



Informal Learning Spaces: Mediated Virtues and Development Practices in a Peri-Urban District of Chongqing, Southwest China

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Abstract

Chongqing, the largest urban agglomeration in its namesake municipality, has experienced rapid urban expansion since the early 2000s, driven by economic growth and land monetisation, bolstered by China's "Open Up the West" policy. This paper focuses on Beibei District, a peripheral space at the urban-rural interface, which embodies new symbolic and material shifts as part of this urban reconfiguration. Specifically, it examines the use of propaganda posters associated with the China Dream campaign during the redevelopment of selected land plots in Beibei, analysing their content and spatial distribution through a relational socio-semiotic lens. By unpacking the (trans)national and local narratives embedded in these posters, the study reveals how ecological modern neighbourhoods and idealised citizens are co-constructed through public-private spatial encounters. The research critiques the territoriality of power and spatial inequalities, especially in China's southwestern peripheries, highlighting the entanglement between state-driven urban identity-making and upscale real estate development as a local governmentality tool. It argues that informal learning, facilitated through visual storytelling in public spaces, politicises everyday environments by promoting representations of Chinese virtues. This work contributes to the study of peri-urban micro-spatialities in the Global East, employing a decolonial approach that centres local languages and ontologies for critical reflection on urban knowledge production.

Keywords

peri-urban, visual storytelling, informal learning space, gentrification, Chongqing, China

Brief Commentary

This article, originally titled *“Spazi di apprendimento. Virtù mediate e pratiche di sviluppo di un quartiere periurbano di Chongqing”*, was first published in 2023 in *Sinosfere*, an Italian journal dedicated to Chinese Studies and overseen by a scientific committee of Italian sinologists. The article underwent an anonymous peer review process. Within the context of Italian academia, it represents one of the few substantive attempts to investigate contemporary Chinese urban peripheries through a geographical lens, moving beyond the dominant macro-geopolitical frameworks that typically characterise the Italian scholarly discourse on China.

In contrast, this paper adopts a transfeminist perspective to examine the evolving micro-spatialities of the urban within the broader political project of Chinese Ecological Civilisation. Acknowledging my own positionality, and drawing from extended ethnographic and digital fieldwork in the area (Bonato 2020), I seek to contribute to the decolonisation of Western-centric knowledge production by foregrounding local spatial narratives and allowing the sources themselves to articulate their ontologies (Moosavi 2023). In this endeavour, proficiency in local languages and cultural fluency are essential.

My decision to publish in an Italian-language journal was also motivated by the noticeable absence of a spatial perspective within Chinese Studies curricula in Italy. The “geography of/with China” is rarely incorporated into academic programmes, and the discipline is often sidelined in favour of state-centric geopolitics or international relations. In academic settings, I have encountered scepticism—even suspicion—regarding the relevance of spatial analysis in Chinese contexts, especially when conducted by non-Chinese scholars. Occasionally, such attitudes are couched in a paternalistic admiration for “mappine e cartine” (maps and cartography, with a diminutive connotation), celebrated more for their descriptive pedagogical utility than for their critical analytical depth. My work, consequently, is often relegated to the margins—perceived as supplementary, non-essential, or as a form of disciplinary excess. The lack of institutional funding for geographical approaches to China further reflects and reinforces this marginalisation, mirroring the precarious academic conditions faced by many Italian scholars (Acetino et al. 2025). Against this backdrop, my aim was to disrupt conventional disciplinary boundaries—both in research and pedagogy—by introducing geographical critique into Chinese Studies, and to cultivate spaces of mutual dialogue between the two fields.

This paper investigates place-making and identity-building practices in the Global East from the perspective of mediascapes and their capacity to produce official and alternative knowledges. Following Appadurai (1996), mediascapes are complex, image-centred narratives that contribute to both official and vernacular productions of place. These mediascapes, often structured by post-socialist and post-colonial infrastructures of memory and affect, play a constitutive role in shaping spatial identity and belonging (Duara 1995; Rofel 2007; Berry and Rofel 2013; Tang 2015). Drawing on Massey’s (2005) relational view of place as dynamic and contested, such mediated geographies reflect not merely representations

but ongoing negotiations of spatial meaning and power. In this sense, space is better conceived as plural (Pierce 2022). At the intersection of lived, imagined, and material spatialities (Soja 1996), alternative knowledges may emerge through everyday visual and digital practices (Rose 2007; Wilmott 2020), challenging dominant geopolitical narratives and reconfiguring the spatial legibility of the Global East.

