

Whose urban development? Changing credibilities, forms and functions of urbanization in Chengdu, China[☆]



Jesper Willaing Zeuthen

Chinese Area Studies & Development and International Relations, Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University, 9220 Aalborg East, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

In Chengdu, as in most other Chinese mega-cities, urbanization has been very rapid over the last three decades. In the current phase of urbanization, approximately 900,000 villagers in Chengdu alone have been resettled to urban-style settlements in order to release space for new arable land and to justify continued urbanization closer to the city. This article studies this new phase of urbanization in the countryside and contrasts it with the way in which urbanization took place in rural areas closer to the city in the past. The main focus is on the institutions regulating changes in the use of land when areas shift from rural to urban status. In the current phase of urbanization, far from the city centre, politically decided plans bargained far from rural communities play a much larger role than they did in earlier phases of urbanization that were closer to the city. The high-level political and financial nature of contestation on the rural fringe of Chengdu gives considerably less room for local communities to affect institutions than was afforded by earlier urbanization processes on the urban fringe. Although the fast state-controlled process entails more formal regulations than in the past, it also means less credible institutions because regulations may change almost overnight as a result of political decisions on which local residents have no influence. In the current situation, the article argues, the high degree of state control contributes to the preservation of old rural property rights institutions.

1. Introduction

In China, one of the ways you can initiate a conversation is by asking: “How many houses do you have?” Investment in real estate has long been regarded as much safer than most other forms of investment by the Chinese middle class. Local state authorities have profited by converting collectively owned rural land to state owned urban land and selling it (long term lease). Land conversion became a very important source of income for local governments because tax reforms imposed between 1994 and 2006 dramatically decreased tax revenues for local governments and because county-level governments and above enjoyed a monopoly on initializing the land conversion of rural land to urban land. This was especially the case in Western China, where economic activity is more limited than along the coast (Tsai, 2004; He et al., 2012; Ong, 2014). The combination of demand for real estate and the need for government funding created a vicious cycle of continued real estate development which vastly expanded China's urban land.

The fast expansion of urban areas has led the political centre to become increasingly concerned, not least the Ministry of Land and Resources (MLR). In the process of its establishment in the late 1990s, the MLR, introduced the “red line of arable land” (*gengdi hongxian*, 耕地红线) (Kong, 2014; Zhang and Wu, 2016). The “red line of arable land” is a politically fixed quota of land that is designated to remain arable. It is currently set at approximately 1.2 million square kilometres. As city, county and district governments increased the share of their budgets covered by land conversion, focus on this red line intensified during the 2000s (Kong, 2014). This led to increased emphasis on China's zoning policy, according to which land classified as rural is owned by village collectives and urban land by the state. While urban land may be sold (long term leased) to private investors, rural land is not tradable. Rural construction land used for housing is assigned to rural households for an unlimited period and may only be sold to fellow villagers, while a 30 year use-right to arable land is assigned evenly among villagers, who are then allowed to lease out land. The formal conversion of land from rural to urban status requires the approval of the MLR and must adhere to five-year plans.

In a country that has been subject to very successful market reforms, it can appear paradoxical that rural land remains collectively owned. Throughout China's economic reforms, the rural outskirts of cities have been arenas for testing new forms of informal property rights institutions (i.e. sets of socially accepted practices that may be directly contradictory to written, scarcely implemented legislation and policies, as opposed to formal

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E-mail address: jesper.zeuthen@gmail.com.

institutions, which are sets of socially accepted and legally and politically sanctioned written regulations). These informal property rights institutions have allowed the use of some formally rural land for urban purposes (conversion into densely populated land with a built infrastructure). Since the beginning of Xi Jinping's presidency in 2013, the first policy document of the year from the Communist Party of China's Central Committee has listed experiments in the reform of rural collective property rights as a top priority. Both within and outside China, these reforms were interpreted by liberally oriented economists as a signal that private property rights would be introduced in rural China (Economist, 2013; Zhou, 2014). Despite this, as this article shows, even in some of the newest forms of urbanization which have been explicitly framed as part of experiments in the reformation of collective rural property rights, rural property rights remain collective. Indeed, this article argues that they are now even further from private property rights in some ways than in the past.

This article contrasts the wave of urbanization that started close to the urban core of Chengdu in the early 1990s (before tax reforms) with the current wave of urbanization occurring at a considerable distance from the urban core. The latter started after tax reforms and is currently framed by Sichuan Province as part of experiments with property rights reforms. The article studies why the collective ownership of land is maintained and even enforced, despite the local state demand for increased revenue, a high-level political demand for clearer property rights, and an expectation based on economic theory of more “modern” property rights regimes. The article argues that collective ownership is maintained because the function of urbanization has changed. In previous phases, the main function of urbanization was to enable increased industrialization. In more recent phases, however, urbanization on formally rural land has increasingly served the purpose of financing city and county governments. The continuation of the collective ownership of rural land maintains and even enforces the state's monopoly on the profits from the conversion of rural land to urban land. Maintained collective ownership prevents the emergence of informal forms of property rights that turned out to be economically and politically costly to compensate when the land was converted to urban land. Citizens living in the areas that become urban are excluded from the bargaining of property rights, and this makes the divide between collectively owned rural land and state owned urban land stronger than it was in the past, at the same time as some of the rural buildings look increasingly urban.

2. Structure, material and methods

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this article is divided into four sections: this methodological section, a theoretical section focusing on the link between institutions and political bargaining, a brief historical analytical section studying early urban fringe urbanization and a longer analytical section studying later rural fringe urbanization. Urban fringe and rural fringe are terms that I use to distinguish between two different phases of urbanization at two different distances from the city proper. While urban fringe urbanization took place in locations that were directly adjacent to fully built up areas when urbanization started, rural fringe urbanization takes place in areas that are not adjacent to existing built-up areas (Fig. 1).

Historical data on the urban fringe was collected during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two townships in Jinniu district by the author in 2007 (approximately 80 semi-structured interviews), a brief revisit to the field in 2017, and review of the rich secondary literature on urbanization in similar localities.

