



Land Governance in an Interconnected World

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 19-23, 2018



The Concentration Dilemma: Urban-Rural Transition in Metropolitan Area of Chengdu Since Early 2000s

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the
“2018 WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY”
The World Bank - Washington DC, March 19-23, 2018**

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Abstract

During the last one and half decade in China, a policy of spatial concentration of rural settlements is widely favored to manage the urbanization of the countryside. And yet, many of the projects developed under this policy have triggered radical and disruptive changes in the social and morphological structure of the countryside, without necessarily delivering the continuous social harmony or economic growth originally envisioned. This paper focuses on this misalignment of policy goals and effects, what we call the “concentration dilemma”, and also some emerging alternative development strategies. Drawing on case studies supported by first-hand interviews, innovative mapping techniques and archival documents, the paper assesses both state-led policy and bottom-up alternatives in terms of short- and long-term socio-economic, community and environmental criteria. In the end, it concludes towards a discussion on the potential of developing more site-specific policies for a more resilient and sustainable scenario for urban-rural transition.

Key Words:

concentration dilemma, state-led policy, rural land management, rural planning



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Introduction

In China today, a policy of spatial concentration of rural settlements is a widely favoured to manage the urbanization of the countryside. And yet, many of the projects developed under this policy have triggered radical and disruptive changes in the social and morphological structure of the countryside, without necessarily delivering the continuous social harmony or economic growth originally envisioned. This paper focuses on this misalignment of policy goals and effects, what we call the concentration dilemma, and some emerging alternatives. Then it discusses potentials for future policy development.

The paper begins with an outline of the concentration dilemma and its history. Concentration policy in China is state-led and typically realized through the mechanization of farms, introduction of large scale manufacturing plants and development of rural tourist attractions. The Chengdu area is significant in the context of this policy debates as it was designated an official pilot area for urban-rural integration in China's inner hinterland. In the Chengdu region alone, concentration policy implicates the relocation of hundreds of thousands of rural residents and the restructuring of thousands of hectares of agricultural land, through periodic campaigns in the name of 'removing urban-rural segregation' (2003-2009) and 'building the world modern garden city' (2009-present).¹ For local government officers, these efforts should be able to deliver the higher economic outputs. However, they did not always do so. As the policy was initially implemented as a rapid and centralized response to the national government's increasing attention to countryside, expertise on rural affairs (such as rural finance, water management, agriculture technology and community development) and rural residents were seldom involved in the shaping of the policy nor its implementation. During the last decade, some places indeed incubated certain manufacturing or agricultural businesses and provided lots of job opportunities. However, it is also common to find clusters of barren land covered by weeds, unused highly equipped glass greenhouses, half-demolished and half-utilized original peasant houses, and hectares of suspended new housing projects at former farming lands or settlements. There are lots of complains about the policy, for different reasons. Typically, lower level officials complain about unprofitable investments, serious corruption and fiscal deficit, contractors' treacherousness and residents' lack of cooperation; private companies criticize the lack of policy support in land tenure security, or the nepotism in

¹ 破解城乡二元分割 and 打造世界现代田园城市 in Chinese.



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government and its influence on the subsidy allocation; local residents quarrel against the lack of transparency in compensation price, poor quality and high price of the new houses, the greatly increased distance from the new settlement to the field, the unfair land redistribution, etc.

As the limitations of those early state-led campaigns emerged, some alternatives were developed by consortia of NGOs, academics, design and planning consultants, private companies, village communities, and some local governments as well. These alternatives are typically focused on low-impact environmental strategies and encouraging local resident participation. Due to the limited policy and financial support, such projects only focused on one or two issues. Some installed maintainable individual systems for blackwater processing and grey water purification in hundreds households; some renovated the public road and squares and encouraged the locals to renovate their houses and courtyards themselves; some promoted inter-regional agriculture or aquaculture cooperatives with higher product standard and stronger marketing power; some tried to persuade people stop their highly polluting cattle farming or pesticide and fertilizer-heavy grain farming, to adopt more environment-friendly production mode; some trained rural communities with modern commercial and political ideas and principles, to enable them better communicate with governors and investors. Compared with standardized concentration campaigns supported by heavy government subsidies, the alternative projects are not only time-consuming in reaching agreement among the many stakeholders and raising funds from different parties, but also require much more professional knowledge not only in rural agricultural and housing technology, but also the functioning mechanism of the rural market and society. Given such projects' high-demand in the implementers' interdisciplinary knowledge and implementation capacity, some reached their goals, some did not.

