Rationalities of Green Urbanization in Chongqing: Local Environment at the Service of Eco-Capitalist Logics?

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Chinese urbanization is certainly a controversial and largely studied phenomenon, at least for what concerns the coastal areas. It is partly seen as a product of the semi-neoliberal politics introduced in the country, that have favoured the flow of economies and lifestyles modelled on capitalist patterns from the Global North. In the light of scholarships pointing out the relevance of local mechanisms of entrepreneurialism and new social manifestations for the promotion of capital production and circulation, this paper analyses the role of upscale real estate in terms of spatial-temporal fix within the analytical framework of China's land beautification politics. In particular, it investigates the outcomes deriving from eco-capitalist logics in Chongqing area and their impact on the natural environment. By following political attitudes in Chongqing urban space that are imbued with the principle of integrated resource management, the aim is to unravel the problematics behind the implementation of such ideological constructs in the locale. The analysis of statistics, political statements, and controversial projects shows how the scopes and purposes of land use, construction, and administrative legitimacy are intertwined and channelled through the satisfaction of alleged consumerist needs. It argues that the projection and imaginary of green but artificial environments ("Beautiful China") are planned to behave as a *token*, i.e. quasi-objects that enable the dismantling of the natural environment in the name of environmental protection and commodity-making practices.

Keywords: Real estate, Beautiful China, Green governance, Landscape grabbing, Token, Chongqing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Urbanization in China is a massive phenomenon which almost reached a threshold of 64 percent of the population in 2020 (Wang 2021). This means that the natural environment is highly manipulated, and due to the high-speed process of urbanization rural areas enter a phase of land renewal which often hinders the rights of local communities towards the land and natural resources in general. The mechanism is designed around the necessity to increase the development rate at the local and provincial/municipal level using neoliberal policies that modify the existing infrastructure and the representation of the territory. In particular, property-led development plays a pivotal role in addressing forms of land monetization that offer the opportunity for local-global flows of capital. Weber (2002) points out how the concept of "obsolescence" is discursively implied to accelerate the process of exchange value in areas that are chosen for redevelopment according to a precise planning strategy. In urban realities such as that of Chongqing, this narrative is only partially applicable because

until the late 2000s many zones labelled as "urban areas" were actually used for agricultural purposes or were pristine areas with a very low population density. Nevertheless, they were formally located within the urban boundaries of the nine main districts that compose the mega-city because of their privileged location on the surroundings of the historic city centre of Chongqing (YJRW 2014). In the last decade, these underdeveloped and undeveloped areas have become the favourite spot for the implementation of new forms of urban planning that are based on particular state-driven green narratives.

In this study the term greenspace has a fluid definition. In fact, although the research area is enclosed in the city administrative boundaries, it would be too limiting to just indicate Chongqing greenspace as the urban vegetated space (Taylor and Hochuli 2017). In fact, the Master Plan 1996-2020 shows a progressive act of urbanization to the detriment of the natural and rural environment (YJRW 2014). In the last decade this greenspace has been certainly reduced in size but has not entirely disappeared: It has been surrounded by or embedded in new development projects. The fluidity of the term concerns also the public (commons)-private shift that often has characterized the transition. Therefore, Chongqing greenspace has initiated a journey from indicating the nature and vegetation in rural (albeit formally urban) areas to becoming urban greenery (parks, vegetation within housing compounds, etc.). The local government zoning labels are also consistent with this fluid definition that resembles a development strategy which is based on the green value exploitation.

