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Rural-to-Urban Transition in Chongqing's Hinterland: State-Led Urbanisation or Urbanisation From Below?

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Abstract

Since 2014 the Chinese state has been pushing for “new-style urbanisation.” Its main goals are accelerated urban–rural integration, development of small-to-medium cities and towns, and a “people-centered” urbanisation, all while limiting movement towards big cities. Similar reforms have been experimented with in Chongqing since 2007. This article argues that we need to take both top-down and bottom-up processes into view if we are to understand completely the intricate transformation currently underway in China’s urbanising society. Thus, policies and programmes at the national and provincial level are examined and then contrasted with findings from field research, that has been conducted in Chongqing’s urbanising hinterland. Findings show patterns of rural-to-urban transitioning which apparently match the central and municipal governments’ plans, but further evidence points to the rejection or modification of state-led urbanisation efforts and towards an urbanisation on the people’s own terms.

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Keywords

New-style urbanisation, Chongqing, in situ, rural-to-urban transition, hinterland

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Introduction

The year 2011 marks an important turning point in Chinese history. For the first time, official statistics registered more urban than rural residents (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2012: n.p.). The catch-up process of urbanisation, economic transition, and societal transformation has been described as “compressed modernity,” as within forty years China has gone through several developmental stages, which developed industrial nations took more than 100 years to absolve (Han and Shim, 2010: 473; Hsing, 2010: 2). In this compressed modernity, we may witness conditions, processes, and risks, that in the case of industrialised nations, count as part of both first and second modernity – as conceptualised by Ulrich Beck and others – or in some cases even fall into pre-modern times (Beck and Grande, 2010b: 424; Chang, 2010: 446–447; Han and Shim, 2010: 475–476; Yan, 2009, xvii; 2010: 510). The People's Republic of China (PRC) can be understood as a “bureaucratic-authoritarian” developmental state, that excels in “promoting continuous economic growth,” actively pursues the modernisation of its society, and exerts a greater degree of control on the complex processes of societal transformation than in Western democracies (Beck and Grande, 2010b: 416; Han and Shim, 2010: 473–474). As Yan (2009: xxxi) cautions, “the role of the party-state in shaping the individual remained strong and consistent across the dividing year of 1978.” Although the party-state is able to learn from other nations' experiences, it has to face its own range of issues which have arisen due to time-space compression, concurrent “multi-dimensional processes” and the persistence of socialist institutions that act as barrier between countryside and city (Kipnis, 2016: 9; Zhang and Chen, 2010: 10–11, 14–16). During the reform period, the urban–rural gap has widened and given rise to a series of problems, for example an imbalanced rate of development, the wasting of resources, and farmers who are often still barred from becoming urbanites. The world financial crisis of 2008–2009 revealed the need to climb up the value chain, create a robust domestic market and a broader middle class, as a greater economic downturn was largely averted by pumping subsidies into infrastructure construction and rural consumption (Schneider, 2015: 339; Yu, 2010: 13). In addition, the working age population decreased for the first time in 2012, heralding the end of a developmental mode that relied on low production costs and an abundance of workers (Song, 2013: 25).

Since 2013, a faster process of urbanisation is one of the main priorities of the central government, and in March 2014, the National New-Style Urbanisation Plan (NNSUP) (国家新型城镇化规划, *guojia xinxing chengzhenhua guihua*), which aims to reach an urbanisation rate of 60 per cent and a *hukou* (户口) urbanisation rate of 45 per cent by 2020, was unveiled (State Council, 2014: chapter 1.5). The urbanisation rate is based on the number of long-term urban residents (常住人口, *changzhu renkou*), meaning anyone who has been registered for more than six months in a city or town. There still is a sizeable gap between the urban resident population and urban *hukou* holders. In 2016, the urbanisation rate reached 57.4 per cent versus a *hukou* urbanisation rate of 41.2 per cent (He, 2017: n.p.; National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2017: 31). The NNSUP supersedes and integrates previously fragmented local experimentation and policy into a consistent and overarching document (Meyer-Clement, 2015: 3).

Amongst other points in the plan, the “citizenisation” of migrant workers who already live and work in the cities and the development of small and medium-sized cities and towns, take priority. “Citizenisation” (市民化, *shiminhua*) refers to the process of turning a person with a rural background into an urban dweller. The term implies that it does not suffice to simply work and live in a city to become urban. Rather, new urbanites have to adapt their lifestyle and gain full legal status. The term is mostly used in conjunction with migrant workers who have worked and lived in a city for longer periods of time (Mobrand, 2015: 109–111). Overall, the plan is a means to rectify past mistakes and bring about lasting and sustainable development.