To illustrate the existence of diverse strategies (both top-down and bottom-up) for areas under urban-rural transition, specify their advantages and disadvantages in varied socio-economic conditions, this paper made a number of case studies on transforming villages and towns scattering all around in the metropolitan area of Chengdu, from suburban to peripheral. Based on first-hand interviews with residents, local government officials and NGO representatives, and documentary records in the city archive, this paper evaluates the most popular development strategies in the concentration campaigns, and some alternative approaches via their short- and long-term social, economic and environmental impacts. It concludes with a discussion on the potential of developing more site-specific policies, to encourage and guide communities and private sectors' participation,



discourage some government officers' short-term physical changes-oriented campaign, and enable different stakeholders to communicate and collaborate towards a more resilient and sustainable transforming scenario for the future.

Methods

The employed methods consist of remote data analysis, on-site data collection, and then detailed field investigation.

Step 1: Remote Data Analysis

Before going to the site, we use large scale data to get a general picture of the region. Through global data such as population density, crop yield, nightlight changes, economic conditions, and urban growth, we can tell that Chengdu plain is featured with high population density in both urban and rural space, high agricultural production, and undergoing rapid urban expansion. So we assume that Chengdu plain is a place of strong urban-rural linkage and high transformation dynamics. In addition, we learn more about the regional changes through relatively higher-resolution public available data such as 30m-resolution national data showing population density, land cover and GDP, self-made 15m-resolution² Landsat remote sensing analysis, and the 2.5m-resolution google earth images. From them we see that during the 2000s, there were rapid growth in GDP per capita, mass migrants from the surrounding Sichuan Basin to the Chengdu plain, dramatic increase in impermeable built land and reduction in arable land -- featured with centralized distribution of industrial and residential land in some "important suburban towns"³.

However, if only seen from such highly abstract or simplified data, Chengdu plain's past transformation looks like an 'ideal' urbanization process written in some theory text book, is that true? On the one hand, if compare the transformation in Chengdu plain with the other agglomeration of similar population density and social-economic tension – especially the other Chinese agglomeration like Yantze River Delta or Pearl River Delta where the transformation is much more decentralized and uncontrolled in their early year of growth, the transformation in Chengdu looks over-artificial. Furthermore, given the Chinese official statistics may have been adjusted for various purposes, especially for financial or political reasons, their authenticity remains questionable. Hence, the following questions were raised: Is the urban-

² As Chengdu is in the Sichuan basin, where the land is always covered with thick cloud, the satellite image is actually very blurry, the true resolution is far below 15m.

³ 重点镇 in Chinese, which means the towns that are in development corridor of the city and most of the resources would be concentrated there.



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rural transformation in Chengdu really a natural urbanization story perfectly featured with ‘concentration’ and ‘upgrading’? If not, what is the primary driving forces for such changes, and what impacts were brought to the area?

Step 2: On-Site Data Collection

In order to understand the specific socio-economic condition and the hidden mechanism of Chengdu plain’s urban-rural transformation, on-site data collection is crucial.