Green urbanization indicates the use of landscape management and environmental-ecological solutions that should lead toward forms of sustainable development (Alberti and Marzluff 2004; Steiner 2011); however, the term is often employed in discourses that are aimed at justifying neoliberal approaches to the urban. The local social structure, environmental values and the narratives of global crisis open to particular entanglements with new political assemblages that being focused on territorialisation (Bassett and Gautier 2014), undermine the right to the city principle (Gandy 2015; Heynen, Kaïka, and Swyngedouw 2006; Marcuse 2009), with the subsequent spatial reproduction of inequality in the use of the commons (Strang 1997, 2009). These practices trigger entrepreneurial mechanisms based on post-reform views of social division and class identity which are framed in the urban through a process of emplacement, especially for what concerns the realization of upscale real estate projects. Although this phenomenon is not completely new in China, especially in the coastal cities, it is mainly described within the "redevelopment" framework because of the consistent urban changes that have interested the eastern areas since the early reform period in the eighties (Romano 2020). Furthermore, Liu talks about the "feeling of nostalgia" which is particularly manipulated at the local level to foster the mechanism of land monetization through housing typologies which fascinate the consumer with dystopian performances that chase after the semblance of living in other times, for example during the presumed fashionable period of the Republic of China (Romano 2020, citing Liu 2013, 108). This paper moves beyond the redevelopment-nostalgia paradigm by shifting the discussion to the nuanced logics of development from scratch that is a characteristic of south-western cities and mega-cities; nostalgia is rather replaced by identity-making and wellbeing preoccupations, and their renewed linkage to environmental issues that make tangible the desire to upgrade the health conditions (such as clean air, green spaces, etc.) in which homogeneous social groups live.

The background of this case study, Chongqing, is the capital of the homonymous Municipality that was established in 1997. The local administration responds directly to the central government in matters of politics, social scenarios and financial management of the territory. This means that although the local government behaviour is aligned to the other provinces' entrepreneurial momentum, decisional power is also audited in a top-down motion. This ensures rapidity in the decision making process and a certain grade of flexibility in the experimentation of turning policies which can be subject of subsequent reviews by the central power. In particular, the municipality moved through a neoliberal path of property-led development and tax relief policy to ensure the funding necessary to move away from state subsides (Chen 1998) and finally start competing on equal terms with Chengdu, the other major city located in the Sichuan Basin (Hong 1999). Since the early 2000s this mechanism has allowed Chongqing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to grow steadily, reaching the peak in 2007 with a +16% rate. In the last decade the level of economic growth has maintained

significant standards (+11% in 2015 and +6,3% in 2019 despite the financial crisis of the years 2014-15 and monetary contraction) (CTJ 2017; TJJ 2021). The richness of natural resources such as water, constitutes the starting point for the implementation of eco-capitalist tactics that aim to enhance the land exchange value as overall strategy of development with the objective to upgrade Chongqing to the level of the other Chinese mega-cities and compete fiercely to attract foreign investments.

2. GOVERNANCE IN A LANDSCAPE GRABBING SCENARIO

In general terms, the definition of "governance" indicates institutional, economic and social practices through which "the diverse actors and networks which coexist within a territory, urban region, city or neighbourhood cluster around a territorial focus, and create the capacity to act (collective actor capacity) for a territory." (Healey 2006, 302). Local governance is closely related to what Harvey defined as the "entrepreneurial turn" of the locale to counteract global forces (Harvey 1989; Wang 2013) from a "re-scaling" perspective (Brenner 2009; Swyngedouw 2000). China's institutional transition toward participative forms of governance started in the mega-cities along the coast (e.g. Wu 2009) but in the last decade it has been reproduced throughout the country, evaluating its local specificities. However, public-private partnerships and stretching financial networks own a characteristic typical of Chinese urban governance, namely the recurrent leadership of local administration above the other stakeholders (D'Orville 2019, Wu and Wiley 2018). Following Healey's idea that "transformative initiatives which succeed in 'institutionalization' need to have the capacity to 'travel' not just from one arena to another, but from one level of consciousness to another", that is "from the level of conscious actor invention and mobilization to that of routinization as accepted practices, and beyond that to broadly accepted cultural norms and values" (Healey 2006, 304), there resurfaces the importance of the symbolic sphere for the successful flow of practices within established but also fluid networks and coalitions. The graph in Figure 1 summarizes some of the entanglements between practice and representation in Chongqing governance system and the different empowerment layers existing within the Beautiful China framework of action.

