My research is centered on future-related campaigns in contemporary Beijing, how they are mediated and how they are received by addressees. I focus on two recent campaigns: Beijing’s 100-day campaign to “clean out” illegal foreigners and the Civilized Cities Campaign. The overall aim of this research project is to answer the following research question: How do young Chinese born between 1980 and 1995 experience these campaigns?

On May 15th, 2012 the Beijing government implemented a 100-day campaign to hunt for ‘suspicious foreigners’ who had overstayed their visas, and deport them. The originating cause of the campaign was a video which was widely circulated online and appears to show a foreigner caught while sexually assaulting a young Chinese woman. The video brought about a storm of protests and triggered anti-foreign sentiments among the Chinese in Beijing. However, the scene of the video is not readily identifiable.

Taking the campaign as an example of what I would dub ‘political advertising’, I argue that there is an interplay between fiction and effect, and, through a perceived threat (the idea that it could have happened) affect politics. Following Massumi[1], who notes that what could have happened and concrete action are related, I argue, based on my own fieldwork in Beijing, that the affective and the discursive dimensions cannot be separated from each other.

Advertising (in the broadest sense) has been understood as a mediated form of strategic self-depiction (of companies, individuals or the state) in the public sphere. Competing images and signs are ‘at war’ with each other. In China, however, political advertising as a form of “opinion management” or “perception management” manifests itself in different forms: one of the more recent forms is the Civilized Cities Campaign.

When travelling through the People’s Republic of China today, there is one term which seems to appear everywhere - as a label on tables in a cafeteria, as a poster in the streets, or as a brochure in taxis: wenming ‘civilized.’ This campaign has been understood as a “hybrid form of social control and urban governance … [promoting] ideals for urban youth.”[2] How are images of the future interwoven into this program and how do they affect the present?

Signs in advertising only derive meaning through their reception.[3] Hence, the data collection is based on focused interviews and participant observation, as well as the study of various media artifacts which have been circulated as part of the program. Theoretically, contributions from new
economic sociology, area studies and gestalt psychology are combined to create a comprehensive theoretical framework in which to understand how the program succeeds or fails.