After arriving Chengdu, intellectual discussions with researchers in local universities, planners in urban planning consultants, leaders of NGOs, as well as officers in governments’ urban planning bureaus were carried out step by step. Their narratives pointed out that the dramatic transformation in built spaces is mostly led by the local government through several ‘concentration’⁴ campaigns in rural or suburban areas since early 2000s till today. These campaigns have been evolving for more than a decade into many variations. But they were carried out due to a mixture of both economic and political concerns: large-scale construction activities can temporarily increase the annual GDP of the city; the built land quota ‘saved’ from the periphery areas -- by concentrating the residential and industrial land -- can be transferred to the city centre and the following land sale can greatly increase the government’s income; large industrial zones may in the future attract big manufacturers from other part of the province or country to come and increase local employment and tax income; new buildings and zones can show off the local officers’ ‘capacity in improving people’s living quality’ to facilitate their career development; etc.

Meanwhile, following the guidance from the interviewees, efforts were made to collect relevant documents, maps and plans of that time period from the archives of various stakeholders. Given the value of urban history has not been formally recognized, historical planning documents are usually poorly archived. In spite of that, a relatively clear idea of Chengdu plain’s urban-rural transformation since 2000s could be mapped out via overlapping all the fragmentally collected maps, plans, policy papers and implementation records of different levels of detail from various perspectives such as water body protection, land re-distribution and compensation, settlement design, industrial development strategy, and agricultural upgrading plan.

⁴ 集中 in Chinese, a crucial concept in China’s urban-rural transformation policy.



Step 3: Case Selection: Contours, Transects and Sampling Probes

After collecting both the remotely available data and the much more confidential and difficultly available local data, they were overlapped together, to identify contours of different levels of urban-rural transformation dynamics -- socially, economically and politically. Based on the contours, transects across places of different and representative areas were drawn, and sampling probes for detailed field investigation were decided. The latter covered both remote cereal-growing and suburban economic vegetable-growing areas; highly industrialized, partially industrialized and pure agricultural areas; by the major policies favoured, influenced, and overlooked areas; economically 'advanced' and 'backward' areas; demographically balanced, dynamically changing and unbalanced areas; really by the social services covered and uncovered areas, etc., in order to comprehensively illustrate Chengdu plain's sophisticated urban-rural transformation process.

Step 4: Field Investigation

After visiting the individual projects and also the surrounding areas, talking to the local people such as factory owners, local peasants, village leaders, migrant workers, social workers, and planners⁵ in charge of specific projects, villages or towns, one can tell the urban transformation is no longer a simplified and curated story featured with dry figures in yearbooks, media reports or official documents, but a zig-zagging process mixed with desire, uncertainty, and conflicts, which are far more sophisticated than a map or some numbers could show. In the end, with all those above collected information and data, a comprehensive understanding of Chengdu's urban-rural transformation became possible. Traditional, the methods listed above are very different and usually used separately by people from individual disciplines. But as shown in the Chengdu plain case, they are complementary and not enough if used alone.

A Brief History of Chengdu's Concentration Campaigns

In 2003, when Li Chunheng became Communist Party Secretary of Chengdu, the government of Chengdu metropolitan area set up the aim for urban-rural integration – "building a standardized service-oriented government and democracy at the grassroots level". The core is the so-called "three centralization", which means 1) concentrate industrial productions at bigger development zones, improve the town's urban development and service industries, and offer more employment opportunities for extra

⁵ In Chengdu, there are 'countryside planners' allocated to each towns. Some of them have been working for one area for 2-3 years, thus know the recent transformation very well.



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labors in rural areas; concentrate village residents to the urbanizing areas of the central towns, encourage them to work on non-agricultural sectors; 3) facilitate the merge of farm land for land-scale, mechanized agricultural production, to improve the agricultural industry and the emergence of professional farmers. In the following years, there emerged different forms of concentrations, but the strategies and detailed methods stay similar.

Taking an early prototype, Changlin village at Tangyuan Town, Pixian Country as an example. Originally, this village consisted of 8 villager groups⁶, covering an area of 1.529 sq km, with 411 families, 1428 population living within 39 typical Linpan courtyards. Here, the arable land is distributed as 560 sq m per capita, and residency land is around 167.3 sq m per capita. Generally speaking, there was 1.14 sq km of agricultural land, including 0.80 sq km of farm land, 0.26 sq km of orchards, and 0.08 sq km of other categories. There are also 0.36 sq km of built area, where there are 0.238 sq km for residential houses, 0.04 for industrial buildings, 0.06 for road networks, and 0.02 for water management facilities.