The knowledge system behind eco-capitalist housing projects is both based on the rational-economic axiom of neoliberal but sustainable development as well as the locally embedded cultural traditions that provide a flourishing substratum for the attempts to create provincial-level responses of environmental conservation (McLaren 2011). According to Bird, "environmental problems […] are the result of mis/taken (unfortunate or ill-chosen) negotiations with and constructions of nature in the shaping of new socio-ecological orderings of reality. They result from morally and politically mis/taken social practices" (Bird 1987, 261). Therefore, environmental problems are closely connected with a cultural construction of nature that is based on anthropocentric views. Similarly, there are some practices of environmental conservation that are currently sustained by intangible heritage discourses and revivals of aesthetic tradition which turn the natural landscape into a commodity (Su 2015; Zhang 2020). In this sense, eco-capitalism as it is performed in Chongqing, intersects the conceptual framework of "landscape grabbing", defined as a landscape "that is 'grabbed' (i.e. modified and/or reshaped) by political decisions, law mechanisms, intangible valorisation processes, and financial flows, while the land ownership does not necessarily change" (Ciervo and Cerreti 2020, 124). According to Ciervo and Cerreti, the concept applies well in urban/rural contexts of the Global North whereas "land grabbing" often defines Global South phenomena where the North-South uneven power relations reiterate forms of colonisation. However, this appears as a flawed discourse in the Chinese context because of the many social and economic differences traceable within the country. China still maintains a hybrid position within the North-South narrative: Although the country is the world second largest economy and has gained great geopolitical power, the legacy of the non-aligned states seems difficult to abandon. Landscape grabbing in Chongqing unfolds in the beneficial role that the landscape owns for a kind of property-led development that focuses on aesthetics and intangible heritage. Finally, there is an inalienable nexus between Chinese post-reform practice of land renewal and the shifting of land ownership where less represented communities often lose rights and access to the commons (e.g. Wu and Waley 2018). Therefore, landscape grabbing as a

niche phenomenon can also happen in areas that have a consolidated peripheral position with respect to the country's core network of power.
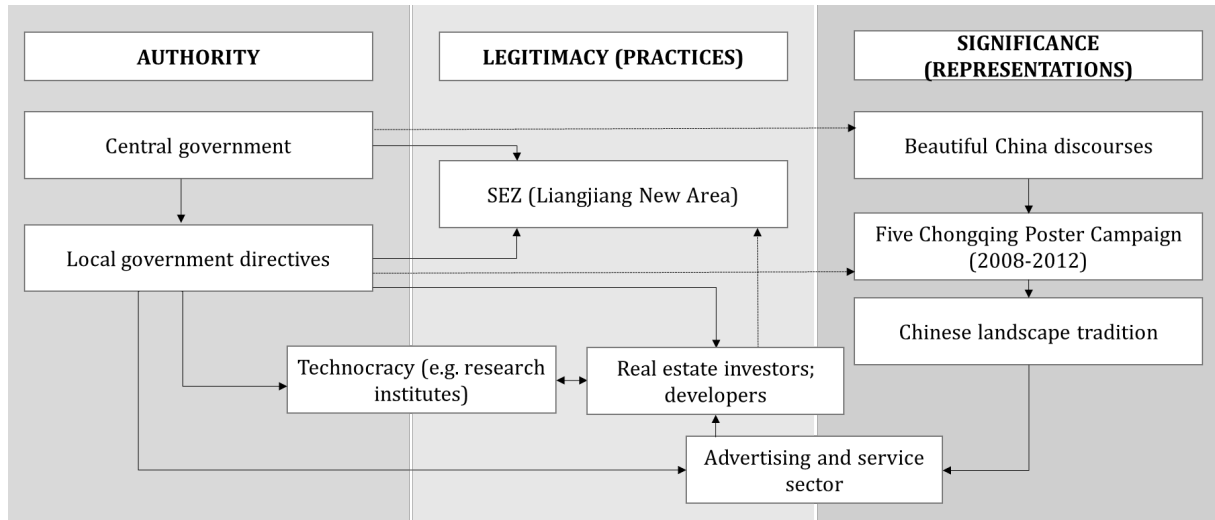

Figure 1. Chongqing governance in relation to property-led development within Beautiful China framework (Source: Design by author).

2.1. Green systemic commodification in the upscale real estate and integrated resource management

Upscale real estate market is seen by Smith and Harvey in post-Marxist terms of capital circulation and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003; Smith 2002). This means that flows of capital from the global level are driven to produce a spatial-temporal fix given by temporary allocation of capital in both physical and immaterial infrastructures such as real estate, education, and research, and spatial displacement with the opening of new markets. This practice supports the reproduction of surplus value, and enforces consumerism as a neoliberal necessity and a measure of personal achievement.

