzhen and Dubai, reports indicate that the lion's share of financing for industrial activity and property development in Ordos is organized

through local kinship- and place-based finance networks, fly-by-night microlending institutions, shell investment companies, and pawnshops (Qin 2011). A small share—around 10 percent—of financing is obtained through commercial and state-run banks (Ordos Bureau of Statistics 2010).

Ordos's urban growth is also conditioned by its articulation within China's contemporary political economy of urban land development, in which city building is the sine qua non of the "urbanized local state [regime]" (Hsing 2010). The concept of the "urbanization of the local state" points to the way in which Chinese city regimes assimilate the logic of urban development to the extent that city building and local state building are two mutually reinforcing processes. On the one hand, cities eagerly pursue development to increase the municipal budget through the levying of various land-development fees and taxes. On the other hand, urban regimes utilize land development to bolster their power through direct control over land use. In Ordos, the internal bias within municipal administrations toward urban construction supplies added thrust to the powerful urbanizing impulses resulting from local capital accumulation. The commodity frontier boomtown at first appears to be a wild expression of the market economy, but in Ordos the local regime is at the center of events, demonstrating the ubiquitous impulse toward city building as an artifact of the political economy of urban land development.

BECOMING A FRONTIER BOOMTOWN: REDEFINING ORDOS AS A MUNICIPALITY

An initial and fundamental transformation was Ordos's conversion from a prefecture to a municipality in 2001. The change in administrative status marked the production of a new kind of social space. Specifically, municipalization recast the formerly rural territory in urban terms, ushering in a new logic of development. This new urban logic, moreover, was introduced in a municipal territory of 87,000 square kilometers, roughly twice the size of Switzerland. The name Ordos refers to the entire municipality; no urban center bears that name, and the great majority of its land area remains sparsely inhabited rural land. The main urban center of the municipality is the city of Dongsheng, which is formally a district with a county-level designation.

Ordos's approval for municipal status marked the latest in a series of spatial-administrative shifts over the past century that repeatedly reconfig-

ured the territorial bases of power in Inner Mongolia. Since 1954, the region had been administered under the autonomous region as the prefecture-level Yeke-juu League. Uradyn Bulag contends that the ascension to municipal status in Ordos was a breakthrough in Han Chinese ethnic consolidation of this historically contested region (2002). In losing its territorial designation as a league (*meng*), according to Bulag, the space was absorbed into a Han Chinese-dominated urban territorial system of administrative *shi*, or municipalities. The switch from the rural-sounding *league* to the more modern-sounding *municipality* signaled a process of "'urbanization' cum rectification of names" (Bulag 2002, 197), making it a contemporary iteration of long-standing ethnopolitical practice aimed at the absorption and pacification of ethnic minorities on China's periphery. My reading of Ordos's municipalization is slightly different. In the context of national spatial-administrative changes, Ordos's municipalization suggests that a different—and much more banal—logic was at work in converting the Yeke-juu League to Ordos Municipality.

Municipalization, in fact, supplies its own compelling motives for local leaders to seek such status and is independent from, and not subordinated to, concerns over suppression of local Mongolian communities. The desire for municipal status is a local manifestation of general tendencies for prefectures to gain the enhanced perks of city status spelled out in national land law and the prestige associated with being a city. In the current administrative system, municipal status provides spatial definition to an important assemblage of powers. Specifically, a prefecture-level city (*diji shi*) is an independent subprovincial unit empowered to draft locally applicable regulations and set policy for its jurisdiction. It is also able to extract revenue from counties and county-level districts subordinate to it. Furthermore, prefectural city status confers a significantly expanded number of offices and staff, which translates into superior resources and power (Chung and Lam 2004, 957–960). These enhanced powers have been part of national urban land policy since the 1990s, with the purpose of linking urbanization and industrialization in the process of regional economic development (Ma 2005). Also not to be discounted is the appeal of municipal status as an index of modernity, which official and popular discourses locate almost exclusively in urban areas (L. Zhang 2006). Ordos is thus no exception to the rule that municipal status is a desirable