When the concentration campaign come, most of the ‘improper’ pedestrian paths, small roads, water management facilities, Linpan courtyards and unused industrial facilities were rehabilitated into farm land, and the compensation fee per square meter for the demolished buildings were only 200-240 CNY for high-quality houses, 140-180 CNY for tile-roofed house, 70-100 CNY for thatched houses, and 30-90 CNY for the other very low quality ones. After the demolition, people were allocated into three concentrated settlements, altogether took an area of 0.114 sq km. In order to buy the new buildings, which construction cost is 405 CNY/sq m, villagers need to purchase them at a price of 300 CNY/sq m, which actually equals to villager’s overall income from their original buildings’ compensation fee. and the government pay the other 105 CNY/sq m, etc. In general, including all the costs ranging from road construction, channel reorganization, farm land upgrading, planning, and building construction and demolition, the government need to pay 28,290,000 CNY for this project, ca. 70,000 CNY per family.⁷

From 2003 till 2011, as the leader of Chengdu did not change, the concentration campaign has been repeated again and again. But compared with the first few years, the high-light came after 2008. On the one hand, it was influenced by the post-earthquake reconstruction campaign. As the region has suffered a great earthquake measuring at 8.0 M in May 2008, Chengdu received a huge amount of post-disaster reconstruction fund from all over the country. In order to use this funds and make the results visible for

⁶ It was a name from the communist era, a working unit or a brigade.

⁷ All information obtained from the official website of Chengdu Government. Accessed on 2018.02.02. <http://gk.chengdu.gov.cn/govInfoPub/detail.action?id=4119&tn=2>



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sponsors, new settlement planning and construction campaign was launched mainly in the influenced areas such as Dujiangyan district and those along the Mt. Longmen. Around 200 planning institutes have attended that campaign, covering 41 townships and 7 tourism belt – as the official report emphasized. This design campaign clearly showed the local government’s ambition to vitalize the transitional rural area through the unexpected financial supports to develop some profitable tourism industry. In terms of village concentration, about 2113 families have been relocated and put into 25 settlements, along the six ‘corridors for style and feature of urban-rural integration’. Those corridors are defined along the main expressways outside Chengdu, so all the visitors can easily drive through those expressways and see the products of this post-earthquake reconstruction campaign.

Generally speaking, all kinds of concentration policies are following the guidance from land use plan. From them we can have an overview of Chengdu’s efforts in urban concentration. The first guiding document is the 2005-2010 land-reorganization plan:

- 2005-2010 Land-Reorganization plan

This is the land use plan for first stage of concentration experiment in Chengdu. Taking the plan for Pi County as an example, 77.76 sq km of agricultural land will be reorganized so there will be around 5.60 sq km increase in farmland, at an increase rate of 7.20%. This is not a satisfying result, because it only reached 49.10% of the original target. In spite of that, there already a total of 1,158 families have been relocated, with a total number of 3722 residents. As a result, a quota of 0.55sq km built-up land were saved.

According to the official report, the problems of this time period’s concentration campaign are as follows: insufficient fund integration and decentralized use of funds; insufficient cooperation and coordination among relevant governmental departments; lack of control in the quality of newly rehabilitated farmland; rights of the relocated peasants were not fully protected, as the compensation fee are too low compared to the market price and their burden in buying new buildings are too heavy.

- 2010-2015 Land-Reorganization plan

While the first land-reorganization plan is still taking effects, things started to change at late 2000s. In 2007, China initiated the ‘2nd National Survey’ and finished in 2009. For the first time combining high-resolution satellite images and ground survey, the government really find out status quo of the use of all types of land no matter in rural villages, small towns or urban built-up area. Most importantly, the government finally know exactly the distribution of farm land. Then



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from 2009 to 2011, Chengdu government itself launched a city-wide land-use right certification campaign for the rural areas, including the farm land and built land. Before that, the land-use right is not that precise recorded in the database. Based on these remarkable improvements in land recording and management, a new round of concentration campaign could be launched through a more ambitious plan for 2011-2015.

