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The Problem Space of Nature in Chongqing: A Conjunctural Analysis of Environmental Crisis Discourses and Local Housing Practices

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Abstract

Over the past decade, China's centralized politics have explored new resources to tame the sustainability question and hinder the possibility for narratives of crisis to institutionalize foci of social and territorial malaise. The party-state rhetoric has focused its attention on inverse discourses of future environmental civilization whereas the current conjuncture shapes the local greenspace as a problem space. The analysis of environmental crisis discourses in Chongqing reveals the conundrum of redefining the commons in transitional times characterized by practices of redenomination of nature reserves and green objectifying high-end real estate advertisement. It points out how the crisis is turned into an opportunity for further uneven development through a process of emplacement on the basis of individualized forms of environmental protection. On the other hand, the digital makes space for alternative narratives of awareness which evoke a sense of social responsibility to understand the territorial changes and avoid a complete de-politicization of local communities on the governance of commons. The essay reveals how the state of tension within the eco-commodity production and circulation is linked to discourses of emotional proximity to the landscape.

Keywords: Chongqing; conjuncture; eco-commodity; environmental crisis; gentrification.

1. Introduction

The term "crisis" has definitively become part of the common jargon in everyday life. In the last twenty years the world has lived through the terrorist crisis, geopolitical crisis, economic and financial crisis and the final recognition of the existence of climate and environmental crisis. China is also stuck in a conundrum made of political, social, territorial and economic tensions. Upon that, the environmental crisis has become a prominent narrative in the last decade but also a creative disciplinary tool for governmentality. On the one hand, Chinese social problems are defined as "not exceptional in relation to those ones afflicting liberal corporate economies" (Dirlik 2012, 289); on the other hand, it would be improper to consider China as a paradigm of socio-economic development because the approaches and solutions applied on the territory are peculiar and defined by Chinese specificities. Furthermore, narratives of crisis developed in the Global North need to be critically engaged in compliance with China's current cultural and ethical discourses.

According to Grossberg, contemporary societies appear of difficult evaluation: "Everything seems to be in flux, or better, everything presents itself as a possible site of contradiction and struggle. The economies – at each instance of production, distribution and consumption, and in each sector – are not only unstable but going through transformative changes" (Grossberg 2019, 39). Furthermore, "the many struggles and contradictions don't seem to offer up a coherent narrative" (Grossberg 2019, 39). Despite the difficulty to read through the tangled networks of actors, commodities and knowledge, scholarship should not indulge in the idea that mankind might get used to living in perpetual times of crisis, on the contrary, it is important to stay critical so as to fight back the thought of simply accepting and settling in what seems to be an a-temporal moment of disruption. The Chinese term for "crisis", *weiji*, is itself a word that indicates a movement or impulse to find solutions to a problem. Within a highly politicized society as the Chinese one, terms like crisis and catastrophe are cleverly avoided by the central government whose rhetorical strategy follows a mechanism that Vázquez-Arroyo defines as "narratives [which] mediate *discursive* and *objective* processes of catastrophization" (Vázquez-Arroyo 2013, 740; emphasis in original). The inverse logic used by the Chinese leadership forces to set up a positive imagery of ecological civilization (to come) in order to overcome the sense of crisis which is nevertheless selectively politicized. In other words, "the dialectic of the upside of down is at

work – namely, the ways in which every loss is presented as an opportunity for renewal, often in tandem with civilizational and market imperatives" (Vázquez-Arroyo 2013, 745).

This essay is based on the analysis of Chongqing city from the perspective of environmental crisis discourses which reveal the conundrum of defining and redefining the commons in transitional times (Ward 2003; Pia 2017)[1]. Chongqing is a Municipality located in Southwest China. It benefits from the direct jurisdiction of the central government, which means that the local government is allowed to partake in global neoliberal narratives concerning the social and economic life of its inhabitants and also to put forward avant-garde strategies whereas the central government's surveillance is active and ready to stop any perceived deviance from the authority of the party-state. The institutional shift at the municipal level is rather a new phenomenon that has appeared over the last two decades, forging a new entrepreneurial image on the city of Chongqing as the "international economic hub" of the region. The local interests and visions are projected towards the achievement of a coveted development in order to finally abandon the recurring idea of catching up on the basis of model cities such as Shanghai and Singapore (e.g., Wu 2011). Before the political scandals that affected the integrity of the city in the early 2010s, Chongqing was described as a city "with transcendent qualities", being its practice of development "beyond history [...], outside of time, i.e. moving beyond the era [...], and beyond the path of Western development" (Hou, Xin, and Ren 2012, 180-181). Despite the laudatory tone, one may read a sort of prophecy in these words which foreshadowed the coming of a "new era" as the one proclaimed during the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2017 (Holbig *et al.* 2017). As a matter of fact, the development path of Chongqing was already described in the late 2000s as *the* alternative whose "essence lies in traditional Chinese culture, which is combined with key elements of modern Western economic management philosophy to form a model of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Hou, Xin, and Ren 2012, 181). Local policies were already focused on practices of "beautification" well before the central government's launching