In particular, the paper takes a longitudinal point of view to deepen the analysis of peri-urban peripheries in southwest China, acknowledging the quest for considering local ontologies and decolonising the urban studies discourses (Roy 2009; Parnell and Robinson 2012) without neglecting the impact of global neoliberal urbanism on local issues of spatial justice and environmental impact (Waley 2016). The research shows the entanglements of propaganda posters, commercial advertisements, and graffiti in displaying a local sense of moral virtues and Chineseness. According to a purely semiotic interpretation, signs “teach not only current conditions and land use patterns but also pending landscape change. They denote place, event or possibility in a spatial-temporal continuum.” (Weigfilman 1988, 69). As semiotic markers of urban lifestyles and (post)modernity discourses, visual representations reflect the urban as a landscape of consumption. Being part of “cultural strategies of economic redevelopment,” they may convey new meaning to the cities’ symbolic image (Zukin 1998, 826) as well as counternarratives of urban resistance (Mubi Brighenti 2010; Dekeyser 2021). Overall, diverse studies have pointed out that in neoliberal societies, urban signs may discursively discipline, legitimise, and resist commodification and gentrification patterns (Papen 2015; Trinch and Snajdr 2017). The symbolic economy analysed in this paper considers peri-urban neighbourhood regeneration and privatisation in Chongqing in relation to housing conditions and Chinese pre-modern Culture. Throughout this dialectical entanglement, it emerges how *signs may do things* in the locale rather than just describe it. Embracing the phenomenological turn in spatial analysis, the socio-semiotic perspective allows us to claim how “linguistic and semiotic landscape is strongly interlinked with the socio-spatial dialectic of a place and its various meanings” (Altenberger 2024, 254; see also Bruce 2010).

The paper draws upon Lefebvre’s (1991) conception of the right to the city, which positions urban space as both a site of domination and a terrain of struggle. This condition appears to be exacerbated by neoliberal policies, which have privatised urban space and governance, shrinking the urban spaces of collective representation through displacement and gentrification (Harvey 2008). In this framing, graffiti can be read as a material inscription of dissent, a practice that reclaims urban space not only for visibility but for alternative modes of inhabitation and expression.

Graffiti’s transgressive visibility challenges normative boundaries of legality and propriety, foregrounding questions about who has the right to shape urban aesthetics, and on what terms. It operates as both a spatial and semiotic intervention, disrupting sanitised visions of urban modernity and asserting claims to memory, identity, and territory. As Bragaglia (2024) notes, “[G]raffiti slogans are both often deeply space-dependent and claim a contested urban space [...] the ‘where’ of graffiti slogans is often a crucial aspect of understanding how dissents resurface in a seemingly consensual environment” (Bragaglia 2024, 1226). Furthermore, Mubi Brighenti (2010, 315) observes how “graffiti writing as an interstitial practice [...] transforms the wall into a fragment of a ‘prolongable’ series, a part of a continuing conversation.” Through the case study, I will demonstrate that official public

service advertising and upscale real estate advertising adopt the very same tentacular tactic on the peri-urban periphery of Chongqing to redesign the landscaping practices via the instrumentalisation of “purely Chinese” values, among which the culture of family savings and intergenerational sacrifice emerges as the main discourse intrinsic to Chinese/Han society. Mediascape (re)territorialisation thus appears as both an institutionalised strategy *and* an informal counterstrategy; their proximity is possible and desirable when understood through Massey’s framework of space as plural (Pierce 2022).

