



Disposable Ordos: The making of an energy resource frontier in western China



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ABSTRACT

China's economic growth in recent decades has been accompanied by vigorous growth in energy production and consumption. This article analyzes geographical shifts in the production of energy resources using a relational frontier concept. The frontier concept is deployed to examine the forces driving energy resource production to territories in China's west. Through an understanding of frontiers as peculiar places shaped by flows of capital and contingent socio-economic conditions, this study underscores the both the contributions of national-level energy policy and local political-economy in bringing about a pronounced shift in the distribution of energy resource supply whereby the country's west is increasingly recast as a production zone for energy and the east as a consumption zone. A case study of coal production in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region's Ordos Municipality in the 2000s details the unfolding of frontier processes for this key energy resource.

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2010, China's domestic media began to feature reports about gargantuan traffic jams along the Inner Mongolian stretch of the G6 national highway connecting Beijing with Tibet. Most reports attributed the standstills to an excess of trucks delivering coal from Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region's Ordos Municipality to the Beijing-Tianjin mega-region (Map 1).¹ The traffic jams were, in fact, not new. They had become a regular occurrence in the preceding several years, a period during which Ordos shot to prominence as a major coal supply region thanks to enormous increases in output at massive state-owned mines as well as at smaller locally owned mines. From the mid-2000s onward, virtually all highways out of Ordos became impassable on a regular basis; the jams sometimes stretched 50 km or more and could take ten days to abate.

The traffic jams in the desert, as they became known, pointed to two related transformations in China's vast western interior regions. First, they signaled an ongoing spatial reorganization of the country's energy resource supply framework in the 2000s, in which production has become increasingly concentrated in the provinces and autonomous regions collectively referred to as

China's "west" (see Zheng and Zheng, 2014).² Second, it revealed the dramatic local impacts this shift has visited upon certain places where resource bonanzas took hold. Coal output in Ordos, for example, grew from 22.9 million tons (Mt) in 2000 to 630 Mt in 2013. On the strength of this growth, Ordos went from a marginal coal producer in the 1990s to China's leading supply site over the following decade. The resource boom also transformed Ordos from a poor and rather sleepy rural place into a booming and indispensable city.

The recent regional shift in energy resource production is a central pillar of the Open the West Program (*xibu da kaifa*), the central government's regional development agenda inaugurated in 2000 and sustained to the current day. Energy resource production in the west has been envisioned as a key strategy to spur industrial growth and erase regional development gaps. The shift in energy resource production has also taken place during a phase of rapid economic growth throughout China paralleled by increases in energy demand. In addition, the energy resource and power industries have undergone transformations during this time, the general thrust of which has been to make both sectors more market-oriented. This has meant that geographical changes in energy

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¹ A compilation of news reports on this topic is available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/jzgsdc/> (accessed 30 May 2015).

² China's official classification for the Open the West Campaign includes the following provinces and autonomous regions: Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Qinghai, Tibet, Xinjiang, Chongqing, and Inner Mongolia. Also included under the program are a handful of ethnic minority autonomous prefectures and counties in Hubei, Hunan, and Jilin.



Map 1. The North-central Region of China and Ordos Municipality. Credit: James DeGrand.

resource supply have been accompanied by far-reaching market reforms and institutional changes.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the interwoven aspects of industrial, institutional, and spatial change in Chinese energy resource production through a grounded study focused on Ordos Municipality. The geographies of resource production have been an important theme in recent work examining regional development in China, including the policies implemented under the Open the West program (see [Lai, 2002](#); [Becquelin, 2004](#); [Goodman, 2004](#); [McNally, 2004](#); [Yeh, 2005, 2013](#)). In particular, this study builds on work that has sought to explicate the politics of regional integration, and specifically the designation of western regions as supply zones for the industrializing coastal east ([Magee, 2006](#)). By contributing to these discussions, this study aims to accomplish the following: first, to provide an account of how a place, overwhelmingly rural, poor, and marginal to the national space economy (if not always marginal to national ethnic politics) is transformed by massive-scale energy resource production in the late reform era. Local dynamics are emphasized here in their interrelation with other scaled forces seeking to intensify resource exploitation in Ordos. Second, this study extends the debates in this special issue around rural transformations in China using energy resource production's geographical changes in recent years to highlight the interpenetration of the rural and urban, the

primary and secondary sectors, and eastern and western regions under current-day political-economic conditions. In so doing, I hope to offer some fresh perspective upon the porosity of the rural-urban and east-west interfaces in the context of resource production and to highlight emergent scalar dynamics that help to stitch together, always imperfectly, a national energy resource supply system. Finally, this article advances a spatial conceptual framework, that of the "frontier," as an analytical tool to make sense of the multiple overlapping dynamics and place-specific impacts of resource-led growth in western regions amid China's capitalist transition. Stated briefly, the frontier is an intersection of actors and entities operating under discordant – and sometimes conflicting – agendas.

In the next section below, I elaborate a notion of the frontier rooted in economic geography and adapted to the particular regional development conditions in China's west. The frontier lens helps deliver insights, presented in subsequent sections, on the geographical implications of recent institutional and industrial changes in the energy resource sector. The following section of the article provides an empirical account of Ordos' emergence as a resource frontier and considers implications of this change for local society. The conclusion argues that the expansion of energy resource production in China's west engenders hardened regional divisions of labor with profound implications for the spaces of

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