The growing role of the housing market in Chinese domestic economy has been object of analysis since the early neoliberal policies were put into practice in the early nineties. Many scholars have analysed the topic from the perspective of emerging global cities such as Shanghai (Wu 1999, 2002), or in the context of regional economies as in Guangzhou Province (Xu and Yeh 2005). The focus area is predominantly the one located along the coast: This leaves the western and south-western urban realities out of the main discussions concerning the urban-natural environment nexus. This study aims to fill in the literary gap about urban studies in Southwest China. Moreover, it brings the discussion a step further by looking at the upscale housing market in its relational attitude towards the integrated resource management (IRM) that is applied locally to ensure the maximization of benefit through industrial and service-driven solutions that should also encompass environmental protection in their practices. Because Chongqing City has a great amount of water resources such as rivers (e.g. the Yangzi River and its tributary, the Jialing River), natural lakes, semi-artificial and artificial water reservoirs (*shuiku*), and underground water, it seems appropriate to focus on a particular aspect of IRM, i.e. the "integrated water resource management" (IWRM) which should reduce the presence of "monopolistic sectoral approaches to water resource management, which lead to 'fragmented and uncoordinated development and management'", and the surfacing of a "water governance crisis" (Otsuka 2019, 3 citing GWP-TAC 2000, 9). Although IWRM recognizes also social equity and sustainable development as its pillars, the economic factor appears as the dominant discourse. It is based on the recognition that "water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good" (*ibid*.). Chongqing local waters are entangled in consumerist networks that exploit the resource as such, namely in its materiality, and also as a tool thanks to its symbolic power. In fact, water is a necessary constituent of Chinese traditional landscapes (Li 1994), which have been used massively in the last decade to commodify the green and fix the commons into patterns of gentrification advanced by the local administration and the other stakeholders involved in the urban planning. National and

local jurisdictions provide the authoritative power to let the emplacement of heterotopic spaces. The following table based on critical discourse analysis (tab. 1), provides some examples of legal shortcuts for *green gentrification* (Anguelovski et al. 2019). Laws are considered for their social interaction and capacity of persuasion rather than as a simple projection of norms and ethics (Gee 2014).

Table 1. Sample of laws on land and water management and their implicit meanings.

Laws	Extension of normative powers
Law of the People's Republic of China on Prevention and Control of Water Pollution, Art. 64	It requires a special control over reservoirs in scenic spots, historic sites, and fishing zones to ensure that water meets the national quality standards: Sanitation is linked to economic profit and spatial control.
Forestry Law of the People's Republic of China, Arts. 4, 15	Forests are categorized based on an economic scale: It implies commodification and green value transferring.
Water Law of the People's Republic of China, Art. 14	The waterscape is re-imagined as a commodity for elitist housing and services.
Law of the People's Republic of China on Water and Soil Conservation, Art. 12	It foresees practices of waterscape beautification to attract tourism and enhance the land exchange value for further property-led development.

Source: Design by author. Data by NPC, *Law*, 2007a; NPC, *Water*, 2007b; NPC, *Forestry*, 2007c; NPC, *Law*, 2011.

As explained in Table 1, Chinese laws move toward the IRM strategy although the top-down approach still hinders practices of "effective governance" (Otsuka 2019, 6), leaving out the less represented communities from the decision-making process and considering the environment as an objectified source of capital.

2.2. Desire and authenticity: the fetish assemblage

Upscale real estate and its related form of gentrification can be described in relation to the emotional spaces associated to the urban and its inhabitants. According to Pow, gentrified neighbourhoods should not be demystified as dystopian results of the neoliberal forces acting at the local level. Zoning and segregation could be possible outcomes of gating urbanism; however, there are many social-spatial variables to consider based on the fact that "the social production and consumption of property (in this case gated communities) is always an ongoing construction and constant negotiation of power in and over urban space" (Pow 2014, 480). As a matter of fact, scholars are also part of the narrative that associates China's property-led development to bad habits derived by this current phase of late capitalism where local politicians and officials are moved by desires for personal recognition, career enhancement, and urban grandeur (e.g. the hubris-urban aggrandizement nexus in Wu and Waley 2018, 284). There is an apparent contradiction lying in gated communities as a neoliberal "urban pathology" and the space produced which could trigger positive emotions as in the Chinese context where 1) gating is a traditional practice linked to the enclosed courtyard (*siheyuan*) and socialist working-living units (*danwei*); 2) gated communities might signify a lifestyle to aspire to (Pow 2014).