Wall-based interventions in China are strictly connected with the visual nature of the Chinese language; despite their common appearance in contemporary urban and rural spaces, visual representations mounted on walls trace back to pre-modern Chinese legal tradition and Maoist-Dengist propaganda campaigns (Landsberger 2001). Within the current Ecological Civilisation framework, public service advertising and upscale real estate commercial advertisements may be locally interwoven into processes of urban aggrandisement based on natural resource commodification, landscape grabbing, and greenwashing campaigns (Bonato 2024). Alongside the spreading of state-elicited public visual art, in the last three decades, graffiti art has entered the Chinese urban scene thanks to foreign visual discursive influences; private and public stakeholders have also appropriated it as a tool for urban beautification in Chinese megacities (Bruce 2010; Pan 2013). While avant-garde artists may employ graffiti to challenge the ideal monolithic constitution of the state vis-a-vis society by temporarily re-occupying public spaces and engaging in issues of socio-spatial justice (Bruce 2010), some scholars have pointed out how this ephemeral artistic practice can be regarded primarily as creative self-expression, emphasising aesthetic intention rather than vandalism (Valjakka 2013). More recently, in line with China’s nationalist cultural wave, prominent Chinese graffiti crews have merged Euro-American graffiti practices with traditional Chinese arts, thus re-interpreting ancient Chinese art forms using graffiti vocabulary (Iezzi 2019). Local communities as lay practitioners may also use graffiti as a form of “spatial poetics” to challenge redevelopment projects and revalorise neighbourhoods (Smith 2020). The graffiti analysed in this paper is an example of indirect confrontation with the local state and communities, as “graffiti relates to broader practices of political dissent in China, which depend on irony, metonymy, and indirection, wherein low-level protest [uses] allusion and evocation (Bruce 2010, 8). As Bruce (2010) notes, “The act of looking [at the graffiti] then creates a kind of epistemic community [woven together] through a spatial relationship” (Bruce 2010, 10). As this research points out, the spatial context provides meaning for the appearance of graffiti in Chongqing’s suburbs, whereas the wall may work as an ephemeral yet potent signal of awareness about the material and emotional imaginary of loss, targeting primarily the local community’s spatiality, undergoing gentrification. Graffiti’s proximity to institutionalised wall-based visual art is also a provocation against mainstream ideological narratives of identity-building and communicative practice.

This paper offers a critical intervention into the geographies of urbanisation and state territorialisation in China’s southwestern periphery, an empirically underexamined region in Western geographical literature. By centring this marginalised context, the study broadens the spatial scope of critical geography and highlights the importance of attending to peripheral urbanisms in the Global East. The research adopts a decolonial approach through the sustained use of Chinese-language sources and extended ethnographic engagement,

disrupting dominant knowledge hierarchies and repositioning local epistemologies as central to spatial analysis.

Grounded in a phenomenological framework, the paper articulates the nexus between creative sign economy and territorial practices, showing how meanings inscribed in space are not merely representational but actively co-constitutive of material and political realities. The case of the China Dream campaign, as operationalised in local urban aggrandisement, reveals how central state imaginaries are locally rearticulated through both human and nonhuman actors. Working as material and symbolic infrastructures, boundary walls of newly gentrified areas display both institutionalised advertisement materials and informal graffiti, acting as active participants in the socio-material production of space and representational politics. These findings reveal the multi-scalar dynamics and contingent logics of state power, offering new insights into how discourses of identity-building and Chineseness are operationalised in peripheral urban mediascapes.

Introduction

The nature of areas on the city's outskirts is fluid and constantly evolving, as they exist within a contested space shaped by the tension between new urbanisation demands and rural realities that are not necessarily in decline. As urban boundaries expand, the urban planning process in peri-urban areas intersects with rural zones, leading to the fragmentation of land and abrupt changes in land use (Abramson 2016). In the peripheral context of southwest China, the peri-urban zone often incorporates pre-existing urban greenery and other natural spaces on the city's periphery, such as hillsides, lakes, water reserves, and uncultivated land. As a result, the peri-urban landscape assumes a polymorphic character, encompassing residential neighbourhoods, urban services, agricultural land, and industrial areas that reflect the heterogeneity of local social structure. This spatial configuration carries significant socio-cultural implications, shaped by processes of speculation and power dynamics in the production and use of space (Kan and Chen 2021).

The area analysed in this article is located in the megacity of Chongqing. With a population of approximately ten million, the city serves as the capital of the eponymous municipality, which was established in 1997 and placed under the direct control of the central government. It is the most recently established municipality and the only one not situated along the coast. As noted by Zheng Degao, this new administrative unit was created to experiment with an integrated urban-rural approach designed to promote the development of vast areas within the Sichuan Basin, capitalising on Chongqing's strategic location. Often referred to as the "gorge of Sichuan," this geomorphological "bottleneck" has become a critical passageway for movement between the western and eastern territories of the country (Zheng 2007).