The study of contemporary urbanization on the rural fringe focuses on how actors at different levels contributed to the urbanization process on collectively owned land. I study how the city government, local authorities, private entrepreneurs, and local villagers bargained a specific form of transfer of development quotas that has come to dominate much of the urbanization process on Chengdu's rural fringe, and how this contributed to the development, change, maintenance or enforcement of the existing institutions governing the conversion of rural to urban land. The cases studied below the city level were selected as the most likely cases of the influence of non-state actors or of very low levels of state influence on the particular

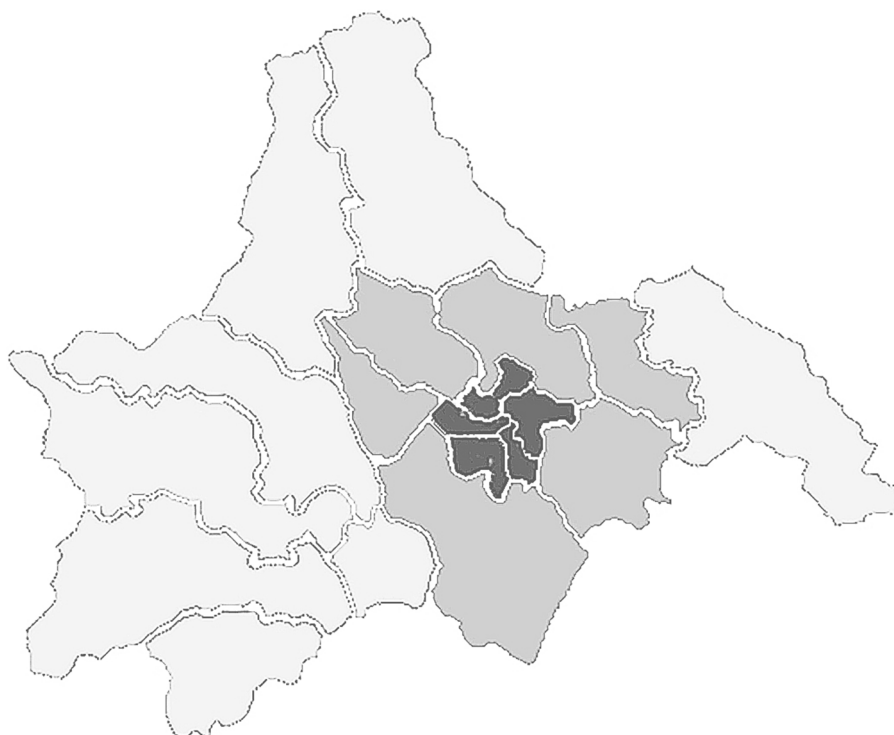


Fig. 1. Map of Chengdu prefecture city [Chengdu shi, 成都市, henceforth city], capital city in Sichuan province. Darker districts are now almost fully urbanized while light grey counties (and county-level cities, henceforth referred to as counties) remain predominantly rural. I refer to the light grey counties as the rural fringe and the more distant parts of the dark urban core district as the urban fringe. The city had 14 million inhabitants in 2013 and covered 12,390 square kilometres. In 2016, Jianyang county was added to the city because Chengdu's new airport will be built there. This is not reflected on the map.

form of urbanization around Chengdu. The county and township that I have chosen to study started a policy of quota transfers before it was an official and widely applied policy. The private investor that I focus on presented his company as the only fully private company investing in quota transfer projects. In the case of villagers, I discuss the prospects for “small property rights” (*xiao chanquan*, 小产权) projects, i.e. projects in which residential buildings are built on land formally classified as rural and traded illegally yet with public acceptance (See [Ho \(2013, 2014\)](#) for an extended discussion). Small property right projects constitute one of the clearest manifestations of informal property rights. Data for the second analytical section was collected during fieldwork in 2007, 2015 and 2017. On the rural fringe, I have conducted approximately 200 semi-structured interviews of citizens affected by or involved in urban development projects, of officials playing a role in organizing these projects, and of entrepreneurs who want to undertake new urban development. While the focus was on citizens in 2007, entrepreneurs, policy-consultants, and local administrators were in focus in 2015 and 2017. Approximately 160 of the interviews were conducted in Qionglai county on Chengdu’s rural fringe.

On both fringes, I conducted fieldwork in tandem with archival work on the enterprises and policies that were encountered during fieldwork. While the study of the urban fringe is contextualized to other cases and can thus be regarded as representative, the study of the rural fringe deals with a form of quota transfer that is unique to Chengdu ([Ong, 2014](#); [Zhang and Wu, 2016](#)). Although my brief fieldwork in Chongqing and three counties in Sichuan outside the jurisdiction of Chengdu revealed similarities with the ways in which bargaining takes place in other places, it also indicated that the ways in which urbanization processes materialize are highly dependent on the political and economic context. Since revenues from land sales play a larger role for city finances in Western China than along the coast, bargaining processes are likely to be different there ([Liu, 2011](#); [Ong, 2014](#)). The two phases of urbanization studied differ in time and location, and I focus more on the latter phase of urbanization than the earlier. I use the study of the earlier phase urbanization as a contrast to the main study on rural fringe urbanization. Though the study of urban fringe urbanization has less depth, I am, however, able to sustain findings from the rich secondary literature. This ensures that data on how different levels of the state, local elites, and residents change access to collectively owned land in the urbanization process are observed by others in similar localities. I can then contrast these findings with the ways collective ownership is maintained or changed in the latter phase of urbanization.

I avoid mentioning names, places and companies that could be used to identify informants that expect anonymity.