step up the economic, political, and cultural ladder in the eyes of local officials (and most residents). Faith invested in municipalization is expressed in the following passage of the former Yeke-juu League's party secretary, Yue Fuhong, in a speech delivered at the founding ceremony of Ordos Municipality in 2001. His statement deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> Becoming a city allows us to improve our bureaucratic system, macroeconomic controls, improve our resource management and use and expand industry; it enhances our ability to build a hub city and to use urbanization to stimulate industrialization and to realize leap-frog growth to become a major growth pole in the west; it raises Ordos' visibility, it improves our capacity to achieve innovations in technology, systems, and opening up, it gives Ordos a wider field for reform and opening up; it will help to advance the socialist legal system and will help maintain a harmonious and united situation; it will help the economy maintain a sustained, rapid, stable, and healthy development. (Ordos Municipal Government 2005, 17)

Ordos's boomtown status is linked to these administrative capacities acquired through municipalization, but is not wholly attributable to them. As stated above, Ordos benefited from historic changes in China's energy picture, which placed the municipality at the epicenter of a new commodity frontier for coal and natural gas.[10] Discovery of the municipality's massive coal and natural gas reserves coincided first with a threefold rise in demand for coal over the decade since 2000 and a central policy focus on natural gas as a cleaner-burning fuel to alleviate China's severe air pollution problems.[11] Secondly, Ordos's emergence occurred amid reforms in coal pricing, mentioned above, which led to huge profits for the first time in the industry (IEA 2007, 278–280). Finally, Ordos benefited from improvements in cargo transport infrastructure and in the electric grid, which fostered a new spatial division of labor in the energy sector, with Shanxi, Sha'anxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Xinjiang forming a new western arc of energy resource exploration and production sites (E'erduosi shi 2010). Based on its dominant position in resource extraction activity and reasonable proximity to Eastern energy markets, Ordos became a major hub in this new configuration.

The economic effects of growth in the municipality's energy resource sector were staggering. In parallel with a sixteenfold increase in coal production between 2000 and 2010, municipal GDP and revenue both rose 1,500 percent in the same period, with up to 90 percent of GDP growth attributable to extractive industry and heavy industries that process natural resources (Ordos Bureau of Statistics 2009; Kang 2010). Over half of the municipal revenue is derived from taxes and fees levied on coal-mining firms alone (Zhang 2007, 30).

These massive fiscal resources flowing into the coffers of a formerly impoverished region emboldened local leaders to dream big. Moreover, with the enhanced administrative power conferred by municipal status, the city is in a strong position to put its money where its mouth is in terms of urban development. Seizing its new regulatory powers as a *diji shi*, Ordos commissioned Tsinghua University and Tongji University to draft in succession three urban planning documents, each calling for greater expansion of urban areas than the previous one. The municipal development plans present a laundry list of projects reflective of city status: a new airport terminal (with the terminal completed in 2007 now being replaced by yet another new one), creation of industrial development zones, construction of highways and railroads, and erection of significant new government buildings. Of course, none of these items makes Ordos unique. Indeed, cities across China are engaged in huge infrastructural expansions. Yet Ordos exhibits a desire to transform from a rural backwater into a full-fledged regional metropolis as soon as possible, notwithstanding the still low population density of the massive territory. As a section head in the municipal planning bureau related to me: "In Ordos, leaders have one thing on their minds: to build big, many, and tall. This is their vision of a city."[12]

BUILDING OUT THE BOOMTOWN

Local leaders have made considerable progress in acting upon this ambition to build big, many, and tall. Construction has overwhelmed all the urban centers of the municipality, bringing a wave of redevelopment and expansion to old urban spaces and the expansion of the city into adjacent empty spaces. By 2011, Ordos's urban area had reached 238 square kilometers, compared with 83 square kilometers in 2002. Projects have included large commercial

developments and massive new public facilities built by the municipal, as well as district and banner, governments. In seeking to expand the city's urban built-up area, the municipal government opened the floodgates to massive private investment in property development, much of it funded through financial schemes of dubious legality. Under these circumstances, the production of new urban spaces acquired special resonance, as urban land became freighted, on the one hand, with the local regime's designs to build a properly modern city and, on the other, with residents' and investors' anticipation of high returns through participation in the booming property market.

