In terms of speed and scale of transformation, few emerging megacities can match the
dynamism exhibited by the urbanization of Chongqing. In the space of two decades, this
city has gone from a relatively unknown provincial city to a center for global manufacturing,
a regional hub for the economy of western China, and a municipality with top-tier
administrative status. A relatively isolated city, on a rocky peninsula surrounded by
mountainous rural land, has been transformed into an immense urban agglomeration
spanning rivers and mountain ranges. In the process, discussion of the possibility of
a ‘Chongqing Model’ of development has caught the attention of many commentators
seeking an alternative to the short-sighted neoliberal modes of urban planning. The city has
faced distinct challenges in reckoning with the contradictions between rural and urban
development, and pioneered a number of innovative planning mechanisms which have
sought to resolve and integrate the rural–urban divide.

Looking Closer at Chongqing

Chongqing is sometimes described as the largest city in the world, based on a population
within the metropolitan region of some 33 million. In fact, this is a misleading figure which
results from a misinterpretation of the administrative organization of the city (see Chan
2007). The metropolitan zone of Chongqing as a province-level local government (a directly
controlled municipality) covers an area of over 80,000 km². This area contains a number of
distinct urban agglomerations but is largely rural in character, with a total urban population
of some 18 million. The core city of Chongqing has a registered population of around
eight million, plus a significant ‘floating population’ of migrant workers (see Figure 3.1).

The city has been correctly identified as one of the fastest growing megacities in the
world (aiming to increase its population by ten million by 2020) and one of the most
dynamic economies in China in the decade following the global financial crisis. The
metropolitan region of Chongqing achieved GDP growth of 14% per annum between 2007
and 2012 and has been a prime location for foreign direct investment and high tech
manufacturing. These achievements are all the more remarkable given the considerable
geographic challenges faced by Chongqing. It is a relatively remote inland city, situated on
the mountainous eastern edge of the Sichuan basin, and was (until 1997) the second city of Sichuan province. It is situated on the confluence of the Jialing and Yangtze rivers and lies between several large mountain ranges. Within the central urban area of Chongqing approximately one third of the land cannot be built upon due to mountainous landscapes and bodies of water (see Figure 3.2).

The emergence of Chongqing as one of the beacons of growth in western China has been regarded as the emergence of a new model of urban planning and development, indicating a new stage in China’s inland urbanization. For many commentators, the innovations in planning implemented by the relatively underdeveloped emerging megacities of western China—such as Chongqing and its neighbor Chengdu—have offered an explicit alternative to the often ecologically and developmentally short-sighted urban planning principles adopted by the global cities of China’s coast in recent years (Chen et al. 2019). For Chongqing in particular, stronger claims have been made of the capacity for the integration of rural and urban planning and economies to offer a new mode of life. The so-called ‘Chongqing Model’ was claimed to be creating a new type of city which offered a ‘third way’ between capitalist and socialist development models (Cui 2011; Li 2011).

The social and economic contradictions faced by Chongqing in its rapid expansion since the late 1990s are not unique within China or the Global South. The degree to which the city offers a cohesive and widely applicable alternative model for urban planning and development rests on an understanding of the historical context of the city, and its broader place within the restructuring of the Chinese economy and administrative hierarchy.

Figure 3.1 The location of Chongqing city (dark gray) within Chongqing directly controlled municipality (light gray)
The Context of Chinese Planning

The urban planning system in China represents a unique hybrid of institutional mechanisms and legal distinctions inherited from the socialist period and market-facing mechanisms and motivations introduced since the 1980s. This is clearly evident in the divide between urban and rural planning, and the associated land system. Urban land in China remains formally under the ownership of the local state, leased to private interests for a fixed period designated by national law. Rural land remains under the nominally collective ownership of villages. There is a strong tradition of urban planning in Chinese cities, with development outside of state planning proscribed by law until relatively recently, while rural planning on a scale greater than individual villages has been rare and inconsistent. The increasing influence of market actors and the state-backed megaprojects of recent decades have muddied these categories somewhat, and revealed their conceptual inconsistency (see Smith 2014). The planning of Chongqing is significant because it is a city in which the divide between rural and urban presents a particular challenge, and a place where planners have adopted a range of innovative policies which seek to integrate rural life and urban life in a number of ways, and alleviate the socioeconomic gulf between the two.