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[1] The Constitution Law of People's Republic of China, Art. 9 reads: "All mineral resources, waters, forests, mountains, grasslands, unreclaimed land, mudflats and other natural resources are owned by the state, that is, by the whole people, except for the forests, mountains, grasslands, unreclaimed land and mudflats that are owned by collectives as prescribed by law" (cf. Land Management Law, § II, arts. 8, 11).

of the "Beautiful China" campaign in 2017, even though the current opinion is prone to see the Chinese President Xi Jinping as "the advocate of this idea [the scientific concept of ecological and environmental protection], the facilitator of this change, and the leader of this march" (Duan 2021).

Developing the city (almost) from scratch was certainly a challenge but the economic and urban impasse that characterized Chongqing until the late 1990s (e.g., Chen 1998) provided also a great tool to the Municipality: the richness of greenspace. The term "greenspace" indicates here both the urban and rural green areas that cover the Municipality, although the scope of this research is limited to the central districts of Chongqing city. In 2010, the CCP Chongqing Municipal Committee issued the "Ten Livelihood" project that included "raising forest coverage by 40% and the urban greening rate by 35%, while building the National Forest City, the Ecological Garden City, and the Environmental Protection Model City" (Hou, Xin, and Ren 2012, 172). All the efforts of making Chongqing beautiful and green, including the already existing "Green Districts" planned in the late 1990s and the subsequent honorary titles granted by the central government (CJGJ 1997), still shaped the greenery as an economic asset, namely an object to customize and commodify according to the market logics. There transpires then how the dream of ecological civilization and the actual environmental crisis are two sides of the same coin belonging to the perpetual crisis of late capitalism. Borrowing Escobar's words, the "scientific" appropriation of local culture and landscapes, i.e. the "postmodern form of ecological capital", gives momentum to the cycle of commodity production where "nature and local people themselves are seen as the source and creators of value" (Escobar 1996, 56-57).

The essay unfolds in the following way. The next section is focused on the theoretical framework and it does so by: (1) outlining the concepts of spatial atmosphere and emotional proximity; (2) relating conjunctural analysis to the existing literature on urban planning and real estate emotional and disciplinary influence on identity-building processes. The third section sheds light on these points in accordance to a scenario of fetish performance, heterotopia and responsibility. There follows the case study which is divided into two parts. The first part investigates Chongqing urban eco-policies from the point of view of real estate advertising while the second one critically engages the imaginary of alternative narratives, their political trajectories and expectations. Finally, the last paragraph is dedicated to some reflections on

the conceptualization of problem space, the agency of the diverse actors moving around the transitional urban space of Chongqing, and the process of eco-capitalist emplacement seen through the lens of official and alternative narratives.

2. FRAMING THE PROBLEM SPACE AS ATMOSPHERE: POWER AND THE EMOTIONAL PROXIMITY

This essay draws upon Grossberg's review of conjunctures which are spatial-temporal formations where social relations based on "shared identity or common belonging" are characterized by networks of power and multiple tensions. Therefore, "conjunctural analysis offers an account of the relations between an organic crisis and the various narratives of it" (Grossberg 2019, 48-55), considering the crisis in its agentive movements rather than a mere spatial context. On a broader sense, the environmental crisis conceptualized in China during the 2010s can be seen as an act of framing nature as a problem space. In fact, the new political narrative intersects the spatial dynamics of nature both in its material and immaterial aspects, namely the environment and landscape as two complementary views of the same battlefield. Grossberg recognizes also the emotional entanglements that arise from spatialized crises which alter the emotional landscape that each one knows, the space that defines "our sense of unity and sanity" (Grossberg 2019, 61). Crisis as well as catastrophic events can be a moment of possible catharsis for the human being. Paraphrasing Beck, crisis is primarily an occasion to think beyond our mental boundaries and see potential futures (Beck 2015). However, authoritative powers can certainly seize the opportunity along the process and manipulate this discourse of hope for reasons of governmentality (Méndez Cota 2019).