Some of the means by which the city expanded are as follows:

Public infrastructure and facilities. Throughout the municipality, the city government and submunicipal governments have raced to expand public facilities and infrastructure (Ordos Municipal Government 2011). In the 11th Five-Year Plan alone (2006–2010), the city nearly doubled its highways by adding 800 kilometers to its network, quadrupled its railways with 911 kilometers of new track, and redeveloped 7.6 million square meters of land in the urban districts, mostly in the main city of Dongsheng. In the same period, it rebuilt or built 151 schools, including a branch of Inner Mongolia University, and vastly expanded its urban park spaces. Lavish new government offices were built in all the banners and in Dongsheng, and four large-scale stadiums were erected.

Industrial zones. Central to Ordos's plans to cement its position as a leading industrial hub has been the creation of multiple industrial parks, zones, and bases. Eighteen industrial parks were built over the past decade, nine of them with direct funding from the provincial government. A further eleven industrial bases have been initiated, including a 25-square-kilometer manufacturing base in Dongsheng and a 52-square-kilometer chemical processing base in Junggar Banner. All told, the city's 2009 development plan calls for about 700 square kilometers of specially designated industrial bases, all of which are already completed or under construction (Ordos Planning Bureau 2009b). Other special zones under construction include a "cloud computing development zone," a computer animation technology zone, an "automobile culture" development zone, and a cultural-creative industries development zone.

Commercial property development. Residential and commercial development has thoroughly transformed the skylines of Ordos's urban centers.

Whereas Dongsheng had few buildings over four stories at the beginning of the decade, the city is now a forest of glass-and-steel skyscrapers, many over forty stories tall. In 2010, there were 10.79 million square meters of new commercial development projects in the city (Ordos Municipal Government 2011). Much of the construction in the city has been in the residential sector. By 2009, for example, 7.4 million square meters of commodity housing were under construction in Dongsheng (Dongsheng District 2010).[13] By way of comparison, Beijing in 2008, during its pre-Olympic construction boom, had 23 million square meters of commodity housing under construction with a population at least twenty times as large as that of Dongsheng (H. Wang, 2009).

New districts. While a significant amount of new construction occurred through redevelopment of old urban cores, much of this new commercial floor space was added in the city's four "new districts" (*xincheng qu*).[14] Dongsheng, for example, established a 35-square-kilometer new district on its western edge in an area that was formerly desert. The banners have followed suit. In Junggar, the banner government built a 20-square-kilometer new town boasting a copy of Beijing's Olympic stadium, a museum dedicated to the coal industry, a new hospital, and a new banner government building. In Ejin Horo Banner, the local government opted for complete reconstruction of its urban core with the aim to rebuild as a new city of skyscrapers and high-design public buildings. Forty-eight billion yuan were invested by 2011 to expand the built-up area from 4.5 square kilometers to 32 square kilometers (*E'erduosi ribao* 2011). The most extravagant of the new districts, however, is Kangbashi, a 35-square-kilometer new town, where the municipal government relocated in 2006 (figure 1). Kangbashi is discussed in detail in the following section.

The frenetic pace and scale of these urban construction projects are defining traits of the frontier boomtown. For Ordos's local regime, municipal status is ratified through construction of a checklist of hallmark urban features: new towns, parks, highways, an airport, schools and municipal headquarters, public art, stadiums, etc. The speed and scale at which such projects are introduced signal not merely an agenda aimed at improving the functionality of the city or at meeting scientifically assessed demands for facilities and infrastructure, but at redefining local life by reshaping the urban spaces in which it takes place. Moreover, the abundance of new infra-

FIGURE 1 Kangbashi District, Ordos Municipality. All photos taken by the author.

structure and prestige projects communicates to residents that the new-and-improved city is a product of superior urban stewardship, making the construction of contemporary spaces a response to regionally specific cultural impulses, rather than the dry calculus of price signals.