Figure 3.2 The layout of Chongqing city and pattern of urbanization since 1980s (mountainous areas shown with hatching; bodies of water shown in black)
The particular mechanisms of urban and rural planning in contemporary China remain extremely complex, and operate under the influence of a variety of explicit and hidden interest groups. Shu et al. (2010) identify at least 83 types of plans operating at different levels of the Chinese planning system, and were able to find no less than 195 different plans being implemented by various state actors in Chongqing by the late 2000s. These were split between ten different municipal departments and four local governments, with little coordination between them. Smith (2014) records how a conceptual framework of ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ has become enshrined in urban planning in China, resulting in a homogenization of rural and urban space under the auspices of professional planning which understands rural land as ‘a collection of resources ready for market exploitation’ (Smith 2014, 211).

Wu Fulong has theorized Chinese urban planning decisions as being structured by a political and economic system which can be termed state entrepreneurial urbanism. This refers to the hybrid form of the contemporary mechanisms for planning and constructing space in the Chinese city: ‘combining features of the developmental state with instruments created in the market’ in which ‘the institutions of land, fiscal policy, and cadre promotion [have] laid down the foundation on which the local state has been incentivized and transformed’ (Wu 2016, 345). In practical terms this means that the planning of Chinese cities must be understood to be embedded within the broader economic transformation of the Chinese economy and state. The contemporary challenges facing such cities must be understood to be structured by the hegemony of the local state as an actor deeply embedded in a neoliberal urban system of land markets and competition for private investment (He and Wu 2009). This will be elaborated on in due course through the examination of the particular position of Chongqing within these transformations.

**Historical Context: Chongqing Prior to 1997**

Chongqing’s geography and topography has greatly influenced its historical relationship to the rest of China. Chongqing lies at the center of a range of mountains marking the eastern edge of the Sichuan basin, characterized by striated bands of steep mountains running north-to-south either side of wooded valleys. As a major river port at the center of a band of thickly forested mountains, the positioning of Chongqing has both historically isolated it and made it a critical point of control on the edge of the empire (see Dykstra 2014, 28–33). The rocky Yuzhong peninsula provided a naturally defensible site for human settlement, surrounded on three sides by the Jialing and Yangtze rivers. Lying at the head of the Three Gorges corridor of the Yangtze also made it an ideal location for a river port, where the region’s salt, fruit and timber could be shipped downriver to the heartlands of the empire far to the east. The cramped and steep topography of the peninsula, and the wide rivers which separated it from the nearby settlements of Jiangbei and Nan’an, posed a considerable challenge for the city’s spatial organization, and resulted in a distinct architecture of narrow stepped streets and dense clusters of houses built on bamboo stilts (diaojiaolou). The so-called ‘mountain city’ (shancheng) did not conform to the traditional logics of urban planning that typified other large Chinese cities. Accordingly, settlements around the city developed a characteristic ‘multi-nodal’ structure, which would continue to be evident in the city to the present day (Li 2013).

In 1937, in the face of Japanese invasion, the Republic of China moved its seat of government inland from Nanjing to Chongqing, declaring it a wartime capital. While the
city was well-suited as a defensive site, it was hardly an appropriate national capital in the eyes of the refugees displaced there from Shanghai and Nanjing. The city was dilapidated and lacking a modern sewage system, with narrow lanes clogged with rubbish and free-roaming chickens and dogs. During the war the city underwent a bout of modernization. Two ambitious plans for transforming the city into a suitable national capital were created with the assistance of experts from Shanghai and international planners, but due to the deprivations of the war they were only partly realized. Municipal authorities (staffed largely by politicians from the coastal provinces) renamed streets and widened them to accommodate motor vehicles, established municipal ferry and bus services, and established limited electricity, water and sewage systems. Modern buildings of three or four stories were constructed. The city expanded considerably, with industrial and residential districts spreading beyond the walled old city to the surrounding districts of Shapingba, Jiangbei, and Nan’an. By the end of the war Chongqing was a major industrial center specializing in the production of armaments and motor vehicles (McIsaac 2000).