The Chinese state frames urbanisation as the “only road to modernisation” (Ceng et al., 2017: 13; State Council, 2014: chapter 1). Modernisation is understood as a project that may be rationally planned and conducted by mobilising all reserves (Han and Shim, 2010: 473; Kipnis, 2016: 9), rather than a process that naturally unfolds. Causality between urban development, ensuing economic growth and finally modernity, is implied. Still, urbanisation is more than a mere regulatory process or the creation of urban fabric and space. To become urban is more complex than settling in a city. Individuals’ engagement in rural-to-urban transformation is driven by multiple factors, for example “education, skills, career, housing, family and kinship ties, and their personal economic interests” (Wang and Christiansen, forthcoming: 5). Although “broadly corresponding to an evolving national planning strategy” outcomes of this transformation might differ, as Wang and Christiansen have shown, “ranging from adopting a wholly urban lifestyle, maintaining a semi-urban identity, or keeping one’s rural roots.” Central and local state actors seem to have realised the core problems of the urbanisation process, but what happens on the local level may often deviate from policymakers’ original intentions.

As the NNSUP is based on local experiments – in Hunan, Anhui, Sichuan, and Chongqing, amongst others (Zheng et al., 2017: 2) – this article does not only consider the national level, on which the plan has been drafted, but takes a look at the process of rural-to-urban transition in Chongqing, considering plans of the municipal government as well as experiences of those affected by those policies. Chongqing’s reforms, which have a similar focus, have been carried out since the late first decade of the twenty-first century, hence we may learn about possible ramifications of the NNSUP. Fieldwork was carried out from November 2015 to April 2016, and in September 2017 in the urbanising hinterland. As Kipnis (2013: 5; 2016: 18) has cautioned, research during the last decade has mostly concentrated on large urban units and smaller villages, but only little work has explored urbanisation and lived experiences in cities with a population range of 100,000 to one million people. Zhan (2011: 277) pointed out that medium-sized and smaller cities might become “important sites of settlement for the majority of migrant workers in the future.” In contrast, recent research on towns and rural regions has often been carried out in developed regions or in peri-urban places (Yang et al., 2015: 103–110; Zhang and Zhao, 2015: 248). Because the party-state has decided to channel most of the remaining rural population into small and mid-sized cities and towns, this article argues that a closer look at on-going experiments and their outcomes in the hinterland is warranted. Therefore, field research focussed on the group of “new urbanites” – former

peasants that have settled down in smaller cities or towns between 2008 and 2016 – their views on the process of in situ urbanisation and how they have engaged in rural-to-urban transition. In this article, in situ urbanisation is understood both as the process of urbanisation at the place of residence, for example, when a city outgrows its former confines and swallows villages and towns, and when peasants settle in a city or town close to their rural home.

The article is organised as follows. First a brief overview of methodology and research sites will be given, followed by a short historical review on urbanisation and urban–rural issues during the reform period. The NNSUP will be introduced, followed by a discussion of local reforms and experimentation in Chongqing and a presentation and discussion of field research findings. In the final part, I will sketch three different trajectories of urbanisation, namely urbanisation without state involvement, relying on the state as a bridge-builder, or in situ urbanisation on one’s own terms – using policies and programmes, but different from what the state intended them to be used for.

Methodology and Research Sites

This article is based on the review and analysis of secondary literature, policy documents, and primary data collected in the field. Analysis of the NNSUP concentrates on the plan itself, commentaries and secondary sources, mostly from Chinese think-tanks and research institutes. Analysis of the experiments in Chongqing is mainly based on a literature review of publications by the municipal government and by local researchers and institutions.

Primary data have been generated through problem-centred interviews (PCIs) with the population affected by the process of urbanisation. The PCI, as conceptualised by Witzel (2000), allows for the combination of guideline-based interviews and short questionnaires. During the PCI, interviewees were asked about their experience with rural-to-urban transition, their views on the process of urbanisation and related policies. The discussion below is based on fifty-three (out of seventy-nine) PCIs. I interviewed thirty-eight new urbanites, ten peasants, and five urbanites, who did not grow up in the countryside. The majority of interviewees were in their thirties, and educational attainment was relatively low. More than 35 per cent left school after the middle school exams, more than a quarter only completed primary education or dropped out before graduating. Most interviewees have jobs in the low-wage sector. The new urbanites’ employment situation has improved, as they have often found stable jobs. The majority only makes contributions to basic cooperative medical insurance and almost none have contributed towards pension schemes.