Chinese residential building has had an ontological shift from promoting social harmony (Bray 2006) to personal desire based on greening strategies that might indicate the rising of "a new form of bourgeois environmentalism for the *xiaokang* [relatively affluent] urban middle class" (Pow 2018, 876). However, this shift does not hinder the possibility to feel ambivalence such as "gentrifiers' fantasies of identification with the other, fantasies of journeying to a hostile place and mastering it, or fantasies of incorporating or becoming the other." (Seitz and Proudfoot 2021, 216). Drawing on Žižek's approach of fetishism in practice, in this study the actors in the governance system consciously accept and embody the new ideology as a gesture of compromise (Žižek 1989). According to Žižek, human beings are fetishist in practice because they accept to live a lie that is "objectively true, but ontologically false, and ethically reprehensible" (*ibid.*, 179). It means that the daily practice of self-censorship is both supportive to the system and to the individual who has the perception of acting in conformity to the

social rules and benefit at the level of identity-building through a process of reflexivity (Myung 2021). Following the Lacanian triangulation of imaginary-symbolic self-reality, authenticity is more prone to follow the imaginary as a "moment of falsehood" of postmodern culture (Jameson 1984, 86-92).

The libidinal economy behind the elite-driven urban planning in the realm of ecological civilization promoted by the Beautiful China campaign, is signed by the fluidity and impermanency of value emplaced through particular assemblages. Value can be followed through the traces left behind by the projection and imaginary of green but artificial (anthropocentric) environments acquired through a process of landscape grabbing. In these terms, apart from the normative power discussed above there are other devices that function as a *token*, i.e. quasi-objects that enable the dismantling of the natural environment in the name of environmental protection and commodity-making practices, showing agency insofar as they produce a transformation (Latour 2005, 53).

3. CHASING BEAUTIFUL CHINA TOKENS IN CHONGQING LANDSCAPE

The early traces of the Beautiful China narrative lead back to the central government decision issued in 2007 to make Chongqing "the national experimental zone for integrating rural and urban development" (Cui 2011, 647), with the hope to transform this area into the first visible success of China *xiaokang shehui* ("relatively affluent society"). At the same time, timid attempts were made by the local administration to increase tourism in the area whose reputation was devalued by the common understanding of Chongqing as one of China's "five furnace cities" (*huolu chengshi*) because of the high temperature, fog and humidity that hit the place especially in the April-October period. The counter-narrative praised the former Sichuan Province provincial level city as a national model city according to the traditional landscape aesthetics or *shanshui* (lit. "mountains and rivers") by exploiting the image of Yuzhong Peninsula (the historic city centre) being surrounded by the Yangzi and Jialing Rivers and Gele Mount hill ridge. According to Li, the pattern of ecological civilization promoted by the country should constitute a global alternative model of development (Li 2017). In 2009, Chongqing was declared as a pilot-city for the opening of ecological districts (CMHURC 2009), in particular Jiulongpo District received attention because its infrastructure had already been upgraded since the 1990s. Its new residential neighbourhoods were both classified as modern and green (CJGJ 1997). In 2012 then the entire city was labelled as "environmental model city": According to Liu, any fruitful discussion on the topic should take into account the progress made by Chongqing administration in the field (Liu 2012). The discourse reaches its climax with the retroactive projection of ecological practices in historical discourses to justify the continuity logic behind the current terminology, resulting in statements such as "Chongqing has been interested by conservation projects for thirty years" (Zhang et al. 2013, 284-285). However, there is also recognized that the entire valley located in the upper-reaches of the Yangzi River (mainly the Sichuan Basin) has comprehensively lost 41% of water and soil surface, which is above the national average percentage of 38%. In Chongqing Municipality (an area of 82,400 sq.km from the upper-reaches of the Yangzi River down to the Three Gorges Reservoir), 37,500 sq.km of water and soil surface went lost, i.e. 45.5% of the total area under Chongqing administration (*ibid.*). Following the data, the local attitude towards the environment might also reveal a crisis rather than a model to imitate.