For example, again in the Pi County, according to the official statistics in 2011, the total size of rural residential areas is 63.55 sq km, and the per capita built-up rural residential area is 204.73sqm, with altogether 310,004 inhabitants. The land-reorganization plan suggested to relocate 132537 people from a total area of 27.1344 sq km, then about 17.70 sq km quota for built-up areas could be saved. At the same time, the per capita built up area of the farmers would be reduced to 50-70 sq m, while the county would be able to make high-standard farmland covering an area of 59.45 sq km by renovate or reconstruct the irrigation and road networks inside the fields.

What is real impacts of these plans? It differs from place to place. Here, I will use the very different stories of three areas -- Ande, Longquan and Jixian -- to illustrate the diversity and alternatives.

Case Study: Concentration Projects

a. Three Villages in Ande Town: Same plan, Different fate

In 2005, Ande Town planned and then constructed a 3.7 sq km Sichuan Cuisine Processing Zone, attracting a lot of the relevant enterprises in the nearby --- such as those on food processing, snack production, logistics, etc. --- together to make a competitive hub. As the companies gathered here were already famous nationwide for quite a while, the industrial zone became very success and indeed offers a large amount of job opportunities for people in the area, as well as a large amount of immigrants from other places of the Chengdu plain. Here, many villager's annual incomes tripled to around 20,000 a year, greatly improved their living quality.

Usually, once a family got enough money from their manufacturing works, they would try to reconstruct the old traditional houses at their plots. However, it was difficult for people living in the villages around the Sichuan Cuisine Processing Zone – as they are planned as the main target of the concentration project, in order to prevent people from increasing their built floor areas and upgrading the quality of the houses,



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which would enable them to ask for more compensation in the future, the government has forbidden the reconstruction activities for many years.

In 2012, the town officially launched the concentration project. The pilot site is the Anlong village. Here, the government has made a huge amount of investment and except one group, all the other 17 groups of villagers were relocated into denser settlements. At the beginning, most of the villagers were willing to move as they were told that the new buildings would have better infrastructure and thus greatly improve their quality of life. However, as the projects went on, people started to regret for following reasons:

- Too little space. No matter how many floor areas a family had previously, they only got 30 sq m per person. And the new buildings are usually 2-3 stories high at a very small plot, so it became more difficult for old people to go to their bedroom. Such a small space is really too little for the farmers, as they usually need quite some space for grain storage, motorbikes, farming tools, etc.
- Unfair compensation for the demolished houses. As the evaluation standard for compensation fee is not very clear, there may lead to different interpretations. People usually complained that they were not compensated properly and then fight with the decision makers (village leaders). But in fact, it is a reflection of people's anger at the generally low compensation fee and the standardized small spaces in the new buildings.

Because of all the complains and tension, the last group of villagers refused to get relocated in the end. Few people even secretly moved back to their original houses – if the demolition was not finished yet. What annoyed the government officers most is that many villagers refused to hand over their farmland – even though only 0.07 ha per person – to the village collective to lease to external farming companies. Because of that, this project failed to concentrate the land nor the mechanization of the agricultural activities to support the material supply of the Sichuan Cuisine Processing Zone. Meanwhile, because of the regulation changes in 'land-quota trading' with the downtown area of Chengdu, all the saved land quota failed to be sold for a good price and remain unprofitable for years. In the end, in order to let this 'model' village look nice, the government has to pay much more money than expected to implement this projects, while the users are still not satisfied with that.