Scholars dissect the concept of space from different perspectives and temporal shifts, therefore it is important to define what is meant by space in the context of this essay. Drawing on Lefebvre's idea of space as a social construct where power relations take place (Lefebvre 1991), this essay investigates how space is modified and "occupied" – using the words of Livingstone (1995, 11) – within the context of environmental crisis discourses. The relational approach according to which space produces relations as well as relations produce space, is useful to overcome the dualism between society and nature in that it grasps the

complexity of social-ecological systems which are made of human beings and their environments (Folke 2006). Löw brings the argument forward, distinguishing between the material aspects of space and the intangible counterpart which is defined as "atmosphere" (Löw 2008). According to the *positioning* logics atmospheres hide the subtle performance of social inclusion and exclusion by making people perceive (un-)pleasant sensations and feelings. The "relational ordering of living entities and social goods" (Löw 2008, 35), clarifies the way social responsibility and attachment vary according to proximity (Katz 2003; Massey 2004). In particular, urban planning with its practice of land renewal can be part of political narratives that appear as "an emotionally charged issue" (Massey 2004, 6).

Urban studies concerning China show particular attention to the coastal area and those regulative adjustments related to the introduction of new forms of governance and neoliberal market practices (Han 1998; Jessop 2000; Han and Wang 2003; Xu and Yeh 2005; Reusswig and Isensee 2009). Local governance and urban renewal are also associated to the mobility of Western paradigms in Chinese urban narratives (Wu 2011; 2015). However, capital flows and finance-knowledge networks albeit their functionality can only partially explicate the consolidation of new real estate policies and performances at the local level whereas the role of emotional proximity in triggering the legitimation of local upscale real estate projects remains a rather neglected topic. Therefore, this essay tries to fill in the gap by exploring how politicized atmospheres can favour the environmental crisis discourse using the service industry as a tool whereas other practices allow for the critical engagement of local communities through an apparent process of de-politicization. The next paragraph discusses the institutional shift concerning urban planning and real estate market in China.

3. The urban planning and real estate reshaping of the commons

The emergence of modern urban planning can be seen as a "turning point in the development of modern forms of political power and techniques for governance" thanks to the disciplinary quality that space entails in the process of fostering social relations. Urban planning can be used to stage a certain socio-spatial ordering through

the achievement of aesthetic desires (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 352). Furthermore, the planning of new spaces supports the legitimization of historical shifts and becomes a site of experimentation, forcing the temporary manipulation of personal routine through pre-established movements and functions. It also shapes the greenery which is artificially designed following "modern" aesthetics. Nature may be perceived as a cultural by-product, for example by producing urban parks and greenways that are conceptualized as spaces useful to learn and perform new civic behaviours (e.g., Zhang, Chung, and Yin 2020). This knowledge contributes to the establishment of zoning and gentrification as governmental tools that serve the housing market with the explicit purpose of enhancing the land value through the construction of luxurious residential areas that often assume the shape of gated communities. As a matter of fact, gated communities have become a trademark of Western, individual, and segregated societies where relationships are mostly built upon fear and profit (Bauman 2005; Davis 2006). The right-to-the-city is challenged by the historical moment of socio-ecological crisis where the commons are denied and borders are becoming more and more visible (Turhan and Armiero 2019). However, this discourse does not necessarily work in the context of urban China because socio-spatial anxiety is not an ontological problem massively used to control the housing need and changes in residential neighbourhoods; for the main state-driven interest on secluded districts is actually the re-establishment of administrative power over certain territories by the means of enclaves which should satisfy the upper-middle class' performative urge for emplacement along the process of identity reshaping (Tomba 2004; Pow 2009; Gerth 2011). This should also partially obviate the sense of confusion and moral crisis felt within Chinese society due to the rapidly changing social conditions which cause a clash between individual desires and mutual expectations (Yan 2009; Osburg 2013). However, as Hampel points out, "individual aspirations and social pressures often appear less contradictory than complementary, as the signifiers of personal fulfilment are also the markers of class" (Hampel 2021, 932). Real estate logics that especially target the middle and upper-middle classes, follow the individual crisis and make it marketable through aesthetic and environmental means.

Environmental crisis discourses convey a sense of "reverse spectacularization" on the strategies of high-end housing market, i.e. they emphasize the possibility to (still) enjoy natural beauty while the city is suffering the consequences of prolonged urban planning policies

that have diminished the cityscape value in environmental terms[2]. As a matter of fact, greenwashing is one device used by Chinese local governments to pursue the eco-city model (Pow 2018), even though recent studies tend to consider greenspaces as both a sign of sustainability and commodification (Zhang, Chung, and Yin 2020). Even though some cities have a long tradition related to the maintenance of urban greenery (Jim 2013), holistic green infrastructure is a relatively new planning approach among the national urban mosaics (Taylor and Hochuli 2017; Miao 2021; Fukuoka 2022)[3].