There was considerable informal development and deviation from state planning during the Cultural Revolution, when heavy fighting took place in Chongqing and 180,000 refugees were displaced from the city to nearby Chengdu. Over 81 hectares of green space in the center of the city was destroyed, the majority of it used for the informal construction of housing by families desperate for extra living space (MacFarquhar and Schonehals 2009). The late 1970s and 1980s saw a return to relative prosperity for the city, which continued to specialize in heavy industry and began to develop a limited market economy from alongside the liberalizations of the period. In 1983 the city’s first masterplan of the post-Mao era was approved by the State Council (Zhu 2012). In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of national reforms were introduced which established the legal norms that underpinned the city’s subsequent rapid urbanization.

Reform of housing and the land ownership system demolished the socialist housing system which had been dominated by work units, introducing the category of commodity housing (shangpinfang) which could be freely bought and sold, and which quickly came to dominate the landscape of housing in large cities. Many state-owned enterprises were privatized, and in some cases this enabled them to switch from a production-oriented business model to one based on speculation and rent-seeking. Many privatized SOEs found that their most valuable asset was not the fixed capital invested in their productive apparatus, but the prime spots of land which they occupied within the city, and so went into the real estate business as developers or speculators (Hsing 2010).

City planning was reformed, with master planning through comprehensive city plans (chengshi zongti guihua) and local zoning through regulatory detail plans (kongzhixing xiangxi guihua) becoming the chief apparatus of statutory urban planning. These plans standardized planning practice across all urban (i.e. state-owned) land, which required long-term plans to be created by the municipal government, submitted for approval by the provincial ministry of housing and urban development and administered by a dedicated city planning bureau. Ostensibly, such plans offered a more flexible and localized approach to urban planning than that provided by the national Five Year Plans of the socialist era, though in practice such plans remained slow to respond to market mechanisms (Yu 2014, 137–143).

Alongside these changes, the tax reform of 1994 abolished the redistributive revenue sharing system of the socialist era, and devolved much fiscal responsibility to local governments (Wu 2003). The resulting impetus to optimize the local state to perform under market conditions and seek revenue streams from beyond the diminishing central state funding was felt across all Chinese cities, but particularly impacted smaller and less-developed
cities which had benefited from the previous system. Regions in western China, including Chongqing, suffered from an outflow of migration as young people moved to the coast to seek employment in factories, forming a ‘floating population’ of over 100 million migrant workers, which deepened regional inequalities between the urbanized coast and largely rural interior (Davin 1998; Kanbur and Zhang 2005).

In combination, these changes produced a hybrid system of state entrepreneurial urbanism (Wu 2003, 2016). Local authorities facing diminishing budgets and growing populations were compelled to take entrepreneurial steps to optimize their city for performance in the international marketplace, seeking to attract foreign direct investment, raise the value of land (which could now be leased to private developers), and project an image of global urban modernity in order to secure such investment. Income from leasing land to private developers made up an increasing portion of municipal revenue, and local governments were motivated to engage in a form of commodification-based land financing, whereby rural land was acquired from surrounding villages (sometimes by force), converted into ‘urban’ state-owned land, and leased via auction to developers (Lin 2014; Lin and Zhang 2015). The structuring of Chinese urban political economy around the state-led commodification of land has had a profound impact on the way planning decisions are made and conceptualized in China’s emerging megacities.

After 1997: Administrative Privilege and Expansion

In 1997 Chongqing underwent a momentous act of administrative rescaling which set it on the path towards rapid urbanization and expansion in the coming two decades. Chongqing was separated from Sichuan province and awarded the status of a directly controlled municipality. In effect, this transformed Chongqing’s local urban governance into a province-level municipal government, giving the administration access to increased central funding streams, preferential administrative treatment, and hugely increased national prominence. Chongqing joined three other pre-existing directly controlled municipalities: Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. These cities were markedly different from Chongqing, being economically advanced and well-established metropolises in the coastal regions of China that had already benefited hugely from economic liberalization.