3. Bargaining institutions

In the “credibility thesis”, the common theoretical ground of this themed issue, “the focus on institutional function rejects axioms of externality and rational agency” ([Ho, 2014: 16](#)). [Ho \(2013: 1091 & 92\)](#) argues that “institutions are not shaped and enforced by a single, outside agent, but instead through the mutual interaction of that agent with others. The endogeneity principle [...] precludes an external agency that can shape institutions, as any actor is involved in the ‘game’, albeit institutions may be perceived as externally shaped.” The bargaining between actors whose interaction is regulated by the institution thus maintains, changes or creates mutually trusted (credible) institutions ([Ho, 2014](#)). Here, bargaining is understood in the broadest possible sense of the word, ranging from formal negotiation to physical confrontation. [Chen \(2004\)](#), [Hsing \(2010\)](#) and [Yep \(2015\)](#) all offer ethnographic accounts of this bargaining process in the Chinese context. They show how local village heads with roles in the local state apparatus and in local business, and often with leading roles in clans (institutional entrepreneurs ([Yep \(2015\)](#))), played central roles in organizing local communities, so they could benefit from the informal conversion of rural land to urban land in the early phases of urbanization. The relations between state and society were extremely direct when villages established industries or residential areas on land that national plans had reserved for agricultural purposes, and ‘bargaining’ was reduced to the local state silently accepting established practices. This was similar to the establishment of the household responsibility system, which, from 1978, replaced people’s communes with households when it came to the responsibility for tilling land. In the case of the household responsibility system, however, the central state made local practice into official policy ([Heilmann, 2008](#)). This form of what I call ‘bargaining through practice’ between state and society played an extremely important role for China’s growth during early economic reforms. [Li \(2014\)](#) shows how the absence of the state created a very different situation in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Here increased contestation over agricultural land made what used to be common land endogenously change into commoditized land. This resulted in over-accumulation of capital for the few, and left many on or below the subsistence minimum. Urbanization on China’s urban fringe happened at the same time as the urban population in other developing countries exploded, and like elsewhere in the developing world, the informal character of urbanization made settlements on many urban fringes look like slum. However, Chinese urbanization appeared to be an exception in the sense that urban expansion happened as a result of a market need rather than in order to meet a demand for merely absorbing surplus population ([Davis, 2006](#)).

Whereas [Li’s \(2014\)](#) example shows that the absence of the state is not desirable, it appears that state-state bargaining with very little involvement of local residents plays an increasing role in Chinese urbanization. In the latter phase of urbanization studied, large-scale voluntarily displacements are politically decided within a short time-frame and with little involvement of those displaced. This suggests the potential relevance of [Scott’s \(1998\)](#) notion of “social engineering.” [Scott \(1998\)](#) uses this term to describe situations in which large projects are designed in good faith by the political top in a process without respect for endogenous local institutions and with no room for feedback from those affected by the project. One such example are cities built from the ground with careful planning, but without the involvement of future (or past, if any) residents. Brasilia is one such example of a project carefully engineered by technocrats with what [Scott \(1998\)](#) calls a “high-modernist” ideology. [Scott \(1998\)](#) argues that when such projects occasionally turn out to be workable, then it is usually thanks to workarounds of the original plan implemented when the intended beneficiaries adapt the plan. Applying the “credibility thesis”, we may understand “social engineering” as a result of the state mistakenly having assumed that it can single-handedly change institutions regulating society. [Hsing \(2010\)](#) and [Rithmire \(2015\)](#) show how political decision-making without the participation of citizens appears to play a central role in specific forms of Chinese urbanization. [Hsing \(2010\)](#) argues that, state authorities tend to control urbanization processes on the rural fringe, leaving very few opportunities for citizens to become involved in the processes. This, she argues, is because fewer actors contest the land, and hence there are fewer opportunities to balance the power of the local state. In her study on urban land, [Rithmire \(2015\)](#) also focuses on political bargaining without the involvement of local residents. While state-society bargaining is limited in these cases, bargaining between contesting bureaucratic bodies does occur, and it leads to very different outcomes in different localities, reflecting political streams in the political centre at the time of political bargaining as well as the socio-economic context. In the “bureaucratic bargaining” process, a decisive influence on policy outcome derives from the framing of policies to fit current policy agendas by various bureaucratic bodies ([Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988](#)), and, more recently, by well-connected elites ([Mertha, 2009](#)).

[Zhou \(2014\)](#) contests the view on increased state control over the urbanization process. He argues that China’s rural land is slowly but steadily commoditized. Something he regards as a desirable and inevitable process. With a Marxist perspective, [Harvey \(2004\)](#) argues that global capitalism and the consequential over-accumulation of capital globally leads to what he calls “accumulation by dispossession.” “Accumulation by dispossession” occurs, he argues, when over-accumulation of labour and capital in the economic core presses investments to ever more peripheral areas and

into forms of investment that bind capital over long periods of time, for example in the construction of infrastructure and real estate. This process is driven by the market, yet “the reallocation of capital and labour surpluses to such investments requires the mediating help of financial and/or state institutions” (Harvey, 2004: 64). Lin (2014) acknowledges that “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey (2004)) appears relevant to Chinese urbanization, yet he argues that theories on neo-liberalism developed in a Western context, such as Harvey’s (2004), need adjustment based on findings from the Chinese context. He argues that in Chinese urbanization, “local states [...] have embraced and manipulated market forces for their political agenda;” (Lin, 2014: 1814 Lin, 2014: 1814). Applying the credibility thesis, this article circumvents the issue of whether the market requires mediating help from the state (Harvey, 2004) or the state needs markets (Lin, 2014), focusing instead on the concrete bargaining in places that become urban between different fragments of the state, elites, and citizens.

4. The urban fringe: institution building from below

This section studies how two urban fringe areas around Chengdu became urban in the 1990s and how the history of their urban development affected local institutions that had regulated access to rural land before the two areas became urban.

Like most other areas on the urban fringe, Shaheyuan and Tianhui had both, hosted substantial numbers of rural-urban migrants, with the result that the locals were eventually outnumbered by rural-urban migrants in both townships. By 2007, the local populations of both areas had been subletting accommodation for at least a decade to rural-urban migrants in housing built both legally on rural construction land and illegally on arable land (urban sprawl), thus enjoying an important source of income. This had resulted in the construction of a large amount of bad quality housing. In both localities, there was a considerable inflow of residents from the city proper. These newcomers were interested in buying property.

