

HOME-steading

Subversions, Reversions, and Diversions of the Moral Right to Space

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Abstract

It can be argued that putting to words one's relationship with the earth has always been a prerequisite of architectural construction, and that such proclamations have required, in turn, structures of the abstract - moral, economic, legal, and of course, linguistic, that assign the necessary hierarchies of value and power to the human and nonhuman entities involved. Therefore, words are, like bricks and mortar, fundamental to the spatial construction of our world. One of the most powerful definitions of such kind, with legacies both catastrophic and subversive, can be found in the evolution of the word "homestead".

Built upon the philosophical ideas of John Locke, the conception of "homestead" invalidated an entire population's relationship with the earth, eradicated their livelihoods, cultural systems, rights to the land, and replaced them with colonial bodies, practices, and beliefs. Under the banner of this word, over 270 million acres of land and countless lives were indelibly altered. Yet, in contemporary times the invocation of "homestead" has facilitated instead the adverse possession of the weak and marginalised, who act in resistance against institutional structures to appropriate their own space in an environment designed for their absence.

Through an in-depth discourse analysis of 城市开荒 (urban homesteading), a phrase used to describe an emergent informal practice that leverages the Lockean proviso to re-appropriate expropriated land and ruralize China's rapid urbanisation, this paper examines the paradoxical agency and the intense spatial creativity that can be found through the subversion of words within the urban context. Gathering utterances and writings from TikTok to legislative policy, internet games to classical literature, I argue the importance of understanding not only the construction of words within a spatial context, but also the fungible, paradoxical and entangled ways of they act within the world.

Key words: Subversion, Decolonisation, Informal Agency, Land Rights, Tactical Reclamation.

归去来兮，请息交以绝游。世与我而相违，复驾言兮焉求？悦亲戚之情话，乐琴书以消忧。农人告余以春及，将有事于西畴。

I've come home! And bid farewell to the society of men. Since the world and myself cannot agree, What more have I to strive after? Joy will be found in the hearty talks with my kin, Or delight in music and books that lighten my mind. When the farmers tell me of the arrival of spring, There will be enough to do in the western fields.

Excerpt from "Going Home" by Tao Yuanming¹

"Hence subduing or cultivating the Earth, and having Dominion, we see are joined together. The one gave Title to the other. So that God, by commanding to subdue, gave Authority so far to appropriate."

John Locke, *Second Treatise*, Sec. 35

1. Introduction

Every act of construction begins with a story, be it one that relays its history with the land or justifies its future upon it, each act begins with a story that provides legitimacy and protection by demonstrating its right to take place, argued through the conventions of right and wrong within its situated context. This paper follows the social media discourse of the informal practitioners of 城市开荒 (urban homesteading), where individuals illegally infiltrate what they recognise as the wastelands of China's rapid urbanisation to cultivate patches of vegetable gardens. Threading through various evolutions of so-called "original" appropriation between China and the West, this paper demonstrates how political ideologies as well as historical and literary imaginaries can be subverted by citizens to assert their Right to the City (Lefebvre 1991). The case of urban homesteaders demonstrates how individuals without formal organisation can leverage a diverse range of concepts from the Lockean proviso to the idyllic imaginary of the Peach Blossom Spring², to re-appropriate expropriated land and ruralize China's rapid urbanisation.

1.1. 城市开荒 (Urban Homesteading)



Fig. 1

Under the shadow of a concrete viaduct, a phone camera watches the sky brighten as a bent-over figure tends to his vegetables; in a city under COVID lockdown, a viewfinder pans from half-completed residential buildings to follow the movements of a mother and her small daughter watering vegetable sprouts emerging from reddish brown soil; in a thin sliver of land behind a flower bed in a residential neighbourhood, a young woman attempts to bring her wilted tomato sprouts back to life. These are just a few of the scenes that would appear if one was to search 城市开荒 (urban homesteading) on China's social media platforms (Fig. 1).

In the four decades since China's economic reform, China has achieved one of the most rapid rates of urbanisation, raising the percentage of its urban population from 21% in 1980 to 63% in 2020 (Xu and Akita 2021; Central Intelligence Agency 2022). Within this transformation, the practice of urban homesteading have emerged within the idle and wasted lands created by inefficient developments of expropriated rural land through Iji Kaifa (first class development), a model of urban expansion where rural people are removed from their land in exchange for monetary compensation and resettlement in

urban residential developments (Lora-Wainwright 2012; Gan et al. 2019; Qu et al. 2020). Infiltrating the "terra nullius" of urban idle lands, from vacant construction sites to neglected landscaping by the sides of streets or rivers, urban homesteaders dig up, clean, till and fertilise the soil to grow vegetables for the self-proclaimed purposes of good health, exercise, and leisure.