Field research has been undertaken in the Youyang Tujia and Miao Autonomous County (酉阳土家族苗族自治县, *Youyang tujia zu miao zu zizhixian*), about 220 kilometers south-east of Chongqing’s core urban area. Youyang is Chongqing’s largest county by size, but also one of its least developed, least urbanised, and poorest regions. In 2016, 853,500 people were registered in Youyang, of whom 31.9 per cent possessed an urban *hukou*. The resident population was 551,600 people, with an urbanisation rate

of 32.2 per cent. Its per capita GDP of CNY 23,370 is far below the municipality's average of CNY 57,904. With CNY 12,521 per capita the local annual disposable income is almost CNY 10,000 less than the municipality's average (Chongqing Municipal Bureau of Statistics and National Bureau of Statistics Chongqing Research Group, 2017: 619–620, 622, 641). Main field research sites were Youyang's county seat (hereafter referred to as Youyang) and Banxi town (板溪镇, *Banxi zhen*), located ten kilometres south of Youyang. As of 2017 much of the old urban fabric in Youyang had been demolished, and replaced with gated communities and high-rises, government buildings, tourist attractions, public spaces, malls, and supermarkets. Banxi's change was less radical. Its status had been elevated from village to town in 2010 and in 2014 it encompassed an area of 162.8 km² with a population of 14,533 (Youyang Xinwen Wang, 2014: n.p.). The town centre has grown moderately, mostly through the influx of peasants from surrounding mountain villages, but the overall spatial makeup has remained relatively unchanged. Since 2008, Banxi's country roads have been upgraded several times and a light industrial park was established (Youyang Xinwen Wang, 2014: n.p.), but not all factories were in operation in 2017 and vacancies in the adjunct new residential area were high. Youyang and Banxi are no model cities or towns and may provide insights into the process of rural-to-urban transition "on the ground."

Urban Development and Urban–Rural Issues

In contrast to many developed nations, where urban and industrial development were historically closely intertwined, industrialisation and urbanisation have been decoupled to a great extent in China, especially during the pre-reform period (Chen et al., 2013: 25). From the early 1960s until the late 1970s, population movement was strictly controlled and during the Cultural Revolution cities overall witnessed near-zero population growth, or even slight de-urbanisation tendencies (Campanella, 2008: 174–177; Chen et al., 2013: 27–29). China was considered severely "under-urbanised" at the end of 1970s compared to its level of industrialisation (Zhang, 2008: 452–454).

Since 1978, the PRC has embarked on a journey of unprecedented economic and urban growth. Despite increased efforts to bring about a more balanced development since the early 2000s, coastal metropolitan regions still reign supreme and urban–rural developmental gaps have mostly persisted. The positive impact of strategies aimed at equalising regional development, like the Go West strategy or Building a New Socialist Countryside (BNSC), has been disputed (Li and Sicular, 2014: 32). The BNSC strategy aimed to improve living conditions in the countryside, but resources were largely used to remodel the rural landscape and promote urbanisation (Ahlers and Schubert, 2009: 41) as local governments understood BNSC as "an initiative for all-out rural urbanisation" (Ahlers, 2015: 124; Thøgersen, 2011: 183). Several interrelated reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, especially decentralisation of *hukou* management, the 1994 tax sharing reform and the 1998 housing reform, in combination with the hierarchical nature of the urban–rural administrative system, have fuelled the growth of larger urban entities and aggravated inequalities. Municipal governments were empowered to take control of

rural land and pursue urban expansion (Meyer-Clement, 2016: 113). Together with land developers and real estate companies, they have formed pro-growth coalitions, which advance spatial expansion and raise appreciation of land. This “land finance” (土地财政, *tudi caizheng*) contributes significantly to governments’ off-budget revenue (Lin and Zhang, 2015: 2782–2783; Sargeson, 2012: 761). “Land-centred urban development” has been identified as one of the main culprits that has caused large cities to grow much faster spatially than demographically and economically, causing some experts to deem China over-urbanised at its current developmental stage (Chen et al., 2013: 31–32; Wang et al., 2016: 517).

Although in the past, the central government has tried to steer the flow of population towards smaller urban entities, it has been mostly unsuccessful. A phase of rural industrialisation and urbanisation during the 1980s and early 1990s seemed to offer an alternative (Carrillo, 2011: 43). Academic and political interest in “rural urbanisation,” respectively “townisation” and “citisation,” as for example Guldin (2004: 144) called it, or, as referred to by Ma and Fan (1994: 1626–1628, 1639–1642), “urbanisation from below,” however, quickly died off together with the demise of the rural industrial sector (Kipnis, 2016). Until this day, migrant workers continue to flock towards metropolitan regions.

A New-Style of Urbanisation

The NNSUP for the years 2014–2020 has been drafted as an answer to the urban–rural issues described above. Although it has been emphasised in speeches and official reporting that this plan means a departure from the “traditional” mode of urbanisation, the plan’s contents are not new per se. Many of its ideas were proposed long before the year 2014 (Meyer-Clement, 2015: 3–4). The plan does not only supersede and integrate former plans and experiments, but it represents the significance that has been attached to “toplevel design” since the twelfth Five Year Plan in 2011 (Wang, 2013: 39). In the NNSUP, the principles of demographic urbanisation and coordinated and integrated urban–rural development are emphasised. Thus, the following discussion will concentrate on these principles, as they are of relevance for the question of urbanisation in underdeveloped smaller urban units.