The eco-capitalist logic is closely related to the local government financial security. Thanks to the 1994 Tax Sharing System Law (*fenshuizhi*), the urban land use tax, the urban construction and maintenance tax, real estate tax, capital gains tax on land, and the state land sale revenues remain at the local level. On this premise, the mechanism of land leasing to property developers has become a significant source of income for the local governments (Wong 2000). Transactions and allotments of

state-owned land rights in Chongqing are around 120 billion RMB per year; residential land is clearly highly profitable (see fig. 2).
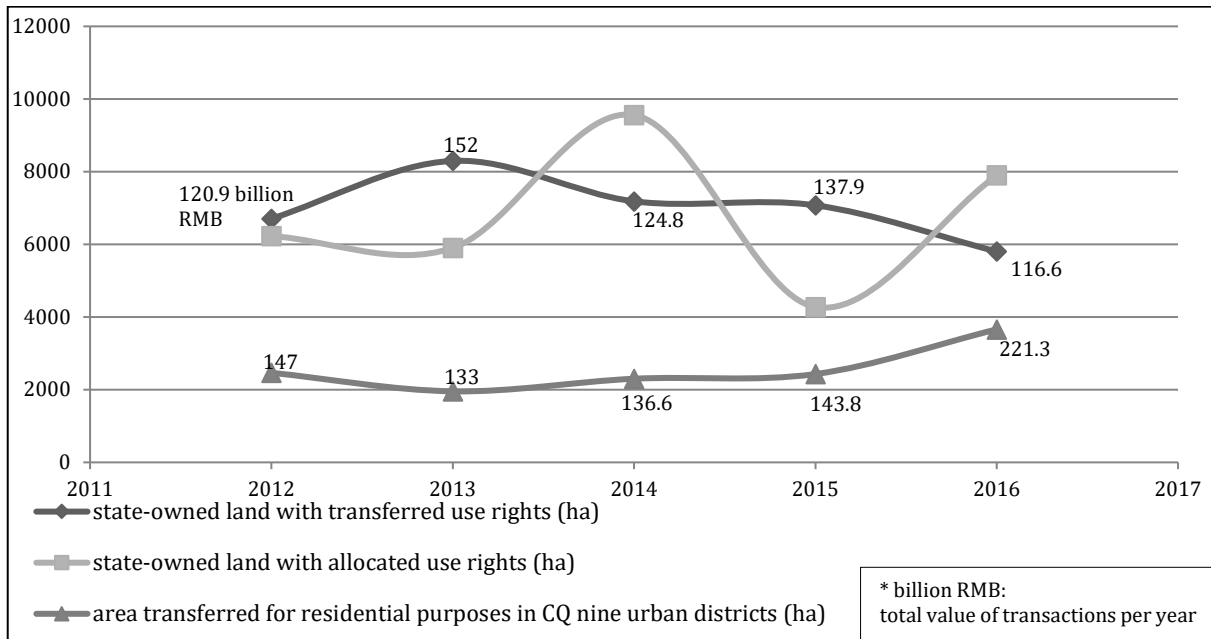

Figure 2. Transactions and allotments of state-owned land rights in Chongqing (Source: Author edited and compiled from data by CTJ, *Chongqing*, chap. 10).

This financial mechanism carried out by the local entrepreneurial government is accompanied by a sense of rightness as the practice of land monetization unfolds. As stated by Chongqing Municipal Government Financial Bureau

> Talking about the masses, their wellbeing is not such a complicated matter. People desire good food and a comfortable house, get a degree without problems, easily find a job, and to be reassured when they consult a doctor. These are exactly [people's] greatest yearnings and expectations. From this point of view, Chongqing Municipal Government Financial Bureau continues to provide large funds and policies; in this way, we can overcome the shortcomings accumulated in many years. The improvement of their living conditions is based on the principles of equality, efficiency, and sustainability (CQSCZJ 2017)[1].