While local governments have formally condemned acts of urban homesteading as "backward", "unhygienic" and "selfish", and have acted to demolish the plots of vegetable gardens with tractors and diggers, the narrative presented by the homesteaders via social media continues to garner popularity amongst netizens through their careful alignment to the etymologies of party slogans, literary metaphors and historical imaginaries that argue for their moral right to exist.

1.2. Social Media as Subversive Narrative

Through social media, urban homesteaders permeate the descriptions of their labours and products with cultural and political references and associations to achieve a variety of associations. For example, the use of party slogans from both the past and the present aligns urban homesteads to valorous behaviour:

To all the farmers of the city, today Granny officially passed the family inheritance [the urban homestead she established] in Wuhan to her little grandson! #FamilyTreasure #HumanCubComingOfAge #ThoseWhoLabourAreTheMostBeautiful

A friend from my hometown came to help plant and water vegetables! **Labour is the most glorious!**³

Alluding to pastoral imaginaries to evoke aesthetic empathy:

In the forest of concrete towers and the cacophony of engines in my city, I have homesteaded a small vegetable garden to enrich our family's dinner table. What I plant is hope, with no expectations of results, but to enjoy the process, and harvest happiness.

Or, extolling the virtuous character of the older generation:

In a foreign city, grandpa found a piece of wasteland. He opened it, weeded it, and cultivated it~ In less than a month, he has planted 11 varieties of vegetables. **He has laboured his entire life and never stopped, what reason do we have for not working hard!** 90-year-old grandpa is so awesome! (Fig. 2, Img. 4, caption translation by author)

Despite their lack of formal organisation, the proliferation of urban homesteading content across major Chinese social media as well as in-person networking have maintained a stable "non-movement" (Bayat 2013) of urban homesteaders in multiple Chinese cities undergoing rapid urbanisation⁴. Despite the disapproval of the local governments, representation through social media provides a social capital for urban homesteading that not only encourages positive associations with the informal practice and attracts more individuals to participate in homesteading but also ultimately influences market desires and changes to real estate development⁵. In the following sections, this paper breaks down some of the most popular references used by homesteaders to justify their right to land within the urban environment to examine the ways in which concepts and verbal mechanisms of the state are inverted, reverted, and subverted.

2. Inversion of Waste and Labour – Terra Nullius and the Politics of Productivity

Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a *property* in his own *person*. This nobody has any right to but himself. The *labour* of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his *labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *property*.

(Locke 1994, 31, original emphases)

The elders often said, as long as you are willing to work hard, anything is possible, today I finally understood, **if you cultivate this plot of land, it is yours.**

#MyVegetableGarden
#UrbanHomesteading
#MyOwnOrganicVegetables

(Yi, excerpt from Douyin post)

In John Locke's Second Treatise of Government, written during the heights of European colonisation, the key to appropriation lies in the definition of "waste". For Locke, who derived his laws of governance from what he saw as the laws of nature and of God, nature was given by God to all men in common

ownership and men are obligated to “make use of it to the best advantages of life and convenience”(1994, 32). A man’s labour upon the land to improve it is not only right and moral, but also mixes the land with his labour to make it his property. “Waste” therefore sets up the precondition for ownership with “labour” as the tool for appropriation – a rather simple formula that provided the foundation for the mass appropriation of Indigenous land in the Americas, Africa as well as Asia Pacific. From the Homestead Act of 1862 in the US to the Free Grants and Homestead Act of 1868 in Canada, the Waste Land Acts between 1854 and 1877 in New Zealand to the Crown Land Acts from 1860 to 1884 in Australia, colonial projects globally draw upon the “moral superiority” of agricultural productivity as the key mechanism of dispossession to deem less overtly cultivated Indigenous land as “waste” and available for appropriation (Fig. 2, Img. 2).