This research focuses on the peri-urban area of Beibei District, specifically a new residential zone to the south of the historic centre, known as Chengnan (literally, "southern part of the city"). Beibei District was established in December 1980, following the dissolution of the local Revolutionary Committee (*qu geming weiyuanhui*). In September 2004, the administrative headquarters was relocated to Chengnan, also referred to as the "new district" (*xinqu*). The historic area near the Jialing River port displays a spatial stratification resulting from rural and industrial policies that have shaped its development since the 1930s (Fig. 1) (Zhou 2003). In contrast, the planning of Chengnan is the product of more recent territorial

redevelopment, imbued with high symbolic value. This redevelopment involves converting large plots of land from agricultural use to buildable land, as well as the privatisation of hilly terrains, which have been transformed into elite residential spaces. Following the relocation of the government seat from the historic centre, Chengnan has become the model area for launching the revitalisation of the district, situated within a local administrative context characterised by highly competitive entrepreneurial attitudes among the central districts of Chongqing. Regarding land use, there is an apparent effort to distance Beibei from its former reputation as a satellite city and heavy industrial hub, repositioning the district as a strategic node within the infrastructure network connecting Chongqing to Sichuan Province. The mobility of symbolic and material value from the historic centre of Beibei to Chengnan contributes to creating a dense stratification of spaces, practices, and land uses, marked by the proximity of power centres, knowledge production sites, industries, and agricultural lands (Fig. 1).

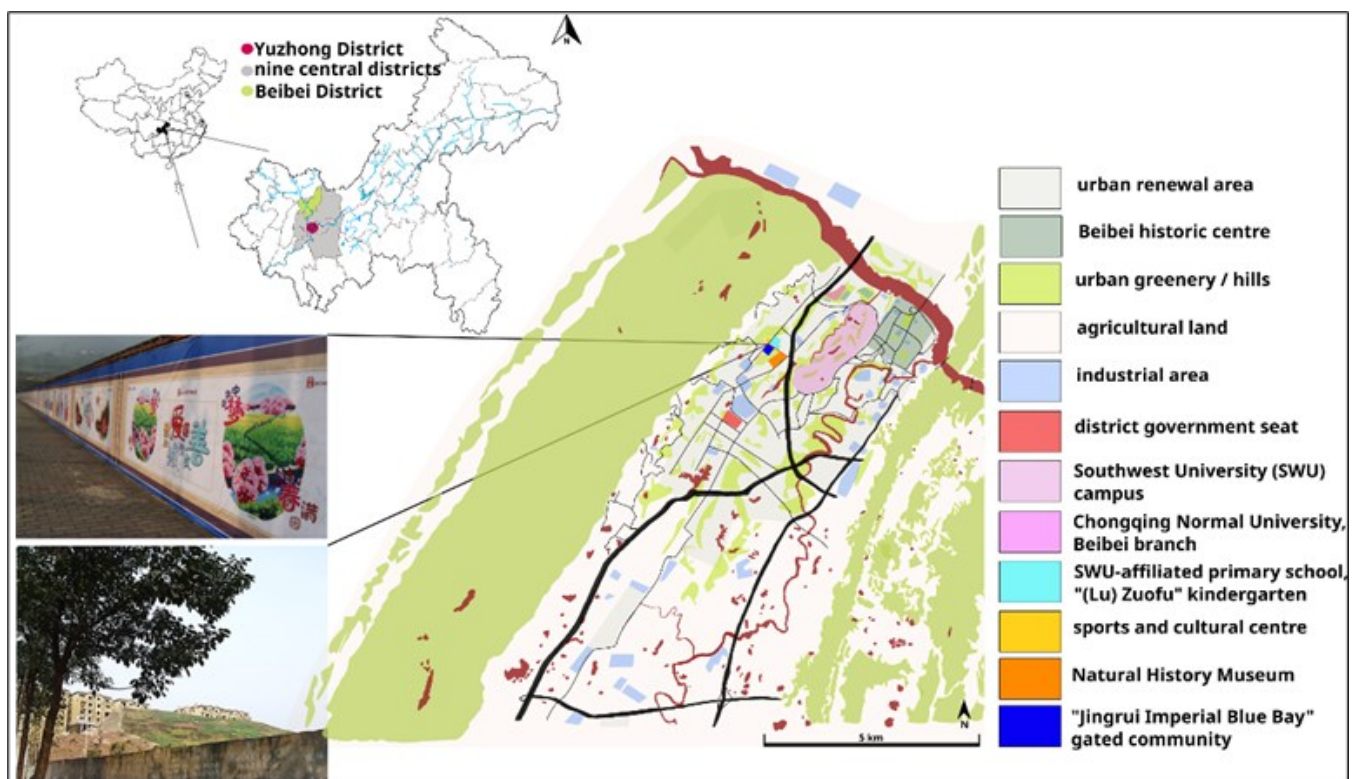


Figure 1. Overview of Beibei District. The posters are arranged sequentially along approximately 500 metres of a retaining wall on Wenhong/Wensi Street, while the graffiti is located on Yunkai Street (Source: Photographs by the author, 2015; map drawn by the author, 2022)