The decision to award the relatively minor inland city equivalent status to Shanghai or Beijing was a message from China’s national government that Chongqing would act as a pole of inland development and urbanization, providing a model which was to be emulated by other cities in western China. The flooding of the Yangtze to the west of Chongqing in preparation for the creation of the Three Gorges Dam marked a huge increase in infrastructural spending in the region, and the administrative powers awarded to Chongqing enabled it to facilitate the resettlement of over one million residents displaced by this project within the municipality. The role of Chongqing as a driver of western investment was further underlined by the commencement of the national program ‘Open Up the West’ (xibu dakaifa) in 2000, which channeled further state funding to western regions in order to improve infrastructure and accelerate urbanization (Hong 2004).

The city itself faced particular economic challenges. Average urban incomes were about 50% of those in the other directly controlled municipalities which lay on the highly urbanized eastern coast of the country—income in the rural hinterland around the core city was far lower. The municipality’s state-owned enterprises were largely unprofitable (Cai et al. 2012; Rithmire 2012). The nascent real estate market was largely dominated by the
government, with a profusion of formal and informal rules limiting private investment (Han and Wang 2003).

In terms of spatial structure, the city retained a multi-nodal layout. However, transport investment in new bridges crossing the city’s rivers, new highways and tunnels beneath the mountains, and (after 2005) a new light rail system resulted in an increasingly integrated metropolitan area (Li 2013; Martinez 2014). Many prime spots of land in the center of the city were occupied by large industrial SOEs or slum-like districts of dilapidated private housing dating back to the 1940s. Informal construction without approval by the municipal authorities continued in many formally ‘urban’ zones, particularly by villagers and rural residents on the mountainous areas close to the central city (Shu et al. 2010, 33).

Remaking Chongqing

In the two decades following 1997, Chongqing underwent a momentous period of growth and expansion. The population of the city soared, its boundaries expanded into the surrounding rural periphery, and its economy and urban development model was substantially reorganized. This period of intensive growth brought Chongqing international attention as an emerging megacity, and was accompanied by notable innovations in urban planning which sought to integrate rural and urban development within the municipality.

The developmental approach adopted in this period was referred to as the ‘Chongqing Model’. This name came to be associated in particular with the brief period between 2007 and 2012 at the height of Chongqing’s growth, when it was embraced as a slogan by Bo Xilai, a controversial and ambitious chief of the municipal Communist Party. Bo championed Chongqing and its approach to development at a national level before being arrested on corruption charges and imprisoned in 2013. Under Bo’s auspices, the Chongqing Model came to describe an ideological shift in the municipality’s entire economic model, rejecting the market fundamentalism which had characterized most urban development since the 1980s and embracing a more state-centered approach. This was typified by the creation of new economic zones, construction of public housing, and reforms to the land system.

The vision for the city laid out by the municipal party described this approach as one which sought to avoid the deprivations of the neoliberal urban development policies which had characterized the expansion of Shenzhen. The Chongqing Model, it was argued, marked a turn towards an interventionist state which sought to improve the basic livelihood of vulnerable groups and build a more egalitarian city rather than seeking merely to increase GDP and land value (Su et al. 2010). This was accompanied by a ‘red’ propaganda campaign which sought to revive the cultural tropes of the Cultural Revolution, organizing the mass singing of revolutionary songs in public spaces and festivals celebrating the contribution of migrant workers to the economy (see Mei 2017).

The extent to which Bo’s policies marked a meaningful shift in the ideology of the local state is debated (see Huang 2011; Lim 2019; Mulvad 2015; Vukovich 2018), but are significant on two accounts. Firstly, it is important to place such policies in the broader context of Chongqing’s transformation and urban expansion after 2000. As noted by Huang and others, many of the policies claimed by Bo to be characteristic of the Chongqing Model were in place long before Bo was appointed to lead the local party in 2007, and continued long after his loss of power. Such policies are best understood as part of Chongqing’s broad urban restructuring under the long tenure of the mayor Huang Qifan (who held high ranking posts in the municipal government between 2001 and 2016). Secondly, it is significant that many of these policies that characterized the Chongqing Model returned to
the theme of Chongqing as an experimental zone in which the inequalities between urban and rural could be lessened.

The innovations in urban policy implemented during the 2000s and early 2010s sought to remake the form of the city, but also to transform it socially and economically using special economic zones, extensive construction of public housing and reform of the land system to create a more equal environment by rebalancing the relationship between urban and rural.