Fig. 2

Ironically within contemporary history, the same principles of Lockean homesteading are used by squatter communities to dismantle the kind of private ownership of the rich and powerful it espoused. The waste that colonial settlers once saw in untouched nature, squatters now see in dilapidated buildings, and urban homesteaders, in turn, see in the vacant construction sites of a newly urbanised city. As Martin O'Brien writes:

[I]n contrast to common-sense conceptions [...] rubbish is ... not that which has no value; rather, it is that which motivates the search for value. (1999, p281)

The verbal act of identifying and labelling something as “waste” is therefore a productive act that sets up the right to act physically upon the site.

For Chinese urban homesteaders, labour is an exalted moral quality, not of Christian, but of revolutionary origin. The frequent references to “劳动 (labour)” and “节省 (living frugally)” originate from a corporeal governmentality that helped the nation survive times of war, famine and economic depression. The imaginary of a selfless labourer or a hard worker recollects a deeply ingrained sense of moral character that is valued within Chinese society till this day (Fig. 2, Img. 1). Out of the 172 social media posts collected for analysis (Fig. 2, Img. 3, Img. 4), 21 were tagged #劳动者是最美的人 (#ThoseWhoLabourAreTheMostBeautiful), a reference to Maoist and contemporary Communist slogans praising the importance of labour within society.

The homesteaders who live in the fringes of the city patch up the wasteland of urban greenery.
#DigForVegetables #Homestead
#HardWorkingLabourer #PlantingHope
#ThoseWhoLabourAreTheMostBeautiful
(Lu, excerpt from Douyin post)

We must securely establish the notion that labour is the most glorious, labour is the highest virtue, labour is the greatest achievement, **labour is the most beautiful**, so that the people can further ignite their passion for labour, realise their potential for creativity, and create a more beautiful life through their labour.

Speech by Xi Jinping, April 28th, 2013⁶

While both past and contemporary slogans for labour were intended to encourage productivity and stimulate economic growth within formal sectors of industry, by associating their practices with the revolutionary ideals of labouring selflessly to improve the lives of others, urban homesteaders frame themselves as good citizens and their homesteads as productive labour that are aligned with, rather than resist against, the state.

3. Reversion to Nature - Opening Wastelands as Escape

All the men in the family have mobilised to homestead for vegetables. A precious Peach Blossom Spring in the city. Seeds are starting to sprout. The vegetable garden is filled with life.

(L, excerpt from Douyin post)

开荒南野际 守拙归田园 [...] 户庭无尘杂 虚室有余闲 久在樊笼里 复得返自然
Opening some wasteland by the southern wilds, I abide by rusticity and have returned to my farmland. [...] Within my doors there is no dust or clutter; In my empty rooms there is leisure to spare. Long have I been in the confining cage [of the city]; Again, I have managed to return to Nature

(Excerpt from “Returning to Live on the Farmland”⁷)

The conception of 开荒 (“kaihuang”, homesteading), the act of original appropriation, where unowned land becomes acquired through productive cultivation, has a physically congruent yet culturally varied connotation to the Lockean proviso. Where the proviso defines European ownership against that of an “other”, the Chinese cultivation of wasteland emerged in an era without a clearly defined racial “other”. Instead, the “other” was the urban as an antithesis to the simplicity and purity of nature – in a way, the opposite of the “other” for Locke, which he saw as the original state of nature. The term emerged in a seminal 4th century poem named “Return to Nature (I)” by Tao Yuanming, the representative poet of the Fields and Garden genre of Chinese poetry. In the poem, the land ownership established in the process of *kaihuang* was merely a means to the ultimate goal of peace by achieving a dwelling place in harmony with nature. As such *kaihuang* was both a reference to the physical creation of a farmstead and an allegory of breaking free from the “confining cage” and the “dusty net” of the city and returning to a state of nature, like a caged bird for the woods, and a pond-fish for the deep sea (Fig. 3, Img. 1). Though Tao lived more than sixteen centuries ago, his pastoral longing of a simpler, freer, slower past in contrast to the urban present is as, if not more, keenly felt within China’s present urbanisation. The alienation felt by urban citizens within China’s metamorphosis was a recurring theme within social media.

In the city, tall towers are built in droves, we plant vegetables to relive fond memories.

(Yu, excerpt from Douyin)

In a city of intimidatingly tall towers and the unrelenting noises from engines, I have cultivated a small vegetable garden.

(Ping, excerpt from Douyin)

A Peach Blossom Spring within the busy city, how beautiful it is to be close to Nature!