Aside to this dramatic concentration project, some really great achievement in village house upgrading has been destroyed. Actually since 2003, a local NGO – Chengdu River Research Association – started to work in waste water treatment and environment protection in Anlong village, as it was located next to one of the main water supply river of the city. After years of efforts, this NGOs successfully made the



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villagers more conscious in keeping the road and river clean, many of them also paid half by themselves to let the NGO install 'eco-toilet' (which can treat the human waste and turn into natural fertilizer) and black water purification system to make sure the village will not pollute the water body and soil surrounding it. The spirit of those projects are to promote independent, self-maintainable solutions in scattering rural areas. Because unlike the pro-large-system urban infrastructure, rural houses should have more independency to save the cost of maintenance. For a long time, this village has been serving as a vivid education base for schools and environment protection activists. However, the concentration project just brutally removed all the efforts and used the urban logic to make a brand new world.

Nevertheless, no matter how the villagers in Anlong complains, they are still the most privileged farmers in the area, as their project was the focus of all the financial resources. In contrast, the concentration efforts in the other two villages at the other side of the main road – Quanshui and Anlin, failed in a nastiest way. As they were relatively far away from the main road and thus not as important as Anlong village, the government only assigned to them a small company with limited financial capacity. When the company went to bankruptcy and the local leader got arrested, most of the original village houses were already demolished, while the new buildings were still in the middle of construction. Then in the following years, the unfinished buildings just stand alone with thick weeds and wild dogs, villagers have to rent a room in other places and the government has to pay for the rent. This situation lasted till mid-2017, when the new governor of the area finally reactivated the project. 'I wish the promised road, electricity, water pipes and finishing of the buildings could be delivered as soon as possible', a local sighed and wished.

Actually, there is a lucky village nearby – the Hongzhuan village. It was also planned for concentration together with Quanshui and Anlin. However, because it was too far away from the main road, so it was listed only in the second phase of the plan. When the new settlements in the other villages failed in the middle, nothing happened in Hongzhuan yet. Then people started to appeal to the government for permit to upgrade their existing houses or add more floors or buildings. As all the concentration projects turned out to be expensive both in social and monetary costs, the government finally agreed to let villagers develop their own plots. Hence, many villagers – who became richer through working in the factories nearby – happily densified their plots with more floor areas and better materials.



b. Mt. Longquan: Eco-Relocation Project's Anti-Eco Impacts

One of the most controversial concentration project in Chengdu should be the 'eco-relocation' in Longquanyi District. Here, since 2007, about 80,000 mountainous residents was supposed to be relocated from the Mt. Longquan into the plain area. Up to today, around 30,000 residents have been relocated. Although it was called as 'eco-relocation', only the villages surrounding a landfill site were relocated out of environmental concerns. According to official statement, most of the target farmers are living in places with little public services and transportation accessibility. Furthermore, there was no irrigation system in the mountainous farmland, so the agricultural production was of low quality and not sufficient for people to depend on them. Hence ideally, if all the residents could be relocated to the plain areas, they should be able to enjoy a much better life – as the planner said. But there is also a crucial but unspoken reason: to save quota for construction land to add to the plain area, and move all the required quota for agricultural land to the mountains, this could be clearly read at the land-use plan made at late 2000s: where most the previously well irrigated fertile farmland in the plain areas were planned for urban construction, while the broad barren, unirrigated lands on the Longquan mountain were marked as 'basic farmland' registered for preservation.

According to the government's propaganda, this relocation projects are based on 'two exchanges', which means 1) exchange the original residential buildings and land for new flat in the urban area; 2) exchange the original farmland for urban social insurance. It looks quite reasonable, but actually not fair for the farmers. Firstly, the new settlements were located very far away the urbanized area of the district. Several years already past, they are still standing along in the middle of nowhere exact a road next to them; in order to save as much construction quota as possible, the new residential estates was of unprecedented high-density -- more than 30 storeys high (most of the other concentration housing in Chengdu are of 3-6 floors, maximum 9 floors); every person is only allowed to get less than 30 sq m of floor area, which is only registered as 'collectively owned rural housing' and not allowed to sell in the property market (similar as in other projects). Secondly, the social insurance paid by the government was very basic, but after deprived of their access to farmland, many villagers could not find a proper job anymore, given manufacturing factories would rather employ people below 45 years old. They have nothing to do, and most time only staying in their residential estates that are isolated from both urban and rural life.