At least since the 1990s, both localities had been urban, in the sense that they were densely populated, and had a built infrastructure. Local officials, reporters from the local press and rural-urban migrants all referred to local peasants as “landlords” (*dizhu*, 地主) because many could live on the revenues they received from subletting housing to rural-urban migrants. In Tianhui, some of the economies of past sub-villages had been boosted considerably by making land available to “small property rights” projects. While these projects were not built on formally urban land and thus not legally tradable to anyone other than local villagers, the local government yearbook on larger political achievements openly bragged about the exact feature that made one of the projects illegal, namely, that it was built on collectively owned rural construction land and thus contributed to the collective economy (Jinniu Yearbook, 2007: 205). In Shaheyuan, the district government organized the process of making room for urban development by demolishing old buildings, constructing new ones for former villagers, and selling new apartments to people who could pay. In the resettlement process, local peasants had their formal registration changed from rural to urban. While this gave them access to slightly better welfare, it more importantly meant that economic organizations based on the collective ownership of land were stopped. In an attempt to compensate for the lost income from subletting housing to rural-urban migrants, resettled peasants were compensated with one flat per member of the household so they would still be able to sublet housing. The standards for compensation set by higher levels of government were very loosely defined, leaving considerable room for interpretation by local governments. Local policy evaluations often praised Shaheyuan’s form of compensation for taking into account how peasants had previously made a living. The evaluations argued that interventions by the local state ensured that those resettled would get the compensation to which they were entitled, thus reducing conflict and securing protection against potentially corrupt village heads (Jinniu District Government, 2006). Conflicts were largely about levels of compensation for resettlement. Claims were often made by sub-villages consisting of members who had been neighbours in the agrarian economy but did not necessarily live in the same neighbourhoods anymore. A few village party secretaries who had had roles in building previous projects had been offered jobs in companies run by the city government. In Tianhui, the collective economy was still flourishing in 2007, and local peasants had maintained their rural registration. Several high-class buildings of up to six stories had been built as a “small property right” project. When I went back to visit Tianhui in 2017, I was surprised to find it largely unchanged, and the collective economy based on one of the larger small property right projects had been maintained.

The function of having access to land changed slightly through the urbanization process. Household registration (*hukou*, 户口) as either agricultural or non-agricultural resident has been decisive for welfare provision well into the reform period. While urban residents had access to welfare provided through jobs in state owned enterprises, rural residents only had land and a share in the collective village economy to ensure a subsistence minimum. On the urban fringe, villagers now earned considerably more than a mere subsistence minimum by controlling land alone, and labour was no longer required to obtain that income as it had been in the agrarian economy. No longer a mere fall-back, land had become a main source of income. This was to some extent reflected in the compensation schemes that were implemented in Shaheyuan to make the area formally urban. Surveys conducted by the local authorities, however, showed a considerable fall in the average income of locals who had been forced to resettle, probably because resettlement only took into account the rural construction land on which housing had been individually sublet, but disregarded lost revenues from the collective economy based on arable land (Jinniu District Government, 2006). Here, compensation took the form of urban registration with extended welfare. The compensation scheme did not fully take into account the changes in functions in local institutions that had already taken place. The function of having access to formally rural land was no longer maintaining a mere subsistence level though hard work. Locals had long had access to welfare at an almost urban level, so the loss of a major source of income in return for only slightly improved welfare did not seem a good deal.

Observations by Chan et al. (2009), Hsing (2010), and Yep (2015) from more developed parts of China all show how, at least in some cases, local communities had had more success in maintaining new functions of holding land as urbanization progressed. Both Chan et al. (2009) and Hsing (2010) observed very wealthy enclaves with good quality housing in high-rise buildings formally organized as villages with a collective economy. Like Shaheyuan, however, many such enclaves did eventually become subject to formal urban planning, and their inhabitants became urban residents (Hsing, 2010). Here, bargaining power was highly dependent on the way access to land had been organized during the period of more informal urbanization leading up to formal urban transition. In Shaheyuan, the bargaining power of those eventually resettled had been considerable. Both in Shaheyuan, where the means for further property development was a shift to the formal urban property rights regime, and in Tianhui, where new large-scale projects were built under an alternative property rights regime, it was important to ensure that projects achieved political and/or legal recognition. The district government attempted to make projects in both areas look like a part of the extremely highly profiled urban-rural integration (*cheng-xiang yitihua*, 城乡一体化) policy – even though the actual projects had been initiated earlier.

Urbanization started as an endogenous process between local residents and rural-urban migrants, with levels of state above the township-level assuming a relatively passive role. Over time, the state’s role in bargaining institutions increased considerably, yet local residents still had a voice. This led to endogenous change affecting some property rights institutions on the rural fringe in ways that no actor in the bargaining process could have foreseen.

5. The rural fringe: extracting space for development

This section studies urbanization on the rural fringe. It focuses on a particular way of working with continued urbanization in spite of increasingly demanding requirements issued from the central political level (the MLR) to protect arable land. The section is divided into four sub-sections, which study the roles of the city government, the county government, private entrepreneurs and villagers, respectively.

5.1. The city government: justifying urbanization of the urban fringe by urbanizing the rural fringe

The extension of urbanization to the rural fringe was a predictable result of increased contestation closer to the city. High demands for compensation for resettlement and the increasingly strict regulations governing the demolition of housing in the city area after several incidents of civil unrest meant that many of the most attractive development opportunities were on very fertile arable land. Here, regulations governing the use of arable land were very strict, and it was a prerequisite for developing new areas that an equal area of arable land was established to replace them. Arable land needed to be established outside the old urban areas and the areas that would become urban. As elsewhere in China, this was achieved by making wasteland arable (*tudi zhengzhi*, 土地整治). In Chengdu, however, an additional way of generating development quotas was applied, namely the system of adding construction land on the urban fringe by reducing it on the rural fringe (*zengjianguagou*, 增减挂钩) (Fig. 2). The second form of conversion made it possible to supplement development quotas from the five-year plan, and quotas generated by reducing rural construction land were sold at much higher prices than quotas produced by the conversion of collectively owned wasteland.

