



# Making the countryside more like the countryside? Rural planning and metropolitan visions in post-quake Chengdu



Jessica Wilczak

Department of Geography and Program in Planning, University of Toronto, Sidney Smith Hall, Room 5047, 100 St George Street, Toronto M5S 3G3, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

In 2008, an 8.0-magnitude earthquake struck southwest China less than 100 km north of Chengdu, the booming capital of Sichuan Province. The city government undertook a massive reconstruction project in its rural hinterlands that was guided by existing policies to develop rural areas through coordinated urban and rural planning. Planners sought to avoid replicating urban settlements in rural areas by developing recognizably “pastoral” villages, an approach that is being widely echoed in the relatively new discipline of rural spatial planning in China. This paper argues that such design concessions evade the key feature of the new villages: the concentration of rural residents. The Chengdu government, though this symbolic and actual de-peopling of rural landscapes, has recast rural space as an environmental amenity and an abstract stock of arable land. Drawing on interviews, site visits, and policy and media documents, the paper analyzes the metropolitan plans that provided the framework for rural reconstruction in post-quake Chengdu, and connects these to a model village site in Chengdu’s rural periphery. The case illustrates the need to understand site-level village planning in the context of regional political economies of land, and highlights the new role that metropolitan governments are playing in rural development strategies.

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## 1. Rural planning battles and the logic of concentration

In September 2008, four months after the devastating Wenchuan Earthquake struck Western China, the city of Chengdu convened a “Planning Battle Conference”. According to local newspaper accounts the conference attracted more than 2000 planners from 147 planning and design firms (Xie, 2010). Over the twelve days of the conference they created plans for 361 new concentrated villages throughout the Chengdu metropolitan area. The language of a planning battle is itself revealing: it suggests a war against the countryside in the high modernist style decried by Scott (1998). Read in this light, the Planning Battle appears to be a case of state-led expertise being unleashed to render rural spaces legible and governable. But in some ways the approach that planners and officials adopted appears more nuanced than such critiques might suggest. There was widespread recognition that residents themselves should have a say in reconstruction, for instance, and that some form of traditional rural culture should be preserved. One of the stated intents of the planning battle was to prevent planners from “cloning” city neighborhoods when rebuilding rural areas. This concern for designing distinctive rural

communities was reiterated at the highest levels by Chengdu’s Party Secretary Li Chuncheng, who expressed the somewhat patronizing concern that, “If everything looks the same, villagers won’t be able to find their own door when they come home at night” (Deng, 2010).

Chengdu’s post-quake reconstruction project was a key moment in the emerging science of rural planning in China. The disaster prompted massive flows of capital and expertise to the area that turned the disaster-affected areas into an experimental field for national and international planners and architects. But rural reconstruction is by no means unique to post-quake Chengdu. Since 2006, rural residents and spaces across China have been subject to the “Building a New Socialist Countryside” (*Shehuizhuyi Xin Nongcun Jianshe*) campaign, a “macro-policy” aimed at addressing the income gap between rural and urban residents (Ahlers and Schubert, 2009). In concrete terms, the campaign has resulted in direct improvements to rural lives and livelihoods, including the abolition of taxes and fees for rural residents and increased investment in rural infrastructure (Unger, 2012). Yet while the New Countryside program is not solely about physical construction, residential concentration and new village construction play a significant role in how it is being implemented at the local level (Ahlers and Schubert, 2013; Bray, 2013; He, 2013). In the concentration process, several natural villages (*zirancun*) or villager small groups

E-mail address: [jess.wilczak@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:jess.wilczak@mail.utoronto.ca)

(*cunminxiaozu*) are combined to form larger concentrated settlements, and remote villages are often abandoned in favor of settlements closer to larger urban centers. Though the design and implementation processes behind the new village plans can vary, they appear to share a few common features, including: residential concentration; infrastructure provision (including paved roads, electricity, running water, cooking gas, sewerage, and digital broadband cable); formal classification and separation of land uses; regulation or removal of “disorderly” spaces (including household gardens, sheds, and livestock pens); and construction of new public spaces and public buildings (including parks, clinics, community centers, and government offices) (Bray, 2013; He, 2013; May, 2011).

The growing role of spatial planning in China’s rural restructuring was reinforced when, in 2008, the central government replaced the Urban Planning Law with a unified Urban and Rural Planning Law (*Law of the People’s Republic of China on Urban and Rural Planning*, 2008). The new law required local leaders to consult with professional planning units to produce overall land use and development plans at the township and village levels. This is new terrain, both literally and figuratively, for planning professionals. Generally housed within architecture departments, urban planning programs have tended to foster a technicist, design-oriented approach to spatial planning (Huang, 2012; Leaf and Hou, 2006). Moreover, until recently, China’s planners were employed primarily in urban areas. Early village plans thus drew rather directly from planners’ experience in cities. As a result, many new villages resembled “concrete forests” of homogenous housing blocks lined up like “barracks,” and came under fire from academics, practitioners, and journalists for ignoring the unique features of peasant life (Liu, 2014). In response, planners are turning towards the more humanistic approach to rural planning reflected in the rhetoric of the Planning Battle—a sort of “New Countryside 2.0” that is ostensibly more attuned to the economic, social, and environmental particularities of “peasant life” (Yang, 2008). Yet such a movement, while aiming to mitigate the significant impact of the concentrated villages on an imagined rurality, elides the fact that the new plans are as much about the disposal of the surrounding land as they are about the design of new houses.