Within this framework, this research investigates the spatial distribution of propaganda posters associated with the "China Dream," a national campaign launched in the past decade to reintroduce pre-modern cultural elements into the discourse surrounding the construction of contemporary national identity. In this context, patriotism manifests not only through representations tied to the social imaginary but also through spatial performances. By tracing the placement of these posters in a new residential area of Chengnan, the article aims to illuminate the relationship between the mediascape accessed through images and the evolving residential space. The dialectical connection has been evident since the planning phase, as revealed by the survey conducted in the area. The study thus examines how the

media contribute to the construction of a harmonious habitat, acting as intermediaries in the process of resignifying the locale as specific elitist urban trends, such as upscale real estate enclaves, expand into the peri-urban zone.

Urban Renewal, Land Monetisation, and the Role of Narratives

In the Chinese context, urban renewal frequently denotes the process of expropriating and re-planning both urban areas and the transitional zones between cities and rural regions. This phenomenon emerged in the late 1990s in major coastal cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou (Wu 1999). Urbanisation presupposes an increase in land value through commodification practices, a necessary condition for managing capital flows and implementing neoliberal reforms (Harvey 2003; Shin 2016). However, by reshaping and renewing the local landscape, this process also contributes to spatial fragmentation, social segregation, and the emergence of inequalities in access to resources. An example since the 1990s is the commodification of the waterscape (waterfront), leading to its “visual consumption” driven by aesthetic considerations (Sieber 1993). Chongqing’s urban development follows this procedural model, driven by the strong dirigiste influence of district-level administrations. These administrations, often acting as entrepreneurial agents—and at times as key stakeholders in the so-called urban renaissance—navigate the flows of power and capital within a network of actors involved in territorial development governance (Wu and Ma 2006; Mertha 2009; He and Lin 2015).

Located on the northwestern edge of Chongqing, Beibei District was long overlooked during the wave of post-1997 urbanisation. As a result, the increase in land value, driven by the construction of luxury real estate, has progressed at a different pace compared to other, more dynamic districts. However, since 2013, residential development based on the gated community model has intensified. The graph in Figure 2 presents data related to a sample of such elite enclaves, all concentrated in the Chengnan area (Fig. 2). The investors and developers behind these projects are primarily private holdings (Bonato 2020); among state-owned enterprises, Zhongtie stands out, as its residential development ranks among the most expensive ones in the area—exceeding 18,000 yuan per square metre on the second-hand market, with villas priced above three million yuan.

From an aesthetic perspective, the housing model capitalises on the green landscape at the urban-rural boundary. This is reflected in the symbolic naming of the residential neighbourhoods, which evoke both exotic architectural references, such as *Fontainebleau*, and elements proper to the Chinese *shanshui* (landscape painting) tradition, including lakes, hills, and hot springs. From a material standpoint, housing standards are marketed as “Western” (*yangfang*) and environmentally friendly, with private green spaces comprising an average of 50% of the total residential area.

The planning of luxury residential neighbourhoods and the resulting increase in land value are integral components of a local development strategy endorsed by the central government. To enhance the effectiveness of this strategy, the Chinese Communist Party has historically relied on the production of narratives as a key tactic to convey political, economic, and social transformations. Storytelling may occur orally or through visual media (Scolari 2009). It strengthens community cohesion by integrating diverse knowledge systems, thereby generating imaginaries imbued with moral values and a sense of place. In this way, storytelling reinforces a collective cultural memory embedded within a shared ethical framework (Tuan

1979; Chan 1997; Assmann 2008; You 2012). As a political practice, it can also enable agentive forms of engagement by fostering emotional attachment to the community (Eder 2010).