Banzhaf and McCormick point out how the demand for elitist spaces with high environmental qualities is related to the way "people 'sort' themselves into neighborhoods with others with a similar willingness to pay for public goods" (Banzhaf and McCormick 2012, 30). As a matter of fact, the interest of Chongqing local government in enhancing land value encounters a quest for social recognition that was a novelty in Southwest China until the early 2000s when the "Open Up the West" initiative was launched (Goodman 2004). Following Harvey, Chongqing local government's neoliberal shift represents a solution to capital flow adjustments to the extent that in order "to perpetrate capitalism, residential groupings obtain representational power in virtue of their consumerist practices" (Harvey 1989, 118). Capital flows enter the global crisis narrative by giving peculiar responses such as eco-cities, spongecities and eco-towns that according to Hodson and Marvin, "promote the construction of ecologically secure premium enclaves that by-pass existing infrastructure and build internalised ecological resource flows that attempt to guarantee strategic protection and further economic reproduction" (Hodson and Marvin 2010, 299). Building ecological security is at the core of local urban planning strategies. However, the

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[2] Chongqing ranked forty-fifth on the list of the most polluted Chinese cities published by Greenpeace in 2014 (air pollution, annual average of PM 2.5 concentrations), with 63.9 micrograms per cubic metre, nearly twice the national standard (35 micrograms/cubic metre). In 2017 the National Bureau of Statistics stated that Chongqing's air quality improved by 16.3% thanks to the 2013 National Air Quality Action Plan (Tan 2014).

[3] Chongqing represents an exception in this discourse regarding green infrastructure as something new and atypical for China. Due to its environmental characteristics, there were green residential compounds already in the Seventies in Chongqing, well before gaining more political power as a Municipality in 1997 (Bonato 2020, 133-144). What is new in Chongqing residential space is the gained consciousness regarding urban greenspace-wellbeing linkages in post-socialist terms.

meaning of "urban ecological security" which already includes risk assessment and prevention against geophysical disasters, should also consider the role that landscape and natural heritage have within the conjuncture (Crouch 2010). As Grossberg says, "culture is not a supplement to the 'more real' dimensions of politics and economics, it is co-constitutive of these dimensions" (Grossberg 2019, 39). These two perspectives, in fact, are more and more entangled in local economic development, particularly the service sector (tourism, real estate, advertising, etc.). Therefore, at the urban level there is an ever growing interest in repositioning landscape and natural heritage within integrated narratives of territorial management that have recently become a key political tool to adjust local necessities to inter-scalar governance (Brenner 2004). This implies the projection of diverse technocratic voices on local pragmatics in the form of fluid infrastructural networks, creating a sort of detachment from local minorities and less represented people's needs as well as divergent views on urban responsibilities. The housing solution of "eco-blocks" triggers the idea that security is divisible rather than a collective issue, for example. Furthermore, the system of governance that articulates the new building schemes conveys a message of unerring replicability of the housing model at the global level that helps the legitimation process. However, the complex governance system where capital and infrastructural flows are both necessary to shape such projects outline the fact that only global cities and megacities can sustain such types of development (Hodson and Marvin 2010, 310-311). According to the central government regulations issued in the year 2014[4], Chinese cities with more than ten million permanent residents are labelled as super-megacities (*chaoda chengshi*): with circa thirty million people, Chongqing is included in the list[5]. Beyond the mere urban reclassification based on statistics, the definition of super-megacity foreshadows a real social division among the Chinese based on urban positioning within the nation-state, the capital and global interests. As explained in China's leading online encyclopaedia *Baidu*

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[4] Before the implementation of the new classification, Chinese cities were divided into four categories according to the amount of non-agricultural population residing in the city centre and the suburbs. The new division breaks the citizen-farmer dichotomy and considers also those residing in the county administered by a city as part of it.

[5] Already in 2015, Chongqing Municipality had a population of 30.17 million people, among which 19.8 million people were registered with an "agricultural *hukou*" and 13.9 million people with a "non-agricultural *hukou*" (CTJ 2017). The term *hukou* indicates the system of household registration in mainland China.