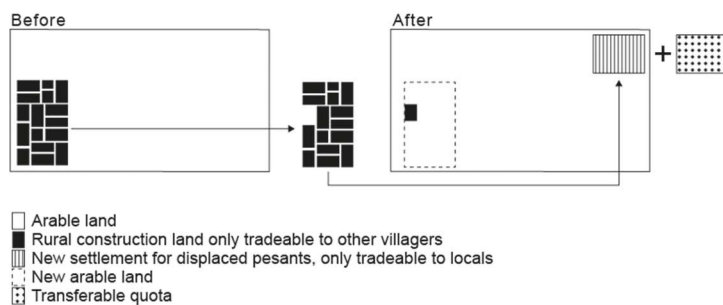


Fig. 2. Quota production by reduction of rural construction land.
(author's drawing)

Zengjianguagou was originally part of an experiment introduced in 2006 in five provinces, one of which was Sichuan (Zhang and Wu, 2016). Chengdu could, however, undertake much more radical experiments than the other experimental areas because the city was given the status of an experimental zone of urban-rural integration in 2007, which placed the fight against urban-rural inequality firmly on the local policy agenda (Zeuthen, 2012). Moreover, Chengdu needed to finance reconstruction after the devastating Wenchuan earthquake of 2008 (Zhang and Wu, 2016). The more radical version of the transfer scheme was formalized in late 2010 after Chengdu City Government had unsuccessfully attempted to adapt a modified version of Chongqing's land ticket (*dipiao*, 地票) system earlier the same year. The land ticket system, like the *zengjianguagou*-system, makes it possible to sell development quotas by reducing rural construction land. However, land tickets may only be used as development quotas for areas laid out as new urban areas in the five-year plan (Liu, 2011; Baidu, 2016). *Zengjianguagou* is used for particular projects that may be outside the plan, and, unlike the land ticket system, it has to be ensured that the arable land transferred to urban status and the arable land transferred from rural construction land are of comparable quality. As a city directly under the central leadership in a mountainous area, Chongqing had relatively more land designated as urban land in the five-year plans than Chengdu in the fertile Chengdu plain (Liu, 2011; Lecturer, 2017). The land ticket system was thus less attractive to Chengdu. During the few months the land ticket system worked, moreover, local authorities sold land tickets before construction land was reduced, and it is therefore not surprising that the MLR chose to stop Chengdu's land ticket system (Liu, 2011). The *zengjianguagou* requirement that projects on the rural fringe be directly linked to projects on the urban fringe probably rendered urbanization on the rural fringe more top-down than elsewhere because it implies that small parcels of land cannot be sold on an ad hoc basis.

By 2012, according to an internal document from Chengdu's Department of Land and Resources (unfortunately only orally communicated to me), approximately 900,000 persons had been resettled in Chengdu to allow the production of development quotas. In 2016 alone, the displacement of several hundred thousand more was announced (Qionglai County Government, 2016).

Villagers were usually concentrated in neat new settlements of terraced houses, sometimes further away from their arable land. As Table 3 indicates, apart from the physical appearance and the physical distance between peasants' housing and their arable land, relatively little changed for villagers who were voluntarily resettled. On the one hand, the particular form of urbanization ensured that local governments could continue to profit from urban development. On the other hand, it took into account past experiences of social unrest on the urban fringe, and the central government's reluctance "to bring market forces into the countryside out of fear for the loss of institutional credibility, and, thus, the eruption of socio-economic instability (read: the rise of landless peasants)." (Ho, 2013: 1097). Recent surveys indicate that this strategy may have helped. While the single major reason for public unrest during the last half of the 2000s was land disputes (Ma 2013: 26), later studies have shown that the share of public unrest focusing on labour conditions has grown to a much higher level than land disputes in the last few years (Göbel, 2015; China Digital Times, 2016).

The main function of the reduction scheme was to enable growth in the urban core. In order to make continued growth on the urban fringe politically possible, some form of assistance to the rural fringe was needed. Quota transfers were a way of giving opportunities to the rural fringe counties while developing the urban fringe. Quotas could only be transferred within the same city in order to ensure that exchanged land was of comparable quality.

Since the introduction of the extended use of increasing construction land on the urban fringe by decreasing it somewhere that is less developed, thus generating development in both the more and less developed localities, similar mechanisms have been applied throughout Sichuan province. In 2016, limited transfers of quotas from poverty stricken counties outside the city were also allowed, meaning that villages several hundred kilometres away will be demolished to make room for urban development in Chengdu. (China Economic Net, 2016). Similarly, very small quotas for making

land used for coal mining into arable land are in the process of being assigned to a few poor mountainous counties. In both cases, it is a major issue that land in poverty stricken areas is of considerably lower quality than in the fertile Chengdu plain.

The quota trade served the dual purpose of maintaining development at the urban core and of giving opportunities to less privileged administrative areas. They were thus part of political trade-offs between entities that usually had at least 500,000 inhabitants each. Naturally, the influence of those affected by urbanization schemes on such processes is only indirect. While part of the reason for extending the reach of urban development was a combination of increased economic contestation partly generated by the demand of the urban middle class and the protests of slightly less privileged urban residents and former peasants, the pull towards the rural fringe was political. The generation of new arable land was a political demand. The political demand focused on the development of the urban fringe with rural fringe development as a potential added effect. Different levels of state bureaucracy appeared to be the main actors in a bargaining process that resulted in the development of mutually agreed procedures on how urbanization could proceed. The *zengjianguagou*-institution that was developed through this bargaining process was not designed by any of the actors taking part in the bargaining process: it emerged through the process. Several participants in the bargaining process would undoubtedly have been technocrats with a “high-modernist” vision and “good intentions”, such as maintaining what they saw as institutional credibility by protecting peasants from losing land, yet the bargaining process between contesting parts of the state serves to prevent “social engineering” scenarios (Scott 1998). The massive investments in building new concentrated settlements on the rural fringe may function as a spatial fix for China’s over-accumulation of capital in order to enable continued neo-liberal practice, yet if it serves this function, there are no indications that this has been part of any ‘master plan’. A spatial fix would be the result of the bargaining process.