Chongqing was a pilot zone for a number of policies which supported this in the two decades following 1997. In June 2006, Chongqing was the first city in China to be designated a national experimental zone for integrated urban-rural reform (quanguo tongzhou chengxiang zonghe peitao gaige shiyuan qu). At a national level this policy was intended to prevent regional imbalances by ensuring the integrated and harmonious social and economic development of rural and urban areas (Peng and Lu 2005). At a local level, this meant the implementation of regulatory detail plans in an attempt to create a more flexible and dynamic system of urban and rural management that would be capable of responding to market demands, and in doing so would seek to maximize land value and general welfare (Yu et al. 2010).

Practically, this meant extending the powers to create regulatory detail plans associated with district-level urban governments to rural territorial governments, enabling the implementation of district plans which matched the needs of the general plan with those of the locality. This involved a considerable expansion of planning apparatus, standardizing the way planning information was collected and land use monitored across over 800 km² of rural and urban land. After 2010, further regulations on rural-urban planning outlined two forms of amendments that could be made to regulatory detail plans: compulsory amendments and technical amendments. The former covers changes in land use, capacity, acreage of public green space, public infrastructure, and services, while the latter covers all other changes, such as resolution of disputes over land ownership and boundaries and correction of planning errors.

By extending such planning measures beyond the city, the intention was to increase the planning capabilities of rural county governments to support and implement the broader reforms of economy, housing, and land that characterized the so-called Chongqing Model. Reorganization of the administrative districts within the municipality enabled expansive and integrated investment in infrastructure projects, a process which Martinez and Cartier (2017) call ‘territorial urbanization’. These innovations and others have led Chongqing to be regarded as one of the trailblazers of the planning concepts which became enshrined in China’s ‘New Urbanization Plan’ (xinxing chengzhenhua) in 2014 (Wu and Shen 2012; Zhang et al. 2015). Three spatial policies in particular have marked out Chongqing as offering a distinct model for urban planning: the creation of new economic zones, the construction of public housing, and reforms of the mechanisms by which land is supplied for development.

Liangjiang New Area: Economic Competition and Spatial Reformation

Liangjiang New Area (LJNA) is a national new area (guojia xinqu), established in June 2010, encompassing 1,200 km² to the direct north of the traditional city center (see Figure 3.2). In essence, it is a form of special economic zone (SEZ) which grants preferential policies to
enterprises and has a variety of exceptional measures in place to encourage and guide rapid development—the first of its kind to be created in western China.

The exceptional policies introduced in LJNA were geared towards specific economic goals. The Chongqing Model promised to avoid the pattern of path dependency in industrial upgrading established elsewhere in China. As commercial manufacturing for export became more expensive in coastal cities in the wake of the financial crisis, the expectation was that such production would shift inland to cities in central and western China, while coastal cities would transition to high-end and increasingly automated tech production. In the creation of LJNA, Chongqing sought to ‘jump the queue’ and attract high-value electronic manufacturers and technical expertise. The LJNA was split into ‘functional zones’ which would allow the clustering of similar enterprises in concentrated new satellite towns and suburbs. Enterprises which were founded in (or relocated to) LJNA would receive a subsidy on gas and electricity, and the construction fees associated with new factories were waived (Huang 2011). For the first two years of the zone’s operation corporate income tax was set at 15% and VAT was reduced to 25% (compared to 33% and 50% nationally). The managers of enterprises headquartered in LJNA would also receive a refund on their personal income tax during this period (Rithmire 2012). On the basis of this extensive package of benefits, the municipality was able to court international investment, winning large contracts from Foxconn, Hewlett-Packard, and other tech manufacturers by offering them heavily subsidized land prices and running costs.

The LJNA significantly expanded the scope of the city northwards. The city’s expansion to the north had begun in earnest in 2000, with the creation of the New North zone (beibuxinqu; NNZ), which marked out an area of 158 km² to the immediate north of the city for development. The rural residents previously occupying the land were granted urban citizenship and rehoused in resettlement housing (anzhifang) within the area, and the administrative apparatus of the NNZ oversaw the reorganization of rural township governments into urban sub-districts. The area was gradually transformed into a mixed residential and industrial zone. The NNZ would form the core of what became the LJNA, providing space for extensive high-value suburban residential districts, Chongqing International Expo Center, extensive parkland, and a new administrative center for the offices of the municipal government. This district also encompassed extensive transport infrastructure which proved advantageous in persuading enterprises to shift production to the LJNA: Jiangbei International Airport, Chongtan River port, and rail links to Europe via the long-distance Yunxinou railway line which opened in 2012.