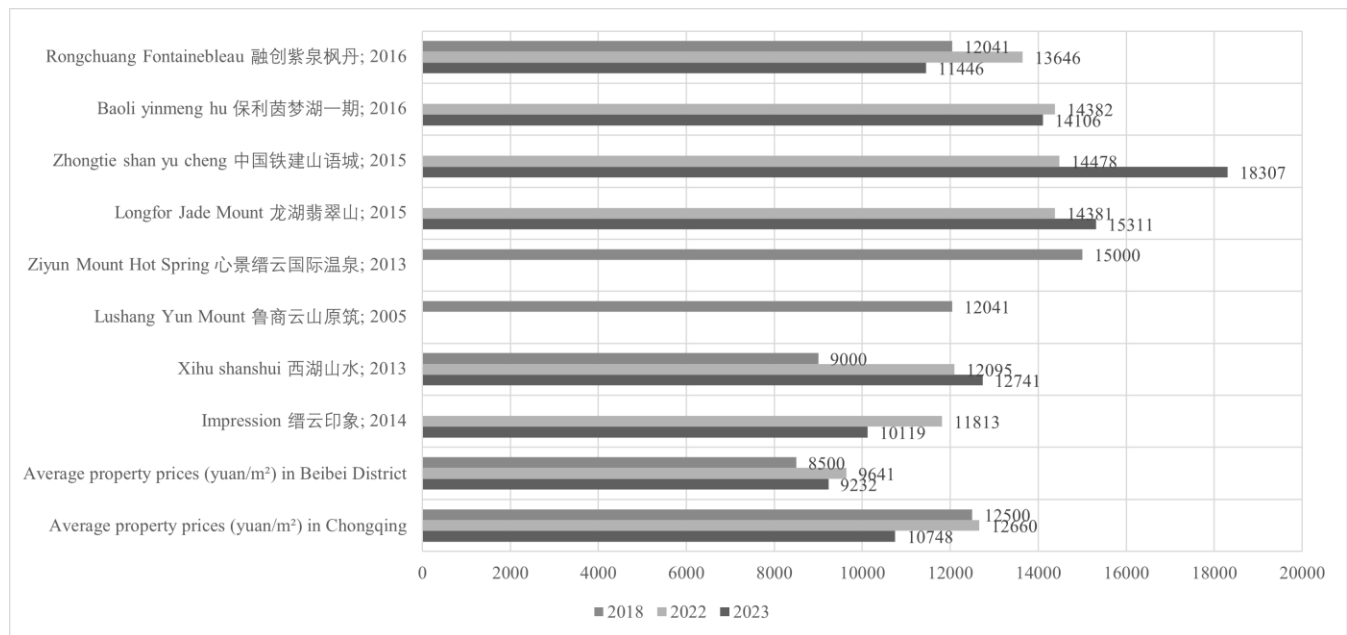


Figure 2. Average property prices (yuan/m²) in Beibei District, Chongqing, and in a sample of elite enclaves in Beibei (Source: author's elaboration, 2023, based on data from various sources: <https://cq.esf.fang.com/loupan/3111033852.htm>; <https://cq.esf.fang.com/loupan/3110879112.htm>; <https://mfang.58.com/cq/loupan/239167/>; <https://cq.lianjia.com/xiaoqu/367144912728213/>; <http://cq.loupan.com/loupan/6186497.html>; <http://yuerongsidi.fang.com>; <https://www.creprice.cn/community/1771492646.html?city=cq>; <https://cq.fang.anjuke.com/loupan/251133.html?ifx=p3013a0c20r0m241201&from=&ifxc=3013>; <https://cq.esf.fang.com/loupan/3111135704.htm>; last accessed April 28, 2023)

In post-socialist contemporary China, official narratives must take into account the transformed social structure in order to remain effective. Individuals from younger generations increasingly seek to balance personal interests with those of the “group,” which is now more often understood as the family rather than a broader collective (Sabet 2011). This shift is also reflected in the narratives conveyed through visual media. Propaganda posters mediate interests across multiple scales—from national to local—by framing learning environments within politicised representations of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Bennett 1998). Over the past decade, authorities have actively promoted the intensification of discourses that selectively manipulate elements of “traditional” culture, using them as a cultural buffer against the perceived threat of unchecked Westernisation, a force that, until recently, was regarded as a necessary component of China’s modernisation strategy (Tsang 2014).