But the local state's success in bringing about social transformation via spectacular new urban spaces is tempered by the limits of its control over the rapidly evolving social and economic context inherent in the frontier boomtown. Exponential expansions in the hugely profitable mining business produced a large cohort of fabulously wealthy individuals and firms with cash to invest but little idea about how to do so. Tens of thousands of farming households were also enriched overnight through compensated evictions in order to make way for mining expansion. Another significant share of urban residents also caught a windfall as a result of demolition and relocation in the urban centers. Finally, speculators from outside the municipality, especially from Wenzhou, flocked to Ordos sensing investment opportuni-

ties. These accumulations of private wealth were channeled toward speculative investments in hundreds of commercial development projects, pushing property prices in Dongsheng and Kangbashi to levels normally seen in the Central Business Districts of provincial capitals. But, despite brisk sales of homes through 2010, an unknown but huge proportion stand empty, having been purchased only as investment properties. As a result, by 2008, Ordos had become a byword for speculative euphoria and a case study in Chinese property bubbles (Chovanec 2010; *Zhongguo zhengjuan bao* 2010). Adding to the general sense of alarm over excessive property development in Ordos, a report by the Ministry of Housing and Urban and Rural Development estimated that up to 300 billion yuan in murky private loans was invested in the municipality's property market (*Jingji guancha bao* 2011).[15] By matching the local state's zeal for land development schemes, private investors generated a frenzy of speculative development in parallel with the many spectacular public works projects and new industrial sites. These twin developments worked in tandem, confirming the commodity frontier as a space of temporally compressed transformation marked by radical spatial reconfigurations, some of it built to plan, much of it not.

By 2011, the symptoms of an investment hangover were beginning to be felt in the city. Behind the gloss of new construction started to emerge reports of unsustainably high vacancy rates, private indebtedness, and distressed underground finance networks. Rumors began to circulate of suicides by people unable to repay loans to loan sharks. In one high-profile incident, a former city judge hanged himself when he found himself unable to make due on a 230 million-yuan loan (Fan 2011). Expansion of urban spaces was thus tied to a host of destabilizing economic and social transformations that served to further define the frontier boomtown as a site of speculative opportunity and acute instability rooted in an extravagant mode of construction. Such construction generates astounding headline growth figures but hides a series of Ponzi-like investment schemes.

PRODUCING AN URBAN VISION ON THE FRONTIER

As stated, the local state's engagement in large-scale development projects was informed not only by a desire to foster property development in the municipality but also by a desire to transform local life by remaking its mate-

rial setting according to certain up-to-date ideals. As the largest and aesthetically most flamboyant project carried out by the municipal government, Kangbashi is an apposite space in which to examine how Ordos's frontier boomtown urbanism assumes an ideological expression through construction of a new built environment. Crucially, the new town does not present a unitary aesthetic. It assumes its particular form through construction and design according to different historical modes of city building, resulting in a manifestly hybrid space united by the scale and ambition inherent to the frontier boomtown. The space further seeks to construct a vision of ecological balance and leisure, without any visible reference to extractive industry.

According to planning documents and planners involved in the design of the new town, Kangbashi was intended to serve a functional role as the administrative base for the municipality and a representational role as a monument to Ordos's arrival as a prosperous, cultured city embellished with abundant landscaped green spaces. Further, Dongsheng and Kangbashi are conceived in plans as complementary poles of the municipality's core urban area, forming a multinucleated metropolitan region governed by the municipality (Ordos Planning Bureau 2009a). The location of key cultural resources and public institutions, and the exclusion of coalmines and power plants from the new district, signaled that Kangbashi would be the region's alpha city. To this end, spatial layout and beautification of the town's core were special concerns (Li, Jia, and Zhang 2007; X. Kong, Zhao, and Huang 2010).[16] Significant effort was invested in coding the landscape in ways that try to announce Ordos's ascendance not merely as a rich and powerful city, but as a supremely livable and sophisticated city.

Kangbashi's development strategy involved building a large park and plaza at the center of a gridded space set to the cardinal points with a collection of cultural institutions and official buildings to anchor the new town's core. Residential, office, and commercial spaces fill the first rings outside the city's core, with industrial spaces distributed mostly downwind along the eastern periphery. In spite of the conventional nature of the strategic plan, the built form of Kangbashi's core evinces a locale-specific representational strategy that monumentalizes local state power while substituting the reality of severe environmental strain with an impression of ecological balance.