In the plan, the central government places great emphasis on people-centred urbanisation. The plan calls for the creation of “inclusive cities” (包容性城市, *baorongxing chengshi*) (State Council, 2014: chapter 8.3), but not all peasants will be enabled to become urbanites at once, however. Migrant workers that live in cities shall be at the centre of new-style urbanisation (State Council, 2014: chapter 4). Gradually, equal access to urban institutions shall be provided to all city dwellers and they shall be integrated into everyday urban life (State Council, 2014: chapter 8.3). Public service provision shall be decoupled from *hukou* status and opened to all permanent urban residents. Ultimately the “*hukou* barrier” (户籍壁垒, *huji bilei*) shall be removed and the *hukou* system will be restored in its original form (State Council, 2014: chapter 7, 23). It is not made explicit how to remove said barrier, whether different systems of registration will

continue to co-exist or if the *hukou* system will vanish altogether. The plan continues the trend of urban–rural insurance scheme unification and the extension of basic service provision to the countryside. Since the introduction of the voluntary new cooperative health insurance and new rural pension system in 2003 and 2009, enrolment rates have risen and in 2016, 96.5 per cent of the population were covered by the unified basic health insurance. In 2014 and 2016, the unification of basic rural and urban pension systems, and respectively health insurances, was announced (Cheng, 2017: 23; Department of Rural Social Security, 2014: n.p.; State Council, 2016b: n.p.; Zhong, 2011: 355). Urbanisation would also bring a lasting developmental impetus. New urbanites are seen as a “second demographic dividend” (第二次人口红利, *di er ci renkou hongli*), which shall drive interior consumption (Duan et al., 2013: 37; Song, 2013: 25) to prolong the current economic growth phase for another fifteen to twenty years while the state works on its economic transition (Li, 2013: 94).

Where and how economic growth shall be fostered is related to a second important aspect of the plan – coordination and integration of urban–rural development. Coordinated development was put on the political agenda in the early 2000s as a countermeasure to uneven development and growth-first mentality (Li and Wu, 2013: 140). Major cities are supposed to become a driving force behind economic and urban development in their regions (State Council, 2014: section 4). Therefore, the NNSUP is strictly hierarchised. The central government is responsible for cross-provincial planning of metropolitan regions and tries to ensure a more ordered pattern of development by imposing regulatory control on the regional level and taking away power from megacities, ultimately reversing decentralisation tendencies (Wu, 2016: 1148–1149). In the current system, resources have often been syphoned off by administratively higher ranked units, despite reforms of the urban management system since the early 2000s (Zhong, 2011: 355). The plan emphasises that central cities function as economic motors for their regions, while it deemphasises their direct administrative control.

Overall, a hierarchised settlement system has been drawn up. The flow of population shall be channelled towards small and medium-sized (satellite) cities and towns, while citizenisation of migrant workers shall take priority (State Council, 2014: section 3). College and university graduates, as well as skilled workers, continue to receive preferential treatment (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016: 92). Cities and towns are divided into five categories according to type and population size, for which different requirements and restrictions for settlement shall apply (Table 1). This is called “differentiated settlement policy” (差别化落户政策, *chabiehua luohu zhengce*), the 2016 population development plan speaks of a “differentiated population policy” (差别化的人口政策, *chabiehua de renkou zhengce*) (State Council, 2014: chapter 6.2; 2016a: section 3). Except for smaller urban entities, the threshold to permanent settlement remains high, particularly for those without formal training or desirable skills. While some authors understand bonus point systems for *hukou* settlement as a fair and transparent means to take control of the floating population, others see potential for exclusion (Chang, 2013: 75–77; Tang, 2013: 80–81). Ultimately the stratification of living spaces and spacialisation of class that has been observed within Chinese cities (Zhang, 2010:

Table 1. Urban Settlement Restriction Policy.

City type	Population (million people)	Settlement restrictions
Town/small city	<.5	Fully revoke all restrictions
City	.5–1	Orderly revoke restrictions
Big city	1–3	Rationally revoke restrictions
Big city	3–5	Rationally decide on requirements
Megacity	>5	Strictly control population size

Source. State Council 2014, chapter 6.2.

13–16, 107–136) could be extended and fixed within a system of hierarchically ordered cities, with metropolises that are open to elites, while migrant workers and peasants may only settle in smaller and less developed cities.

The NNSUP draws a broad outline for urbanisation, but policy implementation is left to the lower tiers of the administrative system. Therefore, we shall turn to the municipality of Chongqing, where local experiments with a similar focus have been conducted since 2007.