Baike, super-megacities should satisfy the need for services and facilities that the citizens may request when they configure their lives upon the globalization of consumptions and practices. Being a super-megacity is "a matter of culture". For this reason, the uncontrolled flow of immigrants is to be avoided on the assumption that "only those who have the necessary open-mindeness and entrepreneurial character can bring benefits to the city" and therefore deserve to be part of a first-rate urban environment (Baidu Baike 2017). Words matter insofar that they help shape our view of the world (Gee 2014): as the online encyclopaedia explains, language itself prioritizes class division and triggers a process of emplacement of elite representations on the local environment. The production of heterotopic and fetish landscapes challenges the communal sense of responsibility towards the commons, as discussed in the next section.

3.1. *Heterotopic and fetish landscapes: a matter of responsibility*

In times of economic and social disruption, local communities face the challenge of reconfiguring their living space, habits and necessities. According to Jameson, "disalienation [...] involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place, [...] and the reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (Jameson 1984, 89). Overcoming the perceived sense of crisis is a matter of material and immaterial resources, and their agency in specific assemblages provides certain social groups with the right to place themselves within the safe space of heterotopias, i.e. "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). These sites exist to compensate and counter-balance the conjunctural problem space which is determined by the institutional neoliberal shift and the race to mass consumerism. Consuming nature and commodifying the landscape bring upon the question of preservation and protection which could later turn into capitalist devices; for heterotopias based on the individualized cultural experience of environmental protection often hinder the physicality of the place itself. The resulting fetish experience of green signifiers bestows upon things an aura of moral rightness which represents a challenge for

the communal sense of responsibility toward the commons (cf. Barthes 1994; Hall 1997). Empowering the site of gated communities with signs of environmental protection whereas the process implies also the previous users' exclusion from access and management, causes at once the de-politicization of the site as a common resource and the politicization of the same as an elite performative site of identity (re-)construction. This practice undermines the notion of freedom as an act of free choice informed by a sense of impartiality which should derive by the understanding of the human beings' existence as part of a social plurality (Arendt 2006, 100-110). In the Chongqing urban development scenario, this means the emergence of floating appeals to environmental responsibility that signify and legitimize forms of privatization and attempts to spread alternative narratives through virtual blogging channels.

4. Chongqing and the urban elite space of nature

Despite the fact that the neo-Marxist scholars have long stressed the necessity to start thinking about the natural resources as actors within the network that shapes environmental injustice (e.g. Benton 1996; Banzhaf 2012), the Chinese leadership continues the tradition of seeing nature as a thing on/through which power is delivered (Marks 1998; Shapiro 2001; Economy 2004; Bao 2010). Returning to the digital field-work, there appears a conscious social shift in the description of nature: In recent years the administrators and writers of *Baidu Baike* have also started delivering information on the financial price estimated for specific natural resources described on the internet, parks, reservoirs and waterscapes for example (Bonato 2020, 176-177, 193-197). This new interest among the netizens corroborates the idea that there has been a change of perspective toward nature, i.e. there is now the perception that the greenspace "exists" and it is not a mere background for human activities; this reading though is not necessarily positive or ecological because as the *Baidu Baike* environment reveals, the economic factor is still at the foreground.

It is not too surprising then that the State Forestry and Grassland Administration – a governmental department whose scope is to promote the best practices in forestry industry *and* protect national ecosystems – describes nature, forestry in particular, in terms of economic performance, declaring that state economy will receive a great impulse from