The celebration of local state power begins with the municipal government's new headquarters, which was placed in a prominent location at the

northern end of the grid's central axis facing southward (figures 2 and 3). The location of the government headquarters, a three-building compound of grey marble and glass, was not coincidental. The choice of site situated the headquarters auspiciously at the base of a minor hill and in front of the new town's central plaza, which leads to a manmade reservoir at its southern end.[17] Following Chinese geomantic principles, such a site is designed to capture positive energy flows that bring prosperity and ward off misfortune. Additionally, the headquarters' location at the center of the grid extends an ancient tradition in Chinese urban form to roughly replicate, on a planar field, cosmological principles of proper social order and hierarchy (Steinhardt 1984). Hierarchy is built into city form by locating official power at the center of a grid and at greater elevation than surrounding structures. This was pursued in Kangbashi.

Municipal self-aggrandizement is also evident in the large plaza named Genghis Khan Square (*chengji sihan guangchang*), which stretches to the south for nearly 2 kilometers in front of the municipal headquarters. On the square, massive bronze statuary and floral arrangements saturate the space with references to Genghis and Mongolian culture. Though these decorative aspects of the square and statuary suggest a typical practice of place making and tourism promotion analogous to efforts in other Chinese cities, they also point to the ethnopolitics of Mongolian co-optation through seemingly mundane aspects of urban form and design. Bulag has called the profusion of popular references to Genghis a "reemergence" of the great Khan as part of a geopolitical battle waged among the region's major powers over control of this historically contested territory (2010, 31–64). Here, Genghis makes yet another reappearance, this time as an inanimate urban adornment. His dynamism and stature in the statuary are deflated by his placement at the foot of the municipal government in a subordinate position within the designed hierarchy of the city space. Situating the statuary in this position guarantees that viewers beholding Genghis must do so with the municipal government looming in the background, a blunt reminder of the actual ethnic distribution of state power. Installing the hulking bronzes on the square represents another salvo in a lopsided discursive struggle over the appropriation of Genghis as a symbol whose multiplicity of valences is constrained and harnessed by the frontier boomtown seeking a distinctive form of self-definition (figures 4 and 5).

FIGURE 2 *(top)* The view north of Ordos Municipal Government's headquarters from Genghis Khan Square.

FIGURE 3 *(bottom)* The view south across Genghis Khan Square.

FIGURES 4 AND 5
Statuary depicting Genghis Khan on Genghis Khan Square.

Signs of cultural power are found elsewhere too. Flanking Genghis Khan Square are Ordos's four major new cultural institutions: the museum, library, cultural center, and performing arts center (figures 6, 7, 8, 9). These institutions are cornerstones of the frontier boomtown's assertion of conventional notions of "culture" (*wenhua*) set against the exoticized frontier background of Inner Mongolia. Each building is centrally located on either side of the central square, three of them with Mongolian-inflected architectural programs. The library was built to represent a triad of Mongolian classic texts,[18] while the performing arts center was designed to resemble traditional Mongolian headdress, and the cultural center's blue facade includes relief detailing themed on the grasslands. Kangbashi's standout building, however, is the Ordos Museum, which the municipal government has adopted as its iconic structure. The museum, designed by the young Yale-trained Chinese architect Ma Yansong, is an ultramodern amorphous shape that directly contradicts the strict geometricity of the town's grid. Ma's iconic

FIGURES 6, 7, 8, AND 9 Clockwise from top left: Ordos's performing arts center, cultural center, museum, and library.

museum helped to put Ordos on the global cultural map by drawing admiring domestic and international architectural reviews. The museum sits on a landscaped rise contrasting sharply with the comparatively clunky architecture surrounding it, transforming the building into a sculptural landmark whose primary utility is its index of Ordos's architectural taste and only secondarily as a functional exhibition space.