Local Experiments in Chongqing

In 1997, Chongqing became China's fourth directly administered, and only inland municipality. By 2016, more than 30 million people were living in Chongqing with an urbanisation rate of 62.6 per cent (Chongqing Municipal Bureau of Statistics and National Bureau of Statistics Chongqing Research Group, 2017: 3, 88). In 2007, the municipality was chosen as a National Comprehensive Experimental Zone for Implementation of Urban–Rural Integration (全国统筹城乡综合配套改革试验区, *quanguo tongchou chengxiang zonghe peitao gaige shiyan qu*) and, to push forward with urban–rural integration, became a National Central City (国家中心城市, *guojia zhongxin chengshi*) in 2010 (Cui, 2011: 647; Ding et al., 2013: 43; Zhong, 2011: 357–358). Local reforms partly forestall the NNSUP's focus on reduction of urban–rural barriers. After a three-year test phase, *hukou* reforms were implemented in 2010, considerably lowering requirements for urban registration. Main prerequisites are now a stable source of income from nonagricultural work and a fixed residence in an urban district (Huang and Liu, 2011: 90–91). Similarly to the NNSUP local reforms first target migrant workers who have lived and worked in the city for an extended period of time. A 2015 update mirrors the NNSUP's differentiated settlement policy. Now, the flow of migrants shall be directed towards the expanded metropolitan core area where most industries are located. The entrance barrier for non-locals has been raised and the establishment of a bonus point system for settlement in the urban core has been announced (Chongqing Municipal Government, 2015: n.p.), but in comparison to other metropolises the urban–rural barrier has been considerably lowered. A unified resident *hukou* (居民户口, *jumin hukou*) has been announced and a system of registration based on place of residence

shall be established, providing all residents with equal access to public services (Chongqing Municipal Government, 2015: n.p.). *Hukou* changers may enjoy preferential policies, for example a “three year transition” (三年过渡, *san nian guodu*), during which they continue to hold full land use rights, or preferential family planning policies for five years after joining any urban social insurance plan (Gu, 2011: 97; Huang and Liu, 2011: 92; Liao, 2012: 28). Medical insurance and pension schemes have been opened towards new urbanites and peasants, but participation in some of the higher tiers is still bound to urban *hukou* status (Gu, 2011: 97–98; Zhang, 2011: 54–55). Most new urbanites remain in the basic insurance tiers (Liao, 2012: 29–30).

Besides reforming the *hukou*, the municipal government has created one of China’s most extensive programmes for public housing construction in the form of public rental housing (公租房, *gongzufang*), which is open to all applicants, irrespective of *hukou* status. Fifty per cent of housing stock has been allocated for “new peasant migrants,” including those from outside the municipality (Huang, 2011: 591; Lim, 2014: 475). The programme fulfils several aims: an overall reduction of housing costs, undercutting property speculation, reducing discontent from migrants and lower-income urban households and supporting the local economy as workers are provided with state housing (Lim, 2014: 471–472). Together with a tight control over the housing market this has resulted in only moderate growth of housing prices (Huang, 2011: 593; Li et al., 2016: n.p.). Public housing is a bridge between countryside and city, offering affordable living space to new urbanites.

Another means of easing rural-to-urban transfer is the Chongqing Rural Land Exchange (CRLE) (重庆农村土地交易所, *Chongqing nongcun tudi jiaoyisuo*). While there is no direct equivalent in the NNSUP, a further opening up of the land market has been hinted at in the plan. Similar systems may become more prominent in the near future due to the rising importance of land consolidation (Wang and Christiansen, forthcoming: 5). The CRLE was established in 2008 in order to promote urbanisation, dampen its financial impact, free up land resources, and foster *hukou* turnover. Chongqing’s former mayor stressed that former peasants will often cling onto their land use rights even when they have relocated to a city (Huang, 2015: 38). In Chongqing, peasants, who convert their construction land to arable land may trade an equivalent amount of land certificates (地票, *dipiao*) through the CRLE (Cui, 2011: 649–650). Land developers are required to obtain certificates before they may partake in bidding competitions for construction land (Cao, 2014: 59). Thereby, national restrictions for land conversion from rural to urban land may be circumvented to satisfy the local demand for land for construction (Cao, 2014: 86), essentially allowing for a zero-sum game, as for each piece of new land for construction the same amount of arable land is retrieved. Moreover, the market allows peasants from remote areas to benefit from rising land values, similar to suburban peasants (Cui, 2011: 652), partly de-coupling the worth of rural construction land from the classic model of a center-to-edge land value gradient. “Comparably high profits” from land certificate trade are seen as a way to solve new urbanites’ financial problems in regard to employment, accommodation, retirement, healthcare, and education (Wang, 2014: 21). Profits of at least CNY 141,000 per mu (one mu equals 666.6 m²)

are split 85:15 between household and rural collective (Chongqing Municipal Administration of Land, 2015: n.p.; Ye and Zang, 2013). Indirectly rural-to-urban *hukou* turnover is fostered because (re-)conversion of arable land to construction land is forbidden, rendering the construction of new rural homes virtually impossible.