5.2. Rural-fringe governments’ wish for generating development quotas

In this sub-section, I turn to study how lower levels of government were able to apply and spread the quota idea locally. As part of the Urban-Rural Integration Policy, Qionglai county and particularly Yang’an, the township closest to Chengdu, had been reducing rural construction land to generate quotas. Under the Urban-Rural Integration Policy, the county had used some of these development quotas within its own boundaries. According to Zheng Keyang from the Policy Research Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the first plans for the concentration of villages in Qionglai were drawn up in 2003 as part of experiments leading up to the new countryside construction policy (*xin nongcun jianshe*, 新农村建设) (Zheng, 2007). These plans set out to enable the sale of land to polluting industries that were no longer allowed in the city areas, not to transfer quotas to the urban fringe. According to Zheng Keyang, the process of making the plan for concentrated settlements had involved grassroots authorities and villagers to a considerable extent:

“When making the plan [for concentrating settlements, industry and agriculture] township party secretaries and village cadres focused on concentrating ideas from the masses, adopt reasonable proposals, mediate interest conflicts, resolve internal conflict, and then finally gave priority to what the masses were most concerned about and cared most for.” (Zheng, 2007: 22)

All levels of the local state pointed out that the provision of terraced houses was one of the major outcomes of having adapted to the actual needs of peasants who might still be tilling their land and who were generally believed to be uncomfortable about living in high-rise buildings. Despite government care for local villagers, direct participation and influence from local residents was almost non-existent (Zeuthen, 2010: 151). Apart from housing in the settlement around the township seat, all new housing was identical to that built elsewhere in the county.

While some of the ideas that were later used to justify continued urban growth on the urban fringe may in part have been produced by experiences with urbanization on the rural fringe, the initial urbanization process was still state-led.

When I initiated fieldwork in Qionglai in 2007, the concentration policy had spread throughout the county, and in the more distant townships, the main purpose of reducing construction space appeared to be the transfer of quotas to the urban fringe. Initially, the experiments in Qionglai were probably not very different from those conducted elsewhere, but Qionglai gained opportunities that other areas did not, which meant that national policies reducing quotas did not affect Qionglai. Chongqing and Chengdu became experimental zones of urban-rural integration in 2007, and only Qionglai and a few other counties were struck by both the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 and a subsequent earthquake in 2013 (Zhang and Wu, 2016: 4). This meant that quotas kept on growing in Qionglai, and the county was assigned much larger quotas than other counties in Chengdu (Qionglai County Government, 2016). It is unclear whether it was Chengdu or Qionglai that seized the framing opportunities created by the Wenchuan earthquake, but in 2010, Qionglai was presented as a model for experimentation with property rights by a very influential Peking University professor, who contributed to the creation of the experimental policy of 2010 formally allowing the types of transfers Qionglai was already making. According to this policy, surplus construction land could be used within the same township for non-residential purposes with an easier approval procedure than the one imposed for lucrative transfers to the urban fringe (Chengdu Government, 2010; Zhou, 2014).

While the county government and possibly even the township government took an active part in bargaining the quota transfer scheme, there was no indication that local residents actively contributed to shaping new urban communities. In Yang’an, however, the urbanization made possible through the quotas clearly did not just generate profit for the county government. While the new town and the concentrated villages around it were somewhat empty in 2007, the new town was thriving in 2015, and what had been empty sites for industry in 2007 were now occupied. Residents of the township who had enjoyed the use-right to arable land in 2007 still had that use-right in 2015. Although the physical surroundings had been completely remodelled, the formal property rights of individual peasants remained unchanged. While residents benefited from urbanization in Yang’an despite the fact that they were not part of the bargaining process making changed use of land possible, their lacking participation may have been what led to unchanged rights to collectively owned land (unchanged property rights institutions).

5.3. Entrepreneurs stretching the rules and affecting plans from outside the bureaucracy

In this sub-section, I aim to identify private elites that may influence urbanization on the rural fringe. The sub-section first studies an investor who presented himself as the owner of the only private investment company engaged in quota transfers. It then shows how even a very well connected village party secretary was unsuccessful in changing land use, thus illustrating the difficulty of gaining access to the bargaining process.

While transfers from rural to urban areas were solely dealt with by state authorities on the rural fringe and by very large investors on the urban fringe, usually state controlled, transfers within counties were sometimes made by at least one private investor. The investor described himself as the only investor working in this field, and he operated all over Chengdu’s rural fringe. Both the owner and an employee emphasized that relations with both state and villagers were important. Relations with the state were important because the investment company was working in a field where

regulations and policies were constantly changing and they needed to stretch regulations as far as possible when developing new projects for which they would need quotas. Relations with villagers were important because the company needed to make deals with them that were as attractive as possible. The employee explained that by negotiating directly with villagers, the company was also able to make deals that might be politically challenging for the government, since the government would need to treat villagers equally. The company operated on a private basis. This meant that it could modify compensation for resettlement as long as individual villagers agreed. However, the investment company remained extremely reliant on local governments identifying relevant villages to demolish and applying to the city government for quotas that would allow the company to demolish them and engage in development projects.

The investment company explained the importance of good relations with scholars and other informal advisors to the government at various levels, including Beijing. They were important sources of knowledge about the types of experiments that might be feasible for the next project. Through a network of influential scholars and good relations with local governments, the company had succeeded in establishing a *zengjianguagou* project in which development quotas were applied in building vacation cottages surrounded by a park-like recreational area on land that was still classified as arable. Although the company stretched rules, it made a great effort to show how the projects it was engaged in were formally approved, with official documents displayed throughout the exhibition hall used for selling project properties and with links to numerous relevant policy documents on its website. The residential buildings that it built for resettlement were only sold to locals, as they were supposed to be.