Unsurprisingly, people got increasingly angry about their situation. They lost their income sources or food production field, they lost their vast living spaces, they lost their accessibility to the nature while also not accessibly to urban life, and they cannot even move out of the new cage as the flats could not be



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traded. Complaints accumulated day by day, as some officer said: ‘Such community is like a bomb that may explode at any time...!’

Not only the new housing estates’ situation are problematic, the ‘freed’ Mt. Longman was also left with a lot of chaos. The entire project was initiated when Li Chuncheng is still the leader of Chengdu and Longquan was under a similarly ambitious governor. Under their leadership, in order to push for the eco-replacement’s implementation, a lot of regulations and bureaucratic procedures as well as a lot of experts and government officers’ rejections were ignored. Till 2012, the project just moved on smoothly based on a lot of special approvals from the leaders. After these leaders got arrested in 2012, the projects stagnated for years. When the new governors put their attention back to Mt. Longquan wanted to make a national park and develop relevant tourism industry in 2016, they found out that the land in the mountain was already fragmented allocated to a lot of unprofessional developers, who mostly have no experience in development but only got the projects due to their social networks. Even though the land allocation at the early stage lack proper procedure, the government still need to negotiate hardly with the current land holders. Actually they have already taken more than one years, trying to get some of the land back, this process is still going on (till the author’s last field work in May 2017).⁸

c. Jixian’s Small Scale Upgrading Projects

Jixian county is located at Chongzhou district, south of Chengdu. This place is assigned as a base for culturing basic grain by Chengdu’ Metropolitan area’s agriculture development committee. For this reason, most of the land are required to grow rice, maize and wheat. Due to its remote location from the urban sprawl of Chengdu, it received relatively little development interests, political attention and funding. These lack of official resources and subsidies seems to be disadvantages for Jixian’s economic development. However, it also enabled area to develop some diverse, acupunctural and pragmatic strategies in rural-urban transition, which indeed shows some unexpected potentials for the other areas facing with similar transforming challenges.

For example, an agricultural service cooperative came to exist in Jixian in the last few years and became an important service supplier in the region. As was claimed, it can provide services for farmers from the beginning to the end, from plunging, transplanting, to harvesting, and from mechanically work to manual operation. With joint efforts from the government and some local groups, this cooperative developed well and turned out to be very popular in the area. Because

⁸ Information from the interview with the local officer Shen W., carried out in 2017.06.12.



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people here – even some relatively professional farmers -- only have a land of limited size and could not afford to have very good equipment only for their own use. Employing this cooperative is a good choice for local to enjoy high-quality agricultural services. Hence, its success suggested that the concentration of agricultural services is really necessary in the region. And in the future, if the fragmentation of the land-holding structure stayed the same, such kind of ‘service sharing’ is actually a much more pragmatic solution to help improve the quality and efficiency of the general agricultural production in the region.

Another inspiring project in Jixian is the renovation of a traditional, low density Linpan settlement, covers around 100 families. Here, rather than demolish the old settlements and build new ones in smaller plots, the government focused on renovating and upgrading the existing roads, infrastructure and public spaces. It has greatly improved the appearance of villages and brought tourists for home-stay. By offering accommodations and gastronomy for them, the local people can earn some extra money in addition to the income from daily agricultural or manufacturing works. This result is quite satisfactory for the locals, but the government is not that happy in the end. because most of the funding was paid by them, there was neither effective cooperation nor financial supports from the villagers. In the end, the government spent more than 400 million CNY which means they paid for each family around 40000 CNY in average without getting any returns.

Of course, compared with the dramatic reconstruction projects, the total spending is not that high. The concern is that if there is some effective cooperation and communication between the villagers and government, if the villagers can participate and pay partially for the projects, the limited governmental funds will be able to support some other settlements who are also in need of renovation and environmental improvement. However, participatory planning and cooperation do need more time and efforts in communication and negotiation, while a local government usually has a lot of pressure in completing a project quickly in China. Hence, an incremental renovation-oriented project finally ended up as a quick project using up all the available resources.