Still, many new urbanites chose to keep their rural *hukou* (Cai et al., 2012: 51). The municipality's targeted urbanisation and *hukou* urbanisation rates for the year 2020 were lowered in 2015, from 70 per cent to 65 per cent and from 60 per cent to 50 per cent, respectively (Lang and Luo, 2015: 5), showing that rural-to-urban migration has been lacking behind expectations. Research that has been conducted during the initial phase of reforms uncovered further issues. In a survey, 45 per cent of new urbanites stated that they had involuntarily transferred their *hukou* and more than 80 per cent stated that they would like to return to a rural life in the future (Cheng, 2012: 228). Few new urbanites were willing to quit their rural land and most new urbanites remain in basic insurance tiers (Liao, 2012: 29-30). Problems were blamed on the experimental character of reforms and corrections have been recommended, but the reasons that have been given are contradictory or otherwise lacked sufficient conclusive evidence. To paint a clearer picture of what is happening on the ground, the remainder of this article will concentrate on the group of new urbanites.

Rural-to-Urban Transition on the Fringes

Youyang county, as one of Chongqing's poorest and least urbanised regions is a good place to study the implementation and reception of national and local urbanisation policies and programmes. Although Chongqing's CRLE targets migrant workers and peasants who live in the hinterland, data from the CRLE's website shows that less than one quarter of the total area of land certificates traded between 2012 and 2015 stems from Chongqing's South-Eastern Ecological Protection and Developmental Area (渝东南生态保护发展区, *Yu dongnan shengtai baohu fazhan qu*), an area that spans 19,800 km² with a population of more than 3.6 million people, including Youyang (Wu, 2016: 11). Of 26,127 households (121,092 people) that became new urbanites between 2010 and 2011 in Youyang county, the vast majority was unwilling to return their land use rights (Liao, 2012: 29). In my interview sample, only three people had engaged in land certificate trade and about half of all interviewees had heard about the programme, but were mostly unsure about its details. Informants distrusted official information and were afraid that it was a scheme to make them give up their land below market price. Participants reported that they had not yet been fully compensated, although more than a year had passed since the process of land conversion had begun. Chinese researchers highlighted a lack of propaganda as a key factor that contributed to low participation in the CRLE. This factor is likely overstated. More propaganda would not necessarily translate into higher participation, due to locals' distrust of officials and cadres. Emotional attachment to the rural home, which will inevitably be demolished, and economic factors should not be discredited. Soil is still seen as a replacement for a retirement insurance, or as one interviewee from Banxi put it:

Because if you give [your soil] back to your country, what will you eat then? If that thing [your soil] just stays there until [you need it], [for example] if you are unemployed, then you can [always] go and cultivate [your] land. (father of two children, rural *hukou*, works and lives in Banxi town)

Low participation in the CRLE and other programmes for rural-to-urban transition may be blamed on the complex situation on the ground. A multitude of programmes and policies, often with changing focus and scope, some of them short-lived, some implemented in a campaign-style mode, complicate the process of decision-making and instil uncertainty. Implementation of the land certificate system in Youyang is a case in point. Before 2017, all peasants could apply, but in September 2017 informants told me that only poor rural households were allowed to apply, because poverty alleviation had been put on top of the political agenda. Reforms and programmes discussed above, aim to steer the flow of rural-to-urban migrants towards small and medium-sized cities. At the same time, other policies, which aim to improve living conditions in the countryside, are also part of the NNSUP. Generally speaking, informants knew more about policies and programmes directly related to agriculture, for example the Grain-for-Green afforestation project (退耕还林还草工程, *tuigeng huanlin huancao gongcheng*), which was popular with locals in Banxi. Arable or unused land may be converted to forest land and in return farmers will receive a small annual subsidy. Even more common is the practice of transferring or contracting arable land to other rural households through formal or informal agreements. This is done to generate additional income or to protect farmland from turning fallow to prevent expropriation by the local government. A general improvement of living conditions in the countryside contributes to a rather slow process of rural-to-urban transition and *hukou* turnover. Massive investments in infrastructure construction have facilitated exchange not only between the core city and remote localities but also within localities. Research in Hubei province has shown that rural households will not necessarily move into town proper anymore and rather commute once the infrastructure has been improved accordingly (Zhang and Zhao, 2015: 253-254). Some informants in Banxi understood their hometown as a suburb of Youyang. This will not stop the shift of the rural population towards the urban centres, but might sabotage efforts to have peasants give up their rural *hukou*. New urbanites who hold onto their land use rights are a double burden, as they occupy more land instead of freeing up space, thereby also undermining one of the CRLE's premises.

Overall, informants were split in their views on state-led urbanisation. One group stressed the role of the state and especially of its local representatives, while others underlined individual responsibility. The first group argues that the state has to take responsibility for new urbanites, especially in regard to employment and social security, if it aims for a faster transition from a rural to a modern urban society. The involvement of this group in the process of urbanisation can be described as rather passive. Often they have been approached by cadres with relevant policies and programmes for resettlement and have participated when conditions seemed favourable. According to Yan (2009) this behaviour is "consistent with the traditional Chinese pattern of an individual-state

relationship,” as described by Lucian W. Pye. The state is “bestowed with both virtue and absolute authority,” but is also responsible for the “protection and well-being” of its subjects (Pye, 1996: 16-18). Responsibility is often linked to individuals in power, in this case a Youyang party secretary who held office from 2008 to 2013 and was universally praised for his achievements. The following statement is representative of this group’s view on rural-to-urban transition.