The interference of the local government in social relations emerges to the extent that it paternally opens the way to new sustainable representations of inhabiting the space. Real estate developers, (online) broker agencies and advertising companies follow the leadership and build their chain of commodity value based on the ecological narrative. The advertising of Lake Blossom enclave (*lixianghu*) built by Zhongguo Haiwai Co. Ltd., tells as follows:

> [T]he representative project of Zhongguo Haiwai Co., Ltd., is a pioneer in the development of a comprehensive urban-rural business. It is a premium work and operates as a new planning model for the city outskirts. It leads in the creation of a completely new lifestyle based on leisure, free time and wellbeing in the suburbs. Providing all the necessary services (school, hospital, hotel, commercial activities, etc.), it will give the impression of "leaving the dust but not the city" [*li chen, bu li cheng*]. It emphasizes a lifestyle based on "villas with their own land and sky" [*"youtian youdi" de zhuangyuan shenghuo*], and the upper-middle class pleasure of housing privatization [*sijiahua*] (CQLoupan 2019).

The advertisement of Lake Blossom Enclave clearly shows the link between urban lifestyle and rural atmosphere, emphasizing the achievement of both private and green space as a matter of high living standards. The name of the property is consistent with a fluid idea of greenspace which

encompasses both urban and rural manifestations of greenery. The English name "Lake Blossom" evokes spring and sweet atmospheres as much as the Chinese name does (*xiang* means "fragrant"). The gated community is developed around a semi-natural lake that in the past was used as a water reservoir for agricultural purposes. Part of the lake surroundings is still used for niche-leisure agriculture (author's fieldwork 2015 and satellite images). The green value exploitation combined with the symbolic power of traditional landscape imaginary plays a fundamental role in the development strategy of this project located on Chongqing suburbs.

The logic expressed through the advertisement is to create blurred boundaries between urban and rural areas by facilitating the emplacement of typically urban services in the rural landscape. The result should be a pleasant mixture of "authentic" rural (and therefore healthier… there is no dust!) landscape and social recognition of the upper-middle class priorities such as private property. The recursive process of identity-building lies between the disciplinary forces of the local government that "knows its citizens", and a mobilized desire that is channelled toward specific behaviours through predefined discourses on nature, wellbeing and sustainable development.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the last years, ecological districts and neighbourhoods have been developed throughout the urban areas of China's main cities and mega-cities (e.g. Pow 2018). However, one main difference between Chongqing pattern of ecological civilization-privatization and other eco-districts lies in the fact that in Chongqing there is no artificial environment that provides the setting of gentrification. It is instead the already existing natural environment to be actively involved in the creation of the ecological (upscale) neighbourhood. The ideal landscape aesthetics was revalued and embodied in the local environment thanks to the slow development that characterized the city until the early 2000s. To accelerate with the introduction of forms of ecological urbanism based on capital flows and temporal financialisation of local infrastructure, the concept of *shanshui*, lit. "mountains and water", is migrated from the landscape painting tradition to indicate a rare symbol of perfection of actual cityscapes.

Following Beautiful China discourses and practices has proved to be useful to share light on their role as a token manifesting agency to the extent that they ensure the transformation of the local landscape within the new eco-capitalist pattern of development. The method also ensures that there is no hierarchical power among the actors playing in the network analysed or between concepts and practices whereas it still remains possible to confirm the idea that the Chinese forms of local governance are highly customized according to the central and local government visions and material benefits. Chongqing beautification policies can be seen as a lively body that interacts and modifies the practices within the local human and non-human network.

Along the process of land renewal in Chongqing City, nature behaves as a hidden actor while technocracy frames the environment in terms of integrated resource management. This process appears as necessary in order to consider the environment as a commodity. The analysis of the intrinsic significance entailed on a sample of Chinese laws related to land and water management points out some of the legal shortcuts that facilitate and legitimize the practice of green gentrification. Therefore, the relational attitude between upscale housing market and IRM is favoured by the authority provided by the rule of law issued by the central and local government.

This study critically engages with the concepts of value, authenticity and desire in terms of a fetish assemblage that is recognized but still accepted by the local communities which seek new fragments of authenticity while engaging in their recursive identity-building performance through acts of emplacement. Despite the necessity to protect the greenspace and the related landscape, neoliberal logics seem to finally determine the use of local natural resources to enhance the land exchange value through mechanisms of landscape grabbing and privatization.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All translations are by the author.