The elements of Kangbashi's urban form just outlined contain precedents in various modes of city building. In the gridded space, traditional Chinese urban form is adapted to the geometric functionalism of what Scott has called "high modernism" (1998). In line with the latter tradition, Kangbashi represents a top-down planned space with maximum legibility. The town's avenues intersect at right angles with sight lines that focus attention on key monuments and planned spaces, such as the municipal government headquarters and cultural buildings, as well as the parks and reservoir. The space is designed to credit the local state for producing a sensually pleasing

urban experience of visible opulence, while also putting expressions of Mongol ethnicity literally and figuratively in their proper place.

Amid these heavy-handed high-modernist and nationalist strategies, Kangbashi's pursuit of the elusive "Bilbao effect," by commissioning a so-called *starchitect* to produce an iconic building, links Ordos to a more contemporary neoliberal style of "transnational space production" (Ren 2008a). Though converting downtowns and waterfront spaces from industrial zones to culture-oriented leisure spaces is a municipal strategy associated with deindustrializing Western cities (Hall and Hubbard 1998; Harvey 2000), rapidly industrializing Chinese cities have also sought to build spaces with a checklist of cultural institutions, like museums, theaters, and stadiums (L. Kong 2007; Broudehoux 2007; Ren 2008b). This practice entails soliciting input from star architects and prestigious planning firms—what Olds terms a "global intelligence corps" (1997)—to claim success in meeting international functional and aesthetic standards. Indeed, the proliferation across China of hugely ambitious prestige projects attests not only to the lower costs of construction but to intercity competition to lay claim to the most up-to-date cityscape. With the museum, Ordos sought to declare itself not just a participant in this intercity game of architectural one-upmanship but a frontrunner.

The side-by-side location of Genghis Khan Square and Ma's museum points to a symbiosis of urban formal traditions and city-building practices that tries to square the circle of Ordos's perceived and real marginality. On the one hand, the square makes a virtue of its association with "minority" ethnic status by flaunting a relation to the great Khan. Yet, while claiming distinction through overt references to Mongolian culture as the Chinese nation's constitutive Other, Kangbashi also seeks to conform to global aesthetic standards with its iconic museum. One thus observes in Ordos's frontier boomtown urbanism simultaneous impulses to celebrate local difference in conformity with current urban practice, and to build experimental showpieces. These showpieces highlight the town as a space in the fringes, where the exceptional is possible thanks to near-limitless resources and a regime eager to make a mark.

Hence, Kangbashi's urban form is a hybrid of different modes of city building. The codings broadcast by Kangbashi's built environment reflect sensibilities that inhere in the frontier boomtown: a desire to build a modern (*xiandai*), prosperous (*fuyou*), comfortable (*shushi*), natural (*ziran*), and

livable (*yiju*) place through the construction of the hallmark symbols of these contemporary ideals, which percolate through planning documents and official rhetoric: wide streets, parks, greenbelts, a sizable manmade lake, and a complement of iconic cultural buildings. The disheveled appearance of Dongsheng and the general poverty of the former Yeke-juu League meant that both failed to meet these exacting new standards. The new town, representing the present and future of Ordos, would be the antithesis of its past embodied by Dongsheng. Kangbashi was thus an opportunity to summon a new urban paradigm via urban construction and commence a new chapter in the region's development. Critically, all visible traces of the municipality's coalmines, places stigmatized as dirty and backward, are banished from the space. Safely out of sight are signs of the severe environmental stress in the Ordos countryside traceable to coal production and a history of destructive land-use practices.

CONCLUSION

Through consideration of concurrent processes of construction and city building, this essay proposes that Ordos represents something new: the emergence in reform-era China of a commodity frontier boomtown. As such, the city is an artifact of highly contingent factors, specifically, the presence of "urbanized local states" and a narrow economic base dominated by extractive industries enjoying a phase of high demand and high profits. These basic conditions propel massive construction in a short timeframe and animate an elaborate urban vision that negotiates complex cultural and environmental conditions inherent to the city's position on China's geographical and cultural maps.