Public Rented Housing: Population Management, Labor, and Space

A key element of Chongqing’s redevelopment plan was substantial investment in public housing construction. After the region had acted as a ‘sending’ area for migrants to work on the coast for much of the 1980s and 1990s, in the 2000s the expanding city sought to attract migrant workers to return to Chongqing. The city suffered from shortages of affordable housing following the destruction of the socialist housing system in the early 1990s, and the real estate market had failed to provide adequate housing for lower income residents (Huang 2012; Long 2010). Under the Chongqing Model’s vision of rapid growth and urbanization, the city authorities pledged to expand the registered population of the city by ten million by the year 2020. As had been the case historically, some of those unable to afford adequate housing in the city resorted to informal solutions: renting from rural landlords who built
informal housing on the periphery of the city, constructing their own shelters, or living in poor quality dormitory housing provided by employers.

The construction of public rented housing (gongzufang; PRH) offered a particular solution to this problem. In 2010 it was announced that an urban development corporation owned by the state would acquire land and construct hundreds of thousands of apartments over the next ten years at 20 sites around the city (in addition to more estates elsewhere in the municipal area). Rents would be set at 60% of market rates. The apartments would vary in size and be based in high-rise blocks of 30–40 stories located in landscaped estates. The PRH system was a national policy, but in their enthusiastic implementation of it Chongqing municipal government took inspiration from the public housing systems of Singapore and Hong Kong. Chongqing’s PRH construction represented one of the largest investments in state-owned housing in mainland China since the end of the socialist housing system.

As an urban development policy, Chongqing’s system of PRH sought to target the ‘sandwich class’ (jiaxinceng)—lower middle-class residents who were not eligible for public assistance in the form of direct state welfare, but who were also unable to afford to purchase a house in the city due to spiraling prices in the housing market. The pledge to construct 40 million square meters of PRH became a key pledge of the Chongqing Model. In the ideological story of the Chongqing Model advanced by Bo Xilai and the authors of The Chongqing Model, PRH was presented as a key element of the city’s claim to spatial egalitarianism—it would provide decent accommodation for migrant workers, and in doing so accelerate the integration of a disadvantaged rural labor force into the city (Lim 2014; Su et al. 2010).

The ambitious implementation of PRH in Chongqing has so far had mixed results. Zhou and Ronald (2017) have found it to have performed favorably in comparison to other cities in China and facilitated some migrants to purchase property in the city at an increased rate, while also generating significant public debt (see also Zhou 2018). Wang and Li (2018) found many PRH estates were rented out directly to neighboring enterprises who housed their employees there, and so interpret the policy as a form of neoliberal workfare regime. Ultimately, the strategic value that PRH delivers to Chongqing is the provision of cheap labor that can serve to attract enterprise capital to LJNA and other development zones—as such, commentators must be cautious in claiming Chongqing’s PRH model as offering a meaningful alternative to neoliberal urban planning.

**Land: Expropriation, Land Reserves, and Development Rights**

The innovations of planning in Chongqing (not to mention the substantial expansion of the city itself) were based upon an extensive supply of previously rural land available for construction, and the role of the state in controlling the acquisition of this land and its ‘release’ to the market. As has been identified by many critical commentators, the politics of urban land—and specifically the acquisition and leasing of land to private developers by local governments—is the basis of much contemporary planning and politics in Chinese cities (see Hsing 2010; Lin 2014).