One of the very good political connections of the company was the mother of one of the leading investment company employees. Her case illustrates how difficult it can be to gain access to affect development plans. According to the local government, she had been “called back” from her job in the private sector to work as a party secretary for the village in which she had been born. While she had not actually moved back to the village, she appeared to be a party secretary who was popular with the villagers, and she also served as a representative in the Chengdu City Party Committee. In 2007, she had tried to make her village part of the industrial zone of the township. When I revisited the village, however, the industrial buildings that had been built had been demolished because the plan did not include industrialization in that area. She was still very influential in 2015, but even so, there were limits to the influence she could exercise from below. Urban planning appeared to be out of bounds for local elites, and without proper title to land there was a real risk that even the well-connected would have to tear down buildings that did not fit the plan.

Though entrepreneurs attempted to stretch rules and affect plans, this was an extremely difficult task demanding very good connections and an acceptance of the need to adhere to formal rules.

5.4. Villagers

One of the ways villagers had become influential on the urban fringe was by subletting housing to rural-urban migrants. Sometimes very large, the houses built by peasants to host these migrants were the predecessors for small property rights schemes. In this sub-section, I discuss the prospects for a similar development on the rural fringe.

During my intensive fieldwork on the rural fringe, I did not come across other large-scale small property projects built for sale to the urban middle class like the development in Tianhui. Several of the houses built in new concentrated settlements were sold to people who were not local but had a rural household registration (*hukou*). This is a relatively normal practice in a grey-zone and not directly illegal like the large scale small property rights schemes in Tianhui. In February 2017, Vice-Minister of Land and Resources, Zhao Long, was thus quoted as saying:

“The final decision [regarding the discussion of property rights to the land used for rural housing under Xi’s leadership] will be decided by law. In the current situation, [we] maintain that the hand over of land used for rural housing needs to be decided by the collective internally; people from the city, especially industry, business and capitalists cannot go into the villages and trade with or on land used for rural housing” (*Today’s issue*, 2017).

This would clearly indicate that selling property to residents from more distant villages to promote local development will continue to be tolerated, while state control is quite firm when it comes to the building of new projects that might become investment objects. In places like Yang’an, urbanization has provided new opportunities that were not there before, including subletting housing to non-locals who migrate to work in the local industry. Since villagers only had one terraced house and each household could only be allocated one house, however, it was not possible to add several stories to the existing building as it had been in Shaheyuan and Tianhui. The income that could be generated from this informal type of urbanization in the future was thus much more limited than it had been on the urban fringe. The potential for villagers to affect property-rights institutions by stretching formal institutions was non-existent.

As [Tables 4 and 5](#) indicate, local households in rural areas gained less new opportunities from urbanization and had considerably less influence than on the urban fringe ([Tables 1 and 2](#)).

While a very important impact of the early phases of urbanization was to bring (originally rural) labour closer to the growing manufacturing industry, the focus gradually changed to enabling investment in property and generating space that could be used by local governments to increase their budgets. In the rural fringe urbanization phase studied in this article, the focus was on enabling the land conversion needed to continue financing local governments under the jurisdiction of Chengdu. As an added bonus, urban style settlements of terraced housing emerged on the rural fringe. In some cases, as in the first projects involving construction land reduction, the idea may have emerged on the rural fringe, but the bargaining process largely bypassed local residents.

6. Conclusion

[Ho \(2013: 1087\)](#) argues that: “institutional constellation stems from an endogenous, spontaneously ordered development in which the state is merely one of many actors.” In the rural fringe urbanization processes studied in this article, however, the main actors were various actors within the state bargain amongst themselves. Despite the dominance of state actors, the article’s findings do not challenge the “credibility thesis”, according to which different actors may affect change and the enforcement of institutions to a greater or lesser extent and may help make institutions more or less credible ([Ho, 2014](#)). On the contrary, the “credibility thesis” contributes to an understanding of how bargaining between contesting state authorities shapes institutions that were not originally part of any design planned by any of the state authorities involved in the bargaining process.

Table 1
Distribution of income generated by changed land-use on the urban fringe.

Income from/to	State	Investors	Collective	Household (excluding non-locals)
Urban sprawl	Only indirectly	No external investors	Rent	Rent + share in collective economy
“Small property”	Indirectly + sometimes as co-investor	External property developers	Rent	Share in extended collective economy
Formal conversion to urban land	Becomes owner of land	Property developers	Dissolved	One-off compensation + slightly improved welfare

(Darker colours reflect larger shares).

Table 2
Bargaining on the urban fringe.

	State	Investors	Local Elites	Household (excluding non-locals)
Urban sprawl	Did not actively work against	No external investors	Organize construction on collective land	Build housing for migrants
“Small property”	Local state actively promotes. Central state gradually works against.	Actively promote	Village heads may play a role in developing projects	Give up use-right to land to gain a share in collective economy
Formal conversion to urban land	Local state actively promotes. Central state (MLR) may oppose to protect arable land.	May actively promote	Lose their role or may be incorporated into investment companies. May actively work against/in favour of higher levels of compensation	May take part in claims for increased levels of compensation.

(Darker colours reflect high degree of influence on processes starting urbanization).