Similar problem emerged in the pollution control project. In the past years, due to lack of control, there emerged a number of small cow raising sheds where the cow’s waste is directly discarded into the river, causing a lot of pollution to the water body, and also the quality of the nearby agricultural production. Since 2017, due to the increasing crises in fresh water supply, Chengdu got determined to stop different kinds of uncontrollable pollutions both in the city and countryside,



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then the cow raising families were required either to treat the cow waste properly or stop this business. At the beginning, most of them agreed to close down their businesses because they know it has been influencing the living environment of the area quite a lot. But later on, inspired by the compensation policy for settlement demolition, someone started to ask for high compensation for their cow sheds. Or else, as they threatened, they will keep on discarding waste into the river. Knowing their polluting businesses are against the law, people did not go to the court, but started some guerrilla like anti-demolition movement and went to Chengdu city government's petition office to complain the improper behavior of the local governors. As the city leader did not know what is exactly happening and just wanted to maintain the stability of the society, he requested the executive officer to solve the issue as soon as possible, rather than properly by law procedure. In fact, many progressive transformation efforts meet with such a problem. In the end, as people usually said: the louder you cry, the more you will gain. It makes the problem more complicated and unsolvable.⁹

Generally speaking, in Jixian country – a place relatively far away from hot money – there indeed emerged more possibilities for incremental in-situ urbanization. It also shows that when there is not that much political pressure in implementing large concentration projects, some officers would be able to think more creatively in improving the residents' living standard by some financially efficient and acupuncture measures, such as the establishment of professional cooperatives and the renovation of the existing building stocks. Now the main problem is how to encourage participatory planning and multi-lateral cooperation. In fact, Chengdu (same as many other Chinese cities) have been spending a huge amount of revenue in 'community building' in the countryside by hiring some social worker organizations to help with spreading moral principles and 'educate' the people with proper behavior. The result is a lot of 'community centers' with dry propaganda slogans hanging on the wall. This is actually not community building at all, but still only superficial 'community show'. A real professional organization in community building should be able to help establish an equal and efficient negotiation mechanism, let different stakeholders know how to distinguish the advantages and disadvantages of an issue, and able to express their real demands and negotiate with each other properly. However, as the government sometimes are worried that this may lead to too much independency and self-consciousness

⁹ Information from the interview with the leader of the Jixian County Hong Hao, carried out in 2017.06.08.



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of a local community, they would rather just waste money on useless propaganda and deal with the chaotic situation themselves. In the end, the state just keeps on leading everything, exhaustedly.

Outlook

In China today, there are countless critics on urban design and planning practices. The generic tabula rasa style urban renewal and sprawl projects – lack of consideration on social, economic and environmental context – have made a lot of people lose their home and livelihood, while not necessarily bringing new employment and economic development as promised. Planners may defend themselves, quite truly, that they are just drawers, while the clients (governments or developers) were actually the real planners of the projects. However, the lack of knowledge and experience, or the lack of strong and insistent willingness to search for sensible and feasible solutions to meet the real needs of different stakeholders – e.g. the government, the developers, the existing locals and the coming residents in the future – are also common among practitioners. Given the market is booming exponentially and the current way of practice being most profitable, few, from young graduates to experienced practitioners, would take more time and energy to develop sensitive strategies with detailed methods. Hence, in spite of continuous critics, generic and brutal projects spread quickly across the country.

However, I believe this unhealthy trend will reach its limits and cool down when the hot money stopped coming to physical urban transformation, as we can already see the potentials in the Anlong and Jixian cases. I believe there would be more professional planning intervention to combine the spatial, social and economic aspects of the rural- urban transformation together, help the always neglected transitional rural areas in urbanizing areas by motivating all the relevant stakeholders to participate and properly negotiate with each other in the transformation process, and finally make comprehensive decisions by themselves.



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