(L, excerpt from Douyin)

The practice of urban homesteading thus takes on the role of the city’s polar opposite, an idyllic space that provides everything that the city denies: nostalgic instead of modern, soft instead of hard, warm instead of cold, vibrant instead of sterile, wild instead of controlled. A similar desire to escape from the harshness of urban life for a fictional idyll has emerged within contemporary popular culture through a genre of internet novels named 种田文 (cultivation novels). According to Baidu, the “cultivation novel” first emerged within contemporary society within Simulated Life Games (SLG) where the gamer employs a conservative strategy of “高筑墙，广积粮，缓称王 (build high walls, establish grain reserves, conquer slowly)” to protect one’s own territories whilst slowly developing their resources in contrast to the high-speed, violent, and intensive pace of conventional video games⁸.

A characteristic of the cultivation genre of the internet novel is the trope of time travel or fantasy world building that sets up the main character in the agricultural society of a bygone era. The protagonist gradually constructs their land and connections, developing their agricultural resources gradually to improve their economic, political, and technological prowess to defeat the antagonists. Works within this genre are noted for their methodical and logical storylines as well as their lack of conflict for the majority of the narrative. Later evolutions of the cultivation novel grew even more focused upon seemingly banal but extremely detailed descriptions of everyday life and character developments. Baidu outlined three reasons for this genre’s popularity, particularly amongst young women: one, it provides a calming, happy, and warm fictional world that is healing for citizens of the modern Chinese society who live within highly pressured environments; two, the predominant use of time travel as a narrative trope where the protagonist is reborn within their childhood or another past era, allows the

reader to experience a sense of redemption and to imagine going back in time to fix mistakes or become an alternative self; three, the emphasis on detailed descriptions and historical accuracy makes the works of this genre fairly well-written and high quality⁸.



Fig. 3

Similar to Tao Yuanming's Peach Blossom Spring, the cultivation genre situates the rural and the practice of agriculture within a utopic, escapist imaginary of a slower, more idyllic life connected to nature, an imaginary much shared, and exploited, by the homesteaders. The attachment of such narratives to the practice of urban homestead within contemporary culture indicates that the social significance of urban homesteads extends beyond its physical products or political debates of land rights and urban development into the metaphysical and psychological dimension. For the older generation that practices urban homesteading, the pastoral imaginary of the rural along with connections to labour and revolutionary valour comes from memories and habits formed from their lived experience of China's revolutionary history. However, for younger homesteaders born after China's economic reform in the 80's, 90's and even 00's, their posts on Douyin reflect an interest in homesteading that is directly connected to the fantasy of idyllic rural living that lacks grounded experience. Thus, the pastoral as an escape from urban life becomes almost supernatural in its ability to connect the practice of homesteading to fiction and virtual experiences, from online fantasy novels to internet games.

In 2008, Chinese game developer start-up 5 Minutes released an online multiplayer social network game called “快乐农场 (Happy Farm)” (Fig.3, Img. 2), which rose to become one of the most popular online games in Chinese history with 23 million daily active users at its peak in 2009. Techgearx.com approximated that over 15 million urban white-collar workers had spent more than 5 hours a day on Happy Farm, and techinasia.com reported that the game became so popular that it was even cited in divorce settlements and was criticised by state media due to concerns that its addictive nature would cause social problems. Commercially the game was such a great success that it was included within Wired's list of "The 15 Most Influential Games of the Decade" for its impact on social network gaming and went on to inspire a horde of agriculture-based copycat games both in and outside of China, such as the highly popular FarmVille on Facebook, as well as play a significant role in the establishment and growth of gaming social networks in China⁹.

Within the game, players can grow crops, trade/sell their produce, and steal from their neighbours, with the latter, according to online forums, being one of the most well-loved and addictive aspects of the game. This popularity of the game and the overlap between its “virtual farmers” and urban homesteaders is evident in the common use of “Happy Farm” as an analogy and “I am coming to steal your vegetables” as a comment on other homesteader's vlogs.

Within the virtual platform of HappyFarm, not only could netizens experience a calm and meditative “slow life” that is the antithesis of their high-pressure urban environment, but they could also obtain things such as land that are out of their reach in their physical reality due to financial or state limitations. From this perspective, urban homesteading is a virtual reality/dream come true – it allows users to obtain land without the burden of payment, to create a space where they can escape from the

chaos of the city but still earn an urban wage and enjoy urban amenities such as better education and transportation. By conceptually linking their physical practice with online gaming/fantasy culture, homesteaders can enjoy the vicarious excitement of “looting” or “stealing” land and produce by “gaming” the modern capitalist system.