this sector in the near future (State Forestry and Grassland Administration 2014). Local statistics narrate a particular story which elaborates on the ambivalence created by the great use of (re-)naming practices: rural counties are transformed into (green) urban districts; rural/pristine areas are turned into urban parks, etc. This method ensures the maintenance of state-defined standards of land usage and green rates. As visible in *Figure 1*, the green strategy applied in the early 2000s in Chongqing has given way to a more nuanced rebalancing of the local greenery over the last decade. Nature reserves have decreased in size while remaining stable in number (see *Fig. 1*). However, the percentage of nature reserves with respect to the total land area shows only a slight decrease. The increasingly expanding urban area is devouring part of the forest vegetation while land zoning favours the privatization of greenspace. Even though Chongqing's image is marketed as a megalopolis built in greenery, the urban space is not necessarily green enough to ensure the equal sharing and enjoyment of what was previously regarded as the commons.
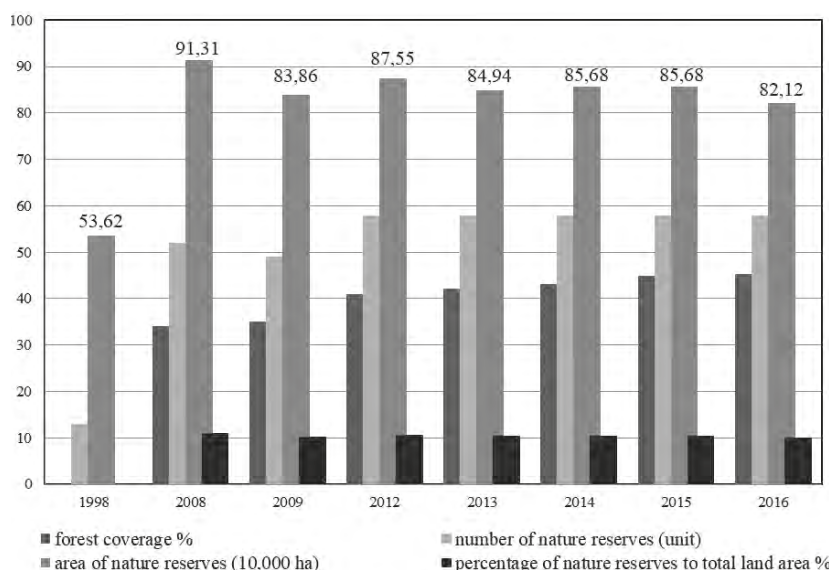
* Values for the year 1998 are divided as follows: eleven nature reserves, 2 ecological model areas; 1,015 sq.km of nature reserves, 4,347 sq.km of ecological model area (1 hectare: 0,01 sq.km).

Figure 1. – Visual ratio of nature reserves and environmental protection.
Source: Design by author. Data from CJW 1999, 98; CTJ 2010, 198; CTJ 2017, chap. 9.

4.1. *New atmospheres through the high-end real estate advertising*

Recent media campaigns promoting the achievement of environmental civilization ensure the spreading of a narrative which re-configures the aesthetic taste also with regard to housing practices. High-end real estate is an emerging sector in Chongqing that has greatly benefited from the new narrative, using green signifiers to legitimize the privatization of the commons. One example is the gated community named Qifeng Yundi ("Qifeng dwelling on the clouds") located on the Gele Mount Forest Park in Shapingba District. The enclaves have been built gradually since 2011 by Chonging Qifeng Developing Company. The neighbourhood is also called Guoji Mancheng, i.e. "international slow town", borrowing the name from the CittaSlow initiative with which it has no real connection. The housing design should emanate a fragrance of ancient European flavour while the choice of the name is linked to the idea of stimulating a virtual return to alleged rural moral values such as thrift, simplicity, and respect for nature. The advertising motto reads: "Qifeng Residences on the Clouds promote the 'slow living' wave" (*Qifeng Yundi yinling man shenghuo fengchao*). It conveys a message of superiority since: (1) the term *di* ("residence") is associated to the high-ranking officials' traditional mansion; (2) the villas are located on the top of the mount and strategically control the territory; (3) the place is specially designed for urban residents (*wei shimin jianshe yi ge "man shenghuo" de taoyuan shijie*). This point outlines the conscious gap between urban-rural living conditions, flattering the audience with mundane messages related to the most avant-garde housing practices. Advertising weaves a dreamlike atmosphere where the clouds resemble ethereal and heavenly spaces, addressed for example through the word *taoyuan* which literally means "Peach Blossom Valley" – an ultra-mundane place of perfection and peace slightly comparable to the Greek Elysian Fields (Qifengyundi 2014; Leju 2016). In *Figure 2*, one of the entrances to the gated community displays a billboard that reads: "The First Ecological Private Housing in a Forest Protection Neighbourhood". Moreover, it invites the dwellers to "personally experience [real life]" (*tiyan [shenghuo]*). On the red banner there is a clear reference to the type of house sold, and precisely the term *yangfang* (Western-style house) enters the discourse and creates a loop within the network of eco-capital circulation and its localized signifi-cance which provides an emotional proximity among social feelings of individualized responsibility towards the environment, private desires for a sophisticated lifestyle, and the achievement of both private space

and private (protected) green (see *Fig. 2*). The gated community aspires to become a sacred heterotopia where human and non-human beings experience pure freedom and happiness away from the precariousness of everyday life upon a decade of politicized environmental crisis.

Figure 2. – Qifeng Yundi gated community entrance with advertising banners.
Baidu source, retrieved April 12, 2018
https://ditu.amap.com/detail/B0FFG6R9GF?citycode=500000
Copyright owner unknown. Public domain.