The educational potential of these narratives emerges not only from fragments of traditional culture but also from signs that communicate the Party’s ongoing contribution to societal well-being. The posters draw inspiration from forms of oral storytelling that have circulated in China since the pre-modern era, repurposing them for contemporary pedagogical aims (Landsberger 2001). Propaganda narratives, in particular, possess a “temporal and local quality,” meaning their content and significance evolve over time, often through processes of recycling and recontextualising specific themes. A notable example is

the environmental theme: originally introduced in the 1980s as part of visual narratives supporting the state's "spiritual civilisation" campaign, it re-emerged in the late 2000s with the promotion of the Party's "ecological civilisation" concept (Gare 2021; Huan 2021; Zhang 2021). However, representations of nature are doubly instrumentalised in local planning strategies, as illustrated in the peri-urban area of Beibei, where both the material and symbolic value of the landscape is mobilised to legitimise extractivist practices.

Reading Media-Space Interactions: A Multimodal Approach

Mass storytelling, created through sequences of images accompanied by brief text, responds to contemporary needs stemming from the fragmented nature of the information society (Bauman 2005; Castells 2008). Fast and effective communication requires greater linguistic economy—reducing the number of words and symbols—while also transmitting "cultural filters" that assist in understanding the messages conveyed by the posters (Geertz 1973; Hall 1997). Beginning with the informative function of signs transmitted through language, it is possible to trace the relationship between the sequence of posters and the surrounding space (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). In this context, images are no longer merely representations of an imaginary; instead, they acquire material significance through new social and residential practices, enabled by spatial restructuring and zoning outlined in the local development plans (Lefebvre 1991; Zukin 1998; Wu 2015).

The multimodal approach to narration is grounded in the premise that signs possess agency in society, a phenomenon observable in the process of cultural formation within communities. This agentive narration thus renders the politicisation of culture effective. Multimodality is also evident in the migration of signs across different media environments, contributing to the consumption of "imaginary worlds" (Scolari 2009). By examining the meaningful interaction between producer, viewer, and viewed object (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Liu 2019), the following section explores the imaginaries potentially conveyed by the posters and spatialised within the Chengnan peri-urban area through interaction with other material and symbolic elements present in the locale.

Chengnan Case Study: From Moral Narratives to Disciplinary Spatialities

The images selected for analysis illustrate the underlying logic behind the media distribution of posters in the peri-urban space of Chongqing during a period of territorial redevelopment. The distinctiveness of some of these posters lies not so much in their content, which is also reproduced in other Chinese cities, but in their spatial placement. It is the *where* that holds significance, as the sequence of images comes to define the place through the atmosphere generated during the viewing and reading process. The panel, in its entirety, extends for approximately 500 meters along the retaining wall of a construction site. It unfolds like an ancient scroll, with each section bearing the phrase: "*The image tells our system of values*" (*tu shuo women de jiazhiguan*).

The first national propaganda poster (Fig. 3) introduces filial piety as a foundational moral principle underpinning Chinese society. Centrally featured is the slogan "strong and prosperous, democratic, harmonious, and civilised [nation]" (*qiang fu minzhu hexie wenming*), a core component of the Party's developmental discourse. The visual composition presents three male generations engaged in a ritualised performance of *xiao* (filial piety): the grandfather, seated on a chair inscribed with the character *fu* (happiness), occupies a position

of symbolic authority. Decorative elements such as the fan featuring the double character *feng* (abundance) reinforce ideologically charged themes of prosperity and intergenerational continuity. Despite markers of age, such as his beard and elongated cranial form, the elder figure retains an image of vitality, underscoring an idealised narrative of active seniority. The middle generation is shown washing the elder's feet in a gesture of reverence, while the youngest observes, signifying the pedagogical transmission of moral values. Although the composition is overtly patriarchal, it is softened by the presence of a hen with her chicks—a maternal symbol—while the inclusion of a rooster, traditionally associated with authority and vigilance in Chinese iconography, evokes the state's paternalistic role in caring for the social collective. This moralising visual framework is further anchored by textual reinforcements such as “filial piety is the foundation of virtue” and “filial piety: the moral excellence of the Chinese nation,” revealing the state's attempt to territorialise ethical norms within everyday public space.