I have sought to balance Ordos's exceptionalism with its evident banality. Though extraordinary in terms of pace, scale, and intensity of development, the municipality's urbanization occurs within a context that is irreducibly national, Chinese, and contemporary. Thus, Ordos can be seen as yet another offshoot of the ubiquitous tendency among territorial administrations to dream in urban terms and to construct this dream in a common idiom. But the divergent expressions that emerge through this shared urban vocabulary merit recognition for their variety, with the frontier boomtown among the most exuberant.

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NOTES

1. North-central Chinese cities, such as Shuozhou in Shanxi and Yulin, Shenmu, and Fugu in Sha'anxi, show a similar pattern of rapid enrichment through coal and gas production, suggesting that Ordos is not entirely unique. The scope of this essay, however, is more narrowly focused on urban transformation in Ordos.
2. Gaubatz notes that Chinese- and English-language studies of China's western cities account for a tiny fraction of scholarly literature on cities. See Gaubatz (2008).
3. It is important to note that the commodity frontier must refer to certain commodities that are key drivers of economy. There is no commodity frontier of chewing gum. There is, however, a definite pivotal role played by coal and natural gas in China's national economy and the global economy. The spatiality of the production of these two key commodities can rightly be said to support relations of production and exchange that produce a commodity frontier.
4. Geng Yanbo, the mayor of Datong, Shanxi Province, remarked in a speech to the city's People's Congress in 2009 that Ordos was developing faster than his struggling city in part because the regime in Ordos encouraged "adorable mistakes" (*ke ai de cuowu*), referring to the Ordos government's purported tendency to tolerate all manner of rule breaking in the name of development.
5. Nine of China's hundred largest coal-producing companies are based in Ordos. The state-owned Shenhua Group also operates some of the largest mines in Ordos, including the world's largest open-pit mine at Heidaigou in Zhungge'er Banner.
6. In 2009, for example, foreign investment in Ordos, including from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, totaled about 6 billion yuan, less than 5 percent of the 156 billion yuan total fixed-asset investment.
7. See "Zoujin E'erduosi" [Enter Ordos], http://www.ordos.gov.cn/zjeedx/.
8. In many locations in Ordos, coal seams some 40 meters thick are buried less than 100 meters beneath soft soils, making the seams easy to reach for highly mechanized strip and open-pit production. In underground mines, the thick seams are often produced using long-wall techniques employing some of the

world's largest such equipment. German engineers with lifelong experience in the coal sector installing equipment at an underground facility in Ordos explained to me that the rotating long-wall machines employed in their particular mine were seven meters in diameter, whereas diameters of two to three meters are more standard to the industry.

9. By law, wages increase when the midday temperature does not surpass the freezing point.
10. Estimated coal reserves in Ordos are 763 billion tons, while proven reserves exceed 171 billion tons. Proven natural gas reserves total 800 billion cubic meters. See "Zou jin E'erduosi" [Enter Ordos], http://www.ordos.gov.cn/zjeedx/.
11. According to U.S. Energy Information Administration statistics, China's coal consumption rose from 1.2 billion short tons in 2000 to 3.7 billion short tons in 2010. See http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=1&pid=1&aid=2&cid=CH,&syid=1998&eyid=2010&unit=TST.
12. Interview with Ordos Planning Bureau section head, October 22, 2011.
13. The pervasive use of illegal loans to undertake projects raises the possibility that new construction is underreported in official statistics.
14. See "Dongsheng qu jinnian chengshi jianshe zongshu" [Dongsheng District recent city development summary], http://www.ds.gov.cn/zjds/csjs/201105/t20110518_311466.html.
15. Interviews with people involved in lending and real estate in Ordos confirmed the circulation of massive amounts of illegal private loans. Reliable figures could not be obtained, and few would offer estimates of loan totals.
16. Interview with Tsinghua Urban Planning and Design Institute manager Wang Chun, July 29, 2011.
17. The design of the government headquarters according to feng shui principles was confirmed by Wang Chun, planning manager at Tsinghua Urban Planning and Design Institute.
18. The texts are *The Secret History of the Mongols*, *Mongolian Altan tobchi*, and *Mongolian Erdeni-yin tobchi*—蒙古源流.

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