From 2002 onwards in Chongqing the urban land supply has been governed at a municipal level by a state-owned land reserve (guoyou tudi chubei). This was supplied, in part, with land previously occupied by unprofitable state-owned enterprises in the inner city but, more significantly, by the extensive expropriation of rural land belonging to townships and villages on the periphery of the city. The process by which rural land is expropriated has been documented to varying degrees in contemporary Chinese urbanization. In some cases
land grabs have been violent, but in recent years they have tended to be negotiated directly with village authorities. Even where state compensation to those displaced by urbanization has been relatively generous, it has still remained far below the market price at which the state profits from leasing the land for development (see Chuang 2015; Wilmsen 2016). While many of those rural residents whose land was expropriated by Chongqing municipality received direct compensation (in the form of urban citizenship, property, and some preferential welfare policies), such remuneration was far below the value that would be ultimately achieved by bringing the land to the urban market. Rural land added to the state-owned land reserve would then be converted to urban land, and its value would be raised by the construction of adjoining infrastructure. By gradually releasing plots from the state-owned land reserve to the market for private developers, the state could indirectly control land prices and maximize the profit generated from their lease.

This process of ‘land financing’ entrenches the inequalities between rural and urban communities in the process of urbanization. The Chongqing Model’s package of reform and rural-urban integration included a policy which was intended to alleviate this inequity. The land ticket (dípiao) system was introduced in 2008, and featured prominently in the discourse of the Chongqing Model as one of the means by which urban and rural development would be integrated and inequalities diminished. The land ticket system in essence functions as a development rights transfer scheme, by which rural residents living in areas remote from urban development were still able to benefit from the marketization of rural land for urban development. By proving to local authorities that they had returned land previously occupied by construction to agrarian use, villagers are able to acquire a land ticket, which can then be ‘sold’ on the market (via a state-administered exchange) to private developers who seek to acquire rural land for construction purposes elsewhere in the city. By allowing villagers to commodify land development rights, remote villages gain some income for returning land used for other purposes to agrarian use. While presented as a mechanism of urban-rural integration and equitable development, the system serves primarily to meet the mandated requirement by the national state to preserve a certain acreage of land for agrarian use in the face of expanding urbanization. Zhang (2018) convincingly argues that the land ticket system serves primarily to obscure the often brutal process of land-grabbing and accumulation by dispossession on the part of local government and private developers.

Towards a ‘Chongqing Model’?

The authorities governing Chongqing have taken an ambitious approach to the city’s development, both in the scale and speed with which the transformation of Chongqing has taken place, and also in the policy innovations through which such rapid growth has been managed. Historically, Chongqing has often been regarded as a symbol of the spatial inequalities of China as a whole. From the introduction of modern planning in Chongqing during the Second World War, through to the administrative rescaling of 1997, the city and region has been understood as a place in which the gulf between urban and rural China at a national level is manifested at a local level. The strategies undertaken by the municipal state in Chongqing since the year 2000 have sought to overcome this gulf in a variety of ways. A concern with the interface between urban and rural is apparent in the planning mechanisms used, but also in the ends to which these mechanisms were nominally employed. The creation of Liangjiang New Area, the construction of extensive public housing estates, and innovations in the land supply, were framed as policies which would create a more equitable city region, where the divide between rural and urban, rich and
poor, would be reduced. The Chongqing Model was an attempt to figuratively ‘integrate’ the urban and the rural in planning and provision, while profiting off the gap between the two through the dispossession of rural land and exploitation of migrant labor.

It is important to not take many of the claims made about the Chongqing Model at face value. It is questionable whether the planning of Chongqing diverged meaningfully from that of other emerging Chinese cities, apart from the speed and scale with which its transformation was enacted. Similar developments in other megacities—most notably Chengdu (see Chen et al. 2019; Ye and LeGates 2013)—reveal a broader shift towards infrastructure-led development in emerging urban agglomerations of central and western China. The fact that such development seeks to ameliorate the worst social and economic deprivations of entrepreneurial urbanism is a promising development after decades of neoliberal state entrepreneurial urbanism, but it is important to qualify the limitations of such a model. Rural-urban integration in Chongqing means the absorption of an exploited labor force of migrant workers and the dispossession of rural land, as well as improved planning measures and new public goods. While the long term outcomes of Chongqing’s restructuring remain to be seen, they are likely to be bound up with the fate of the land-based economic model and system of administrative privileges which gave rise to them. In the wake of the Belt and Road Initiative, with Chinese state-led urbanization emerging as an increasingly global vision, the experience of Chongqing may become increasingly relevant to other cities seeking to manage the gulf between the urban and the rural through a combination of state planning and marketization.

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