The second image (Fig. 4), produced at the municipal level, features the slogan “dedication to work, credibility and integrity, fraternity and love for the motherland” (*jingye chengxin youshan aiguo*), directly echoing the core socialist values promoted by President Xi Jinping at the 18th National Congress. Framed within a circular motif, the phrase “study diligently to make progress” (*qinxue xiangshang*) reinforces the moral imperative of self-improvement, while the inscription “patriotism” (*aiguo*), rendered in traditional characters, signals a symbolic linkage to cultural heritage and continuity. The image portrays three youth figures ascending a hill while reading a shared book—an allegorical representation of collective advancement through education. In the background, a rural village landscape is depicted, into which a lone farmer returns, carrying a *bangbang*, which is the iconic bamboo pole associated with manual labour and goods transportation in Chongqing and surrounding rural areas. The composition integrates urban aspirations with rural continuity, articulating a spatial narrative in which moral development, patriotic sentiment, and productive labour are fused. As such, the image functions not only as an ideological artefact but also as a visual mechanism for embedding state-endorsed values within everyday spatial imaginaries.



Figure 3. Poster related to the concept of “filial piety” (Source: Photo by the author, 2015)



Figure 4. Poster related to the concept of “study and patriotism” (Source: Photo by the author, 2015)

Following the visual and textual signs embedded in the narrative sequence, a set of non-heroic, everyday figures emerges, shaped as familiar archetypes that embody mundane

virtues such as diligence, self-improvement, playfulness, affection, and filial respect. These representations, often conveyed through vibrant colours and oversized, stylised fonts, translate ideologically complex messages through the accessible grammar of visual simplicity. Rather than adhering to a diachronic or linear storytelling structure, the posters rely on thematic juxtaposition: individual panels are saturated with iconographic elements that, drawing from pre-modern Chinese pictorial traditions, evoke harmonious relationships between humans and the environment. Alongside romanticised portrayals of agrarian abundance, featuring natural resources and domesticated animals, other posters depict assertive male figures engaged in technical labour or administrative tasks, such as the signing of official documents. These images recall the technocratic ethos of Chinese statecraft and draw directly from the visual lexicon established during the Maoist and Dengist eras. Moreover, symbols of Chinese material culture, including traditional fans, board games like chess, specific clothing styles, and historically coded hairstyles, serve to anchor a discourse on cultural sovereignty. This visual reassertion of national identity contributes to an ethical-political dialogue on self-determination, particularly in relation to perceived external (Western) influences, which are increasingly framed as threats to the integrity of Chinese cultural continuity.

Nevertheless, a generalised and decontextualised notion of culture is conveyed, represented through objects stripped of their original socio-historical meanings and disconnected from their spatial embeddedness. This act of cultural abstraction is visually underscored by the use of stark white backgrounds, which isolate the figures and sever their representational ties to the surrounding landscape in which the posters are physically situated. Once extracted from context, intangible heritage is reconfigured as a vehicle for circulating contingent ideological narratives, functioning to symbolically reaffirm state authority and control over territory. In this process, the inclusion of textual captions functions as a directive device, guiding the viewer toward state-sanctioned interpretations and minimising the potential for polysemy. To grasp the spatial affordances of the media ecology under analysis, beyond the self-referential dimensions of the message itself, it is necessary to consider other material and symbolic elements present at the site (Fig. 5).

The sequence of images is strategically positioned along a retaining wall within a newly designed residential neighbourhood, which is nearing completion with the addition of a kindergarten and a primary school affiliated with the district's leading university. This retaining wall runs parallel to Wensi Street (*wensi lu*, "Street of Merit and Morality"), a secondary road intersecting Jinyun Avenue (*Jinyun dadao*), one of the primary arteries in Beibei. The placement of the posters, along with the nomenclature of the new street at the base of Jinyun Hill, reflects the narrative-driven spatial appropriation, which is centred around the themes of ecological civilisation, homeland, and familial values. The posters engage with the visual landscape of an elite housing enclave under construction directly across the street (*Imperial Blue Bay*; see Figs. 1 and 5), amplifying the narrative of residential idealism. The real estate developer, Jingrui Holdings Ltd., reinforces this vision through the slogan: "We understand love and even more, family" (*dong ai geng dong jia*), positioning family as central to the construction of ecological and moral space. This aligns with the environmental ethos promoted by the imagery—an idealised, pollution-free habitat (Fig. 6)—and with the rural metaphor (*zhongzhi*, cultivate; *turang*, soil) in Figure 7, which equates the nurturing of a child to the growth of a plant, rooted in love. The juxtaposition of vibrant coloured sections and

subdued black-and-white portions emphasises the hierarchical nature of meaning within the image, underscoring the home as both a sanctuary and a site of familial warmth. In this framing, the interplay between material and symbolic space is evident: public and private posters alike function as agents of urban renewal, shaping both the place and landscape as well as the ideologies embedded within it.

