

A golf craze in Beijing

A course by any other name

Never mind the environment, build more greens

Feb 17th 2011 | BEIJING | from the print edition



Once farmland, now Versailles at Pebble Beach

AN ACUTE shortage of water, say Beijing officials, is one important reason for limiting the city's growth. Rarely in recent memory has water scarcity been so apparent as this winter, which saw 108 dry days before snowfall on February 9th—the latest to arrive in 60 years. When it comes to water-hungry golf courses, however, a blind eye is turned.

Golf has been a favoured sport of the elite since the 1980s, when Zhao Ziyang, then Communist Party chief, played at one of the city's first clubs. To make the pursuit more palatable to xenophobes, the state media ran stories brazenly claiming that the game was invented in China hundreds of years before the Scots had ever heard of it.

By 2004, the golf craze was getting embarrassing. Not just in the capital, perennially afflicted by drought, but nationwide a profusion of golf courses was eating up scarce farmland. The government banned the building of new courses. Beijing already boasted 38, but they appear to have been far from enough to satisfy demand. In January *Southern Weekend* reported that construction in the capital, as elsewhere, defiantly continues apace.

The newspaper said that telephone directories alone showed the existence of more than 60 courses in Beijing; other materials suggest 73. A recent aerial survey by the government confirmed 170 golfing establishments (including driving ranges), of which at

least 70 were illegal. Developers appear to have got away with it simply by not calling them golf courses.

For all the fretting about this winter's drought, Beijing shows little sign of renewing the onslaught on golf (or on skiing, another popular pastime around Beijing, for which snow is created artificially). The drought has hit eight provinces that produce much of China's wheat. Crop-damage could send already fast-climbing food prices much higher. The game, though, goes on.

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