At the same time, the Happy Farm imaginary appears to be a useful marketing tool for developers as well. In a video posted by a local news channel, Yunlong Fenghuanggu, a residential development in Zhuzhou, Hunan, has converted its vacant land into allotments for its residents and labelled it the “Happy Farm”.

We can't travel during pandemic, so let's homestead. Let children understand that every grain of food comes from hard work. #HappyFarmRealWorldCombat (Yang, excerpt from Douyin Post)

A new residential development in Zhuzhou provides **Happy Farms** for residents to “divide up the land” and plant vegetables. (Douyin post by Live from Zhuzhou News)

4. Subversion of Civility– Self-Sufficiency and Environmental Morality

With the rapid speed of China's urban development, there is limited capacity for oversight or quality control on the part of the state to ensure that developers maintain their developments (Qu et al. 2020). Local news reports as well as previous studies on urban homesteads by Zhu et al (2020) and Yu (2020) point out that in many urban areas the jurisdiction and responsibilities of various authoritative institutions are convoluted and unclear, which creates confusion and delays in governance. While this provides an ambiguity that the homesteaders exploit, as the state and corporations fail to provide the type of environment promised to its citizens, the citizens' practice of urban homesteading is in fact taking on their work and responsibility. Numerous Douyin homesteaders noted that they are homesteading to provide a reliable source of produce at a reasonable cost that the cities were unable to guarantee during the pandemic.

In fact, this shifting of responsibility onto the shoulders of citizens during times of crisis was at the root of the historical emergence of some of the political slogans popular amongst homesteaders. For example, during the Sino-Japanese War, as the Red Army (Chinese Communist forces) faced severe food shortages as a result of the Japanese invasion, economic blockades by the Kuomintang as well as several natural disasters in the north of China, Mao Zedong called upon the people to provide for themselves in order to outlast the Japanese invasion. The poster child of the movement was the story of the 359th Brigade, which was deployed to open the muddy wastelands of Nanniwan to increase productivity and create self-sufficiency during a time of crises. The exploits of the 359th was heralded as a success of the intelligence and hard-working character of Chinese people, minted in a documentary, folk song, and famous calligraphy by Mao Zedong with the slogan (Fig. 4, Img. 1):

自己动手，丰衣足食。
(ziji dongshou, fengyi zushi, “do it yourself, want for nothing”)



Fig. 4

The practice of outsourcing public services to the voluntarism of the people, which echoes neoliberal characteristics of community gardening that have been analysed in Western academia (Ernwein

2017), has allowed the Chinese state to overcome multiple disasters in its contemporary history from political struggles such as the Great Leap Forward to natural disasters such as the Tangshan earthquake of 1976 in addition to the aforementioned Sino-Japanese War. The revolutionary values of self-sufficiency and hard work, as embodied by the slogan and the act of *kaihuang*, remained popular within society after the war.

In parallel, since 2012, when the central government wrote into the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party a vision for 生态文明建设 (ecological civilisation-building), urban sustainability and environmental protection have been a major campaign within China’s urban planning (Olivier Krischer and Luigi Tomba 2019). Initiative with catchy slogans such as 美丽中国 (beautiful China) and (clear waters and green mountains) have become widespread in popular culture in order to encourage citizens to do their part and participate in sustainable and environmentally conscious lifestyles (Fig. 4, Img. 2) - a task that urban homesteaders have eagerly taken up.

Homesteading in the vacant land in front of the residential building to **become self-sufficient, adding a bit of green to the city** #VegetablePlanting #LabourIsTheMostGlorious #PastoralLife #Homesteader
(Chang, excerpt from Douyin post)

Homesteading for vegetables in a desperate time, clearing up the backyard wasteland to grow vegetables, **becoming self-sufficient as well as environmentally friendly and economical** #JoysOfGardenLife #PlantingVegetables #OrganicVegetables #Homesteading #WildTrees #DesperateTimes
(Gong, excerpt from Douyin post)

By representing their homesteading efforts as the volunteering of their own bodies and labour not just to lessen the burden on the state in terms of food provision but also to contribute to the party’s goals for greener healthier cities, urban homesteaders seem eager to embrace neoliberal “exploitation” in order to avoid demolition. For example, many commenters on the post by Live from Zhuzhou mentioned at the end of section 3 (describing the residential development that have decides to rent its vacant land to residents as vegetable gardens) argued that such schemes are not only pleasurable for the residents but also positive in their contribution to the nation:

This is the life I long for, I want to go plant vegetables too.