Existing studies see quota transfers as a means of commoditizing collectively owned rural land (Liu, 2011; Zhou, 2014). By commodifying not only very valuable land on the urban fringe but also land further away, investments in urban development contribute more evenly to development, Zhang and Wu (2016) argue, and add that commodification mainly means commodification for the local state and project investors. In the cases studied in this article, the ability of local state authorities to profit from the conversion of rural land to urban land was continuously either maintained or enforced throughout the urbanization processes on both fringes. The actors involved in shaping institutions of quota transfers included the central state (MLR) and city and county governments, as well as a few well-connected non-state participants such as scholars and large-scale private entrepreneurs. There were clear resemblances between the ways bargaining changed institutions during the urbanization process in the past and in recent years. The major difference was that stakeholders in the bargaining process were closer connected to local communities in the past. Just as local villagers had built larger buildings than specified in village level building codes in the past, local governments looked for ways to experiment that did not already have a green light from the top, as was the case in early experiments in Qionglai and the failed attempt to implement the land ticket system. Here, bargaining between relatively equal parties helped to build frequently changing institutions. However, this did not mean that local communities enjoyed the same type of privilege when it came to testing the political and legal framework. Their situation was considerably different from their position in earlier phases of urbanization on the urban fringe. As Table 6 shows, fairly standardized regulations had been introduced to govern procedures of resettlement from the very beginning of urbanization on the rural fringe. The formal institutions directly affecting villagers were not necessarily highly credible, however, since they were negotiated in a forum to which local communities did not have access. Seen from the perspective of local communities, dramatic exogenously imposed change could happen very quickly, as the resettlement of 900,000 villagers had done.

Despite massive restructuring on the rural fringe, the property rights regimes associated with collective ownership of rural land remained unchanged. By default, residents still had land that was insufficient to provide a living, and they still could not sell property to outsiders. The earlier phase of urbanization saw the widespread introduction of locally rooted practices that were then later politically forgiven by authorities and in some cases even made into formalized institutions that spread throughout the country. In the later phase, however, political bargaining at a relatively high

Table 3
displacement of peasants on the rural fringe.
(Source: Interviews).

	Rural land	Rural construction land	Housing
Before displacement	Use-right to land nearby equally divided among villagers. Possible to lease out.	Possible to sell to other villagers (including yard etc.)	Possible to sell to fellow villagers.
Negotiating displacement	Terms for resettlement are agreed upon. Publicly known standards for each county are usually the starting point. When rural construction land has been reclaimed, peasants normally receive new housing as compensation, often with opportunities to buy higher standard housing than the compensation for reclaimed land justifies. <i>Hukou</i> remains agricultural, since the peasants still have land. Since the development quota for developing another locality is the purpose of displacement, displacement is usually not forced.		
After displacement	Arable land is expanded. Possible to lease out.	Old rural construction land is cultivated.	New housing only to be sold to locals

Table 4
Income for changed land use on the rural fringe.

Income from/to	State	Investors	Collective	Household (local)
Transfer to urban fringe	County sells rural fringe quota. City sells land on urban fringe. County fees + overhead	Investors are state owned	no change: arable land remains collective	no change: new building, but unchanged status
Transfer rural to rural fringe	County sells rural fringe quota and sells rural land converted to urban land. County fees + overhead	Private investors may develop projects	no change: arable land remains collective	no change: new building, but unchanged status

Darker colour reflects higher share.

level played a much more central role from the outset of the urbanization processes, thus leaving much less room for villagers to affect the process than in earlier phases.

Contrary to urban fringe urbanization, it was not clear that making the rural fringe population live in more concentrated settlements had any other function than releasing land. In this way, rural fringe urbanization appeared to be urbanization with the purpose of making room for surplus population, a process similar to the identified by Davis (2006). Yet, through state organization of the process, it was ensured that settlements unlike elsewhere in the world did not look like slum, and were placed further away from the centres of mega-cities.

Whether the localities studied were urbanized early or late, publicly announced political or legal acceptance appears to have become more important over time. To some extent on the urban fringe, institutions that had developed as a result of a more informal bargaining process survived this formalization, but on the rural fringe there had been no informal bargaining process and no opportunity to develop informal institutions. All informants identified this higher degree of formalization as the reason why resettlement processes in the rural context now appeared to be under more control than they had in the past. It seems that the formalization of resettlement procedures under the control of increasingly high levels of state and capital decreases opportunities for disputes. Paradoxically, this means that despite a decrease in the credibility of the processes, seen from the point of view of individuals who can no longer predict sudden changes, the government has achieved a higher level of social stability (less social unrest). It is unclear why rural property rights on the rural fringe were frozen as result of the bargaining process. If Scott's (1998) concept of "social engineering" is applied, the freeze might be seen as the result of a misunderstood attempt to increase institutional credibility which has resulted only in decreased credibility. Following Lin (2014), on the other hand, property rights may have been frozen to maintain the state monopoly on the commodification of land. The credibility thesis, however, would suggest that bargaining between different fragments of the state produced a result that nobody could have predicted. The bargaining process balanced the needs of those involved, so the resettlement scheme simultaneously served the dual purposes of displacing over-accumulated capital (Harvey, 2004) and maintaining and enforcing the state's monopoly on transferring rural land to urban land.

Table 5
Bargaining on the rural fringe.

	State	Investors	Local Elites	Household (local)
Transfer to urban fringe	Central state accepts. Local state promotes	State controlled investors make plans	May play role in organizing form of compensation	May choose whether they want to take part in scheme
Transfer rural to rural fringe	Central state accepts. Local state promotes	Private investors may contribute or make project plans	May play role in organizing form of compensation	May choose whether they want to take part in scheme

Darker colour reflects higher influence.

Table 6
Function of urbanization process.

		State	Investors	Local Elites	Households (excluding those moving in)
Urban fringe	Urban sprawl	Attract industry and trade	Often local elites	Added income opportunities from land and labour.	
	Small property	Often some degree of finance to lowest level of state.	Profit	Profit	Additional income
	Formal conversion to urban land	Space and finance for further investments, industry and trade.	Profit	Likely to lose access to land based profits	Improved welfare, but limited additional income opportunities from land.
Rural fringe	Transfer to urban fringe	Access to space and finance from urban fringe + protection of arable land	Profit	Access to new opportunities for improved agriculture	Maintain same opportunities as before urbanization
	Transfer rural to rural fringe	Space and finance for further investments, industry and trade.	Profit	Added local business opportunities	Added labour opportunities

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