Peasants who become urbanites, that is not impossible, it depends on the kind of policies [that are handed down] from above. [...] The current policies [...] [I] would not say that they are not alright, [but] currently they are not yet up to the requirements, [we are] progressing, but rather slowly. [...] The government is working on it, they are taking care of it [...]. (father of two children, urban *hukou*, lives and works in Banxi town).

The other group of respondents held the contrary view that settling in a city and securing the family’s reproduction mostly fall into the realm of individual responsibility. They stressed that ability (能力, *nengli*) is of utmost importance. Ability may point towards physical strength, a sought-after set of skills, good connections, or intellectual capacity. Yan (2009) uses the term “individual ability,” which he defines as “a good education, social connections, or earning power,” which has been used increasingly, since the late first decade of the twenty-first century. Most respondents framed sufficient financial means as an important – maybe the most important – ability for successful urbanisation:

Everybody has thought about living in the city. But if you do not have any money and then obtain an urban *hukou*, I think that does not make sense. Your own abilities [decide] how you live your life. [...] You have to regard your own strength, have to wait until you have money, [then] we may slowly transition, transition to the city. [Those] without money continue to be peasants [...]. (father of two children, rural *hukou*, Banxi native, lives and works as migrant worker in Guangdong province)

This understanding of urbanisation and citizenisation – without overly relying on the state – fits in with how Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have described Chinese individualisation. Under a “limited, state sanctioned individualisation” the individual is “damned to be proactive,” all while the “social securities of Chinese state socialism are gone.” Individualisation is fostered and even enforced by the state, but constrained to the spheres of economy and private conduct of life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheimer, 2010a: 204). Gaining a fully legal urban status is not considered essential for becoming urban anymore. Rather personal wealth, and to a lesser degree, skills play a crucial role when defining who may be considered a full citizen.

The *hukou* system as a barrier between countryside and city was only mentioned by a few interviewees. Of thirty-eight new urbanites, only eleven had engaged in *hukou* transfer, which was often only partial as family members continue to hold a rural *hukou*. Peasants showed little interest in *hukou* change, because only few benefits are associated with an

urban registration in Youyang. Carrillo (2011: 155) made similar findings in an urbanising town in Shanxi. In the local context urban and rural *hukou* are seen as mostly equivalent. Some interviewees held the opinion that in recent years, the rural *hukou* had become “more valuable.” While local researchers have named access to urban healthcare and pension schemes as an important pulling factor (Cheng, 2012: 228; Yu et al., 2014), for my informants social security systems did not play much of a role when they decided to settle down in Youyang. Due to the continued opening of these systems, urbanites and peasants now have access to the same facilities and services. Participation in the higher tiers of medical insurance and pension systems, for which a *hukou* conversion is inevitable, was seen as too costly. Knowledge of preferential programmes associated with *hukou* transfer was low, as these play less of a role in the context of in situ urbanisation. The high cost of living was regarded as the main obstacle for settlement in a big city. This confirms Zhan’s (2011: 248) argument that the importance of the *hukou* has “declined substantially,” and that “market and social exclusion have become the most important factors in limiting migrant workers’ life chances.”

Between the two opposites illustrated above – urbanisation without involvement of the state or relying on the state as a bridge-builder between countryside and city – there is a middle course, namely in situ urbanisation from below, wherein new urbanites make use of preferential policies and programmes to enable a different kind of rural-to-urban transition. In Banxi town, alternative means of urbanisation can be witnessed. Movement of the locals from the mountains into the town centre is facilitated by government-led programmes, but the locals’ utilisation of these programmes often twists their original intention and sometimes is in conflict with the law. In Banxi, it is quite common to purchase a plot of land from those who hold land use rights in or close to the town centre and then erect self-built housing on it, although this practice is illegal under the current law. Often part of the money for self-built housing comes from programmes or subsidies that were originally designed to foster settlement in ordinary urban residential communities. The phenomenon has been largely tolerated by the local government until 2015. Since then, the government has adhered more strictly to town planning standards and tries to prevent illegal land purchases and construction of unapproved housing. Locals are supposed to move into concentrated housing communities, and in a few cases illegal construction has been torn down. Still, most informants did not worry about their housing as homeowners, regardless of their housing’s legal status, have received compensation for demolition. Others had been able to obtain property ownership certificates (房产证, *fangchanzheng*) for illegal housing, due to connections to the town administration. Most respondents were convinced that the government would not engage in large-scale demolition because of possible social unrest. Some informants were unaware of any wrongdoing, as the practice of selling land is common in this region, making views on property and land ownership an important driver for this kind of in situ urbanisation. Self-built housing is seen as family property, while urban commodity or public housing is understood as a temporary investment. Respondents transfer their “rural” conception of land and house ownership to the new houses in the town centre:

If you move into the city, you may only live for 70 years in that apartment. The houses people [in Banxi town] have build belong to them for generations, unless they sell them, isn't it like this? (father of two children, rural *hukou*, lives and works in Banxi town)

Social housing in Youyang and concentrated community housing in Banxi was refused by most informants due to its size and a supposed lack of building quality. Rural living space in Banxi generally exceeds 200 m², while living space in resettlement housing is often less than 100 m². Self-built housing normally is two to four stories high, has a storeroom or small shop in the basement, and plenty of space for three generations, making it comparable in size to old rural dwellings. Many houses feature fireplaces, which have an important social function as gathering place for family members, relatives, and friends. Similar traditional elements cannot be installed in commodity and terraced housing. Thus, economic considerations as well as family and social relations greatly influence housing choices.

Locality and the level of development is important in the context of rural-to-urban transition in places like Banxi and Youyang. Although officially an urban unit, Banxi still is fairly rural and even its town centre may be best described as “townising,” that is, a place that is in a transitional process from village to town (Guldin, 2004: 144). Traditional family structures are still intact and often get transplanted in the process of in situ urbanisation. Urbanisation on one's own terms, as described above, may only be fully realised in a strictly localised context. Bypassing laws and regulations, or exploiting official programmes and policies, is made possible by well-rooted *guanxi* networks and kinship structures.

Conclusion

Fieldwork in the hinterland of Chongqing has shown that rural-to-urban transition in a locally confined context may play out differently from what official plans envision. On the surface in situ urbanisation seems to be in accordance with the NNSUP's focus on small and medium-sized urban entities, but in reality the local process of urbanisation may be at odds with the official plan.

Research in Youyang and Banxi has confirmed two trends in regard to ongoing *hukou* reforms, namely that the main mechanism of exclusion has shifted from administrative to market-based (Zhan, 2011: 248), and a continued weakening of the distinction between urban and rural registration in the local context, while boundaries between locals and non-locals are strengthened (Chan and Buckingham, 2008: 605; Zeuthen and Griffiths, 2011: 228–229). For most people from Youyang and Banxi systemic barriers like the NNSUP's hierarchised urban system are of minor relevance. Interviewees engaged in urbanisation in situ, not because they saw systemic barriers as a major obstacle, but rather because personal finances did not allow for settlement in bigger cities. Since the early 2000s, the urban–rural administrative barrier has been gradually lowered and access to insurance systems and urban public services continues to be equalised. Locally, it does not matter much what kind of *hukou* someone holds. In Chongqing, this issue is evident from low participation in programmes that aim at fostering higher rural-to-urban

turnover rates. Programmes for the improvement of living conditions in the countryside do also contribute towards this problem. There is less of an incentive for new urbanites to change their *hukou*, especially in the context of in situ urbanisation. The only remaining strong pull factor is better access to urban schools. By opening bigger cities for rural-to-urban migrants or by fully unifying rural and urban land markets, the attractiveness of the urban *hukou* might be partially restored.

In situ urbanisation, as it may be witnessed in Youyang and Banxi, leads to a series of problems for the local and central state. New urbanites hold onto their land use rights, hence land will not be freed up for other uses, be it urban construction or for farming. This could create problems in regard to food supply and national food self-sufficiency. Land tenures grow increasingly opaque, because of informal agreements, illegal land sales, and construction of self-built housing. This does not only create administrative issues, but does also challenge the urbanisation and modernisation narratives of the central government. During the process of in situ urbanisation, locals transplant part of their rural lifestyle and customs into the growing towns, and thereby in part subvert what it means to be an urbanite. While interviewees generally see urban life as more convenient and hygienic, they do not necessarily understand it as superior to a life in the countryside. In fact, most new urbanites contemplate if they should move back to their rural home for retirement. Only the future of the coming generations is firmly seen in the city.

Developments in Youyang and Banxi show that implementation of national and local policies may very much differ from what has been intended by plans and programmes. Peasants engage in urbanisation in situ, due to a lack of options, thereby often transplanting part of their rural habits and traditions. Still, most of them hope that their children may advance to one of the bigger cities. Hence, urbanisation happens in a step-wise manner that might span generations. This has important implications for the overall makeup of society. If the state is not able to instil development in small and medium-sized cities where the leftover rural population may effectively only settle, then this will further intensify the stratification of society. In addition, if there are no sufficient channels for upward mobility then the current urban–rural dichotomy will be merely transplanted into the urban system. While it is important to understand how the central state pushes forward with its vision of new-style urbanisation, more research on the actual outcomes of state-led urbanisation, especially in small cities and towns in the hinterland is needed to understand how China's society will develop in the coming years.

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