Very creative, I like it, I think this can become part of the country's policy to save cropland and increase food production.

Planting vegetables is aesthetic and fun, can stimulate small-scaled economies and protect our country's “breadbasket”.

5. Conclusion

Though it is nearly identical to the practice of Lockean homesteading in its justification of land use/ownership through the valorisation of agricultural productivity, urban homesteading is a project of inward escapism and survival whereas the Lockean homestead is one of outward expansion and development. The combination of both within the practice of urban homesteading, as a form of escapism into fantasies of pastoral life from the harshness of urban life through the occupation and appropriation of land they deem to be in “waste”, allow the homesteaders to take on identities both docile and political, both romantic and utilitarian, both inward facing and outwardly expanding.

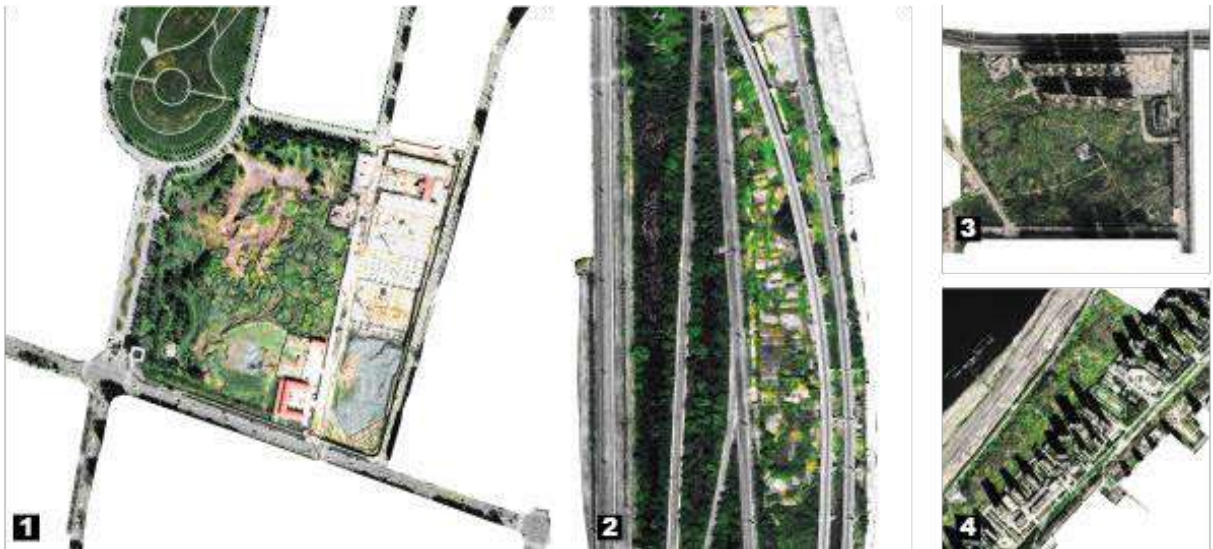


Fig. 5

The success of the story that legitimises an act of appropriation lies not in itself, but in the nature of its entanglement with the structures of the society within which it is situated. The continued survival and proliferation of urban homesteaders rely, not on formal structures of resistance, organisation, or aid in the forms of NGOs or charities, but on the rhetoric of positive citizenship and the imaginary of appealing pastoral peace they evoke through the power of words and social media platforms. Their understanding and intentional misinterpretation of etymologies allow them to take ideologies, pop cultures, and, legal frameworks made for the visions of top-down governance and turn them into “weapons of the weak” (de Certeau 1984) in their pursuit of their right to the city. In answer to the central, timely, and worthy question asked by the symposium, the case study of the urban homesteaders demonstrates the power of etymologies as a resource of spatial agency that is more economical, flexible, viral, and democratic than brick and mortar.