4.2. *Alternative narratives: feeble sounds within the problem space*

The growing upscale housing market in Chongqing and its close relation to the local communities' progressive loss of communal spaces and the commons as such, e.g., local water resources, has controversial outcomes within local social groupings. In general, there appears to be no structured uprising against these neoliberal practices related to the privatization of the watershed and the manipulation of the natural landscape. A Chinese scholar working in the urban geography academic field shared this thought during an informal interview:

> The contradiction does not lie in people's incapacity of seizing the gravity of the problem. [...] I would rather say that the majority of the Chinese does not read the phenomenon as a problem at all. At the moment they

seem to be more concerned with other kinds of environmental and social issues, like air and water pollution [...]. (Informal interview, July 2015)

What is scientifically measurable such as air quality can become a tool for governmentality. Landscape owns instead pretty much volatile qualities which are based on affection and cultural tradition. Landscape aesthetics is hardly measurable apart from the set of national and supranational recognitions connected with the contemporary discourses on intangible heritage protection (Svensson and Maags 2018). Therefore, landscape is also a challenging site for the performance of alternative narratives that may compromise the stability of the mainstream politics and rhetoric, especially because the landscape scenarios are often exploited through the media – both visual and non-visual ones – whose content production and distribution are highly centralized and supervised by the party-state and/or the local governments, especially during perceived moments of crisis (Su 2020).

One of the difficulties met by local groups is the fact that to be legit, social organizations have to be registered and approved according to the Chinese law: the strict disciplinary arrangements aim to hinder the creation of systematized forms of resistance (e.g., Lubman 2016; Franceschini and Lin 2019). In fact, following the centralist ideology only the party-state has the right and duty to institutionalize ideas and practices derived by a bottom-up approach whereas controversial phenomena can be easily stopped thanks to a divisive regulatory mechanism that is well branched within the physical and virtual boundaries of the nation.

Due to the challenging politicized environment other forms of citizenship are being tested, in particular using the internet as an interface and means of news spreading to increase social awareness and responsibility towards the environment. The term "social media" indicates those media "[that] are fundamentally defined by their sociality, [...] operating on a networked, many-to-many rather than a broadcast, one-to-many basis; [...] demotic rather than elite" (Bruns 2015, 1). However, the development and massive use of social media in China lies in a controversial position within the state-society nexus of relations (e.g., Lee 2016). The role of some netizens in arising social issues to a national level in order to convince the central government to take action in matters that are experienced as social scandals (e.g., child labour), was defined as the emergence of Chinese civil society (e.g., Cavalieri and Franceschini 2010). As some social media analysts point out (e.g., Lovink 2008; Bruns 2015), it is important to understand the daily use

of mass media to catch if they are processed by users as social media, in order "to study culture and society […] *with* the Internet" (Rogers 2009, 28; emphasis added). Blogging groups created on the Chinese *Weixin* platform are a valid arena to start a digital ethnographic fieldwork[6]. Following an approach based on critical discourse analysis, this online movement of research within the platform was illuminated by the idea that words are less the expression of ideas and more the willingness to show agency and maintain alive the possibility to perform awareness within a difficult playground (Gee 2014, 79).

The digital fieldwork was conducted in the period of June-October 2017[7]. The following two extracts pose questions on land ownership and monetization, landscape commodification and place-making practices:

> Soon after Huarun Co. Ltd. [a joint venture of China Resources HK Ltd.] settled its branch in Beibei last month, it was clear how another big brand was going to take land in our Beibei! Being one of the world's 500 strongest companies, Wanke Co. [Vanke] has taken possession of Beibei block D standard allocated parcels nos. D2-4/03 and D2-1/04 for a total sum of 925 million RMB (4,794,700 RMB/*mu*).[8]

> Jiujie Company managed to buy an entire old village – Jingangbei, which is located on a hidden site on Ziyun Mount, Beibei District, with the purpose of transforming it into "China's first thermal bath set in a four-hundred-year-old town".

These two extracts are explicatory of a trend noticed during the digital ethnographic fieldwork, precisely the fact that the blog messages are normally short and sometimes elusive; they appear as descriptions of new regulations and policies, sometimes providing the reader with pictures and specific maps of the area addressed by the process of land renewal. The analysed group uploads the content in relation to the changing urban planning of Beibei District in Chongqing; it shows its strength, i.e. its ability to surface and not be taken down in the disciplinary space of the Chinese digital, to the extent that the content remains within the limits of a descriptive text as a list of facts occurring at the local level. However, some articles published by the administrator present discourses

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[6] *Weixin* (English name "WeChat") is a digital platform privately run by Tencent. It was delivered to the market in 2011 and since then, it has become the main multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment application used in China.