While concentrated settlements are frequently framed in terms of meeting the developmental goals of the New Socialist Countryside, they are also the foundation of a nationwide project of rural residential land consolidation (Gu et al., 2010; Song et al., 2010). The idea is that moving farmers into concentrated settlements allows previously scattered homes to be demolished. The housing land and attached homestead plots (*nongcun zhajidi*) can then be converted to agricultural land and consolidated into larger parcels, facilitating the development of large-scale mechanized agriculture. Residential concentration also makes it less costly for local governments to provide infrastructure like running water, electricity, internet services, and paved roads (Zhao and Zhu, 2009). Land consolidation thus meets multiple goals, including improving agricultural productivity, protecting the rural environment, improving farmers’ quality of life, mitigating land conflicts, and addressing the problem of “hollowed” villages as a result of rural outmigration (Li et al., 2014; Zhang, 2010). A further justification for consolidation, moreover, is preserving arable land in an era of rapid urban growth, thereby enlisting rural areas in shouldering some of the burden of urbanization (Shao et al., 2013). Rural residential concentration is thus not merely a means of pursuing rural development, but the key to pursuing sustainable “scientific development” at the national and regional scales as well (Fan, 2007).

In this paper, I draw attention to the logic of concentration as key to understanding rural planning (*xiangcun guihua*) in contemporary China. I further argue that evaluations of rural planning that stop at the scale of the village miss important dynamics shaping

rural restructuring, and underestimate the important role that metropolitan governments are playing in shaping rural futures. Drawing on the case of post-quake Chengdu, I illustrate how the city government has pursued rural concentration as a means of recasting rural space as an environmental amenity and an abstract “stock” of arable land. The paper is based on an analysis of policy and media coverage, as well as site visits and interviews with residents, planners, and local government officials conducted throughout the quake zone from 2010 to 2012. The research is presented in three parts. I first outline the national policy context that has set the stage for metropolitan governments to take the lead in the current round of rural restructuring in China. I then turn to regional strategic planning in Chengdu, showing how the plan allows the city to meet the rural development goals established by the central government, but also helps local officials pursue global city ambitions. Finally I analyze site planning in Luping Village, which was lauded as a model for rural planning in post-quake Chengdu. Rather than simply examining the village site plan, I explore what was happening to land around the new concentrated village, linking this back to Chengdu’s metropolitan vision and the regional politics of land that is defining China’s latest round of urbanization.

## 2. Cities as leaders of “coordinated urban and rural development

In 2014 China’s central government announced the “National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)”. The plan targets taking the percentage of the urban population up to 60 percent by 2020, and is being promoted as a means of both increasing living standards and transforming China’s macroeconomic structure by boosting domestic consumption (*National New Style Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)*, n.d.). But this is not urbanization in the “traditional” sense of growth around built-up urban centers. A literal translation of the Chinese term used in the plan’s title—*chengzhenhua*—is “city- and town-ification”, indicating an effort to promote urbanization through the planned growth of small cities and towns in order to relieve potential population pressure in large urban cores.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the official government site for the New-Type Urbanization Plan calls for the preservation of rural culture and stresses that this does *not* mean making urban and rural areas the same, or covering rural areas with “concrete forests” (*National New Style Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)*, n.d.). The case of Chengdu illustrates that the intent of contemporary rural urbanization projects is to create an integrated urban and rural system in which city and countryside play distinct roles. As one Chengdu official was quoted as saying, “The new style rural urbanization is not meant to eradicate the countryside; rather, it is meant to make the city more like the city and the countryside more like the countryside” (Liu, 2014).

Metropolitan governments have become crucial actors in these efforts to “make the city more like the city and the countryside more like the countryside.” One reason for this relates to the particular morphology of Chinese cities: since the 1950s the boundaries of China’s large cities have included large tracts of rural land and significant populations of rural residents, as well as surrounding towns and cities. City boundaries grew further in the 1990s as the central government undertook sweeping reforms of China’s territorial system, including the “abolishing counties and

<sup>1</sup> The concept of *chengzhenhua* is not new and dates back to at least the early 2000s (Yeh et al., 2011). Shih (2013) directly adopts the Chinese term *chengzhenhua* (city- and town-ification) rather than urbanization to describe these contemporary processes of rural urbanization in China. She points out that the English term “urbanization” evokes the image of built-up urban cores, and “...forecloses possibilities of imagining the rural as a potentially urban site” (Ibid.).

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