Notes

1. The poem was written by Tao Yuanming, the seminal poet of the Fields and Garden genre, upon his retirement from bureaucratic service to return to his family homestead in 405CE. Translation of poem by Stephen Field, *Ruralism in Chinese Poetry*, 13.
2. The Peach Blossom Spring is a common allegory used in China to denote a fantastical location of extraordinary natural beauty where one can be sheltered from the troubles of the world, in particular those of cities. The allegory originated from Tao Yuanming's famous fable of the same name. Written in 421CE, the fable tells the story of a fisherman's accidental discovery of an ethereal utopia set during a time of political instability McGreal, *Great Literature of the Eastern World*, Harper Resource.
3. All social media excerpts have been anonymised or attributed to pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the homesteader. Translations of the excerpts by the author.
4. See remote sensing analysis and survey of urban homestead distribution in Wang, *Assessing the Impact of Informal Ruralisation Practices within the Rapid Urbanisation of Wuhan, China*, IGARSS 2023.
5. See section 4 for description of emerging incidences in real estate developments in China where developers, who are unable to proceed with construction on bought land after the initial phases of development, opt to rent such land to existing residents for vegetable gardens. Such schemes have been marketed as Happy Farms (see game in section 3) and urban homesteads.
6. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0429/c64094-21323712.html> [published on 28/04/2013, accessed on 10/06/2022]
7. Translation by Charles Kwong, *The Rural World of Chinese 'Farmstead Poetry'* (Tianyuan Shi), 65.
8. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A7%8D%E7%94%B0%E6%96%87/1644809>
9. <https://www.techinasia.com/rise-fall-china-happy-farm-social-game-2012> [posted 28/12/2012, last accessed 10/06/2022]; <https://www.chinasmack.com/happy-farms-popular-online-game#> [posted 21/10/2009, last accessed 10/06/2022]

Image Captions

Fig. 1. Examples of urban homesteads and their homesteaders from social media: 1) Homesteads patches taking over undeveloped lot [source: Xigua videos]; 2) retired man homesteading under the light rail [source: Douyin]; 3) a grandma bringing water for her homestead [source: xcool.com]; 4) middle-aged man homesteading under a bridge [source: Douyin]; 5) urban homesteads spring up inside a stagnated Evergrande construction site [source: Douyin]; 6) homesteads established along a river bed [source: Douyin]

Fig. 2. Inversions of waste and labour: 1) Poster published in 1989 in honour of national model workers, the slogan reads 无私奉献劳动光荣 (Selflessly and respectfully presenting the glory of labour); 2) *American Progress* (1872) by John Gast, an allegory for Manifest Destiny and the American westward expansion; 3) a woman homesteading in a failed urban green space between the street and residential developments [source: Douyin]; 4) a 90-year-old grandpa who's established a homestead with 11 varieties of plants in under a month [source: Douyin].

Fig. 3. Reversion to Nature: 1) *Fairyland of Peach Blossoms* by Qin Ying (ca. 1494-1552) [source: Tianjin Museum]; 2)&4) screenshots from a young man's urban homestead vlog where he compares his cultivation to the game Happy Farm [source: Douyin]; 3) a young woman's vegetables from her homestead by the river [source: Douyin].

Fig. 4. Subversion of Civility: 1) Calligraphy of the slogan 自己动手, 丰衣足食 (do it yourself, want for nothing) by Mao Zedong for the documentary *Nanniwan* [source: Baidu]; 2) Poster with the slogan 守护绿水青山, 赋能美丽广州 (Protect Clear Water and Green Mountains, Empower A Beautiful Guangzhou) from Guangzhou Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau; 3) A man homesteading with the caption "Homesteading for vegetables, do it yourself, want for nothing" [source: Douyin]; 4) A newly established homestead in a vlog with the hashtag #BeautifyOurEnvironment [source: Douyin].

Fig. 5. Examples of urban homesteads in Wuhan found through remote sensing analysis (Wang, 2023).

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Biography

Hanxi Wang is a licensed architect, urban geographer, and ESRC-funded PhD researcher whose work questions the dominant narratives of power and agency within the urban environment. In particular, she is interested in informal practices of urban ecology and the complex, sometimes paradoxical ways in which their practitioners negotiate, adopt, or subvert top-down structures of governance to create alternative visions of the city. She has multiple teaching and research experiences at Cornell University and the University of Oxford. Her current research project, *Ruralizing Urban Wastelands — Homesteads and Subversive Metabolisms in China's Growing Cities*, which investigates the subversive influence of displaced farmers in the wastelands of China's rapid urbanization and the potential of informal practices in creating strategies of urban metabolism, has been exhibited at Cornell University and presented at the 2022 Royal Geographical Society Annual International Conference in Newcastle as well as the 2023 International Geoscience and Remote Sensing Symposium.