[7] The following blogging groups and related online addresses are kept anonymous.

[8] China's traditional land measure called *mu* is equivalent to 0.165 acre or 666 ⅔ square metre.

that are a thin cry of alarm against the rapid privatization and corporate greediness which are consciously recognized as licit mechanisms approved by the local political leadership, capable of re-organizing the territory and modify the sense of place and identity of Beibei community. Therefore, the interest of the online collective is to improve the level of awareness on the changes affecting their (beloved) land, using the social media as a post-hegemonic space insofar as the content uploaded on it shows little political relevance while it poses questions about the local community's sense of dwelling, recognition of environmental conflicts and the governance system behind them. The ability to skilfully expose the power network may indicate "a radical alternative to policing the environmental conjuncture" (Méndez Cota 2019, 88), advancing in the realm of social awareness through the use of non-representational means which leave space to the agency of local communities, bringing them an opportunity to exert practices of social responsibility out of the virtual.

5. Conclusions

According to Pia, "Ecological Civilisation [*shengtai wenming*] actually seems to be working to reinforce a chauvinistic and system-preserving distrust in local people's ability to redress the imbalance between efficiency in resource use and equity in allocation" (Pia 2017, 31). The same perspective applies to the nexus between land management and landscape grabbing where the fragility of social relations is revealed and ultimately exploited through the local governance. This, however, does not hinder the local communities' willingness to know what is happening in their territory, aware of the fact that local resources are still the commons to which they should have the right of access and fair sharing.

Although the term "crisis" represents a sort of taboo in the Chinese leadership's current narrative devices, the crisis exists in the form of a twisted image of ecological civilization (to come). The objectification of anti-crisis discourses and their performance through practices of landscape commodification are the clear signal of the authoritative capacity to turn the focus of attention from negative realities to positive (dreamed or already existing albeit heterotopic) futures. As Vázquez-Arroyo says, "the narratives of catastrophe today, [...] encompass the citizen as a labile participant who, however powerless, is invited to tacitly authorize those in power to respond to the catastrophic menace described, and to

render the response legitimate, as part of the depoliticized politics that characterize the present" (Vázquez-Arroyo 2013, 742). As the second part of the case study shows, there are however alternative narratives to Chongqing scenario of environmentally-driven forms of gentrification and privatization. Although feeble signs of a politicized community, the online blogging experience allows the spreading of local awareness on the changing territoriality and the subsequent loss of the commons. It invokes emotional spaces (hence the recurrent use of terms such as "our land") to raise social consciousness and move the discourse on a less unjust platform of governmentality.

Landscape is the site of continuous representational adjustments and the space of emotional performance. Upscale real estate advertising forces a new reading upon the already existing environment by making use of the mainstream ecological narrative. Therefore, it reveals how nature is once again linked to the commodity chain, however this time playing an active role as the agent of emotional spacing practices of gentrification. The heterogeneous practice of dwelling within the fetish heterotopia of ecological gated communities manifests an individualized willingness to mobility which is supported by a sense of rightness in one's actions. The blogging group's writing of the local landscape modification reveals what Crouch defines as "the gentle politics [of representation] whose expressive force works through space as landscape" (Crouch 2010, 13). Through the description of the urban planning as it unfolds its governance mechanisms in one of Chongqing urban districts, the group's administrators invite the readers to an act of performativity manifested at least through the awareness of the changing political scenario. In this sense, their descriptions are less representations of a new reality than subtle acts of communal responsibility that reverse the de-politicizing logics on which the space problem of Chongqing nature is rooted.

Capital production and circulation cannot be considered as a unidirectional flow of power. As Zhang, Chung and Yin (2020) find traces of sustainable patterns in the development of greenways, so it happens in Chongqing case that eco-commodities based on the privatization of local resources-the commons, cannot be fully legitimized through a centralized system of governance built on a mechanism of spatio-temporal fix that allows the capital reproduction and circulation. The local upper-middle class looks for heterotopias which could better signify their material and immaterial yearnings against the actual environmental crisis. It is in this conjuncture that the problem space of nature is temporarily resolved through the politicization of the landscape that conveys a message of

hope and health within what is considered as a toxic urban environment. Gentrifying becomes a discursive performance of individualized practices of environmental protection. On the other hand, there emerges the systemic failure to depoliticize local alternative narratives which move away from a direct confrontation with the local state to experiment with digital peer-to-peer mechanisms of awareness and social responsibility on the basis of discourses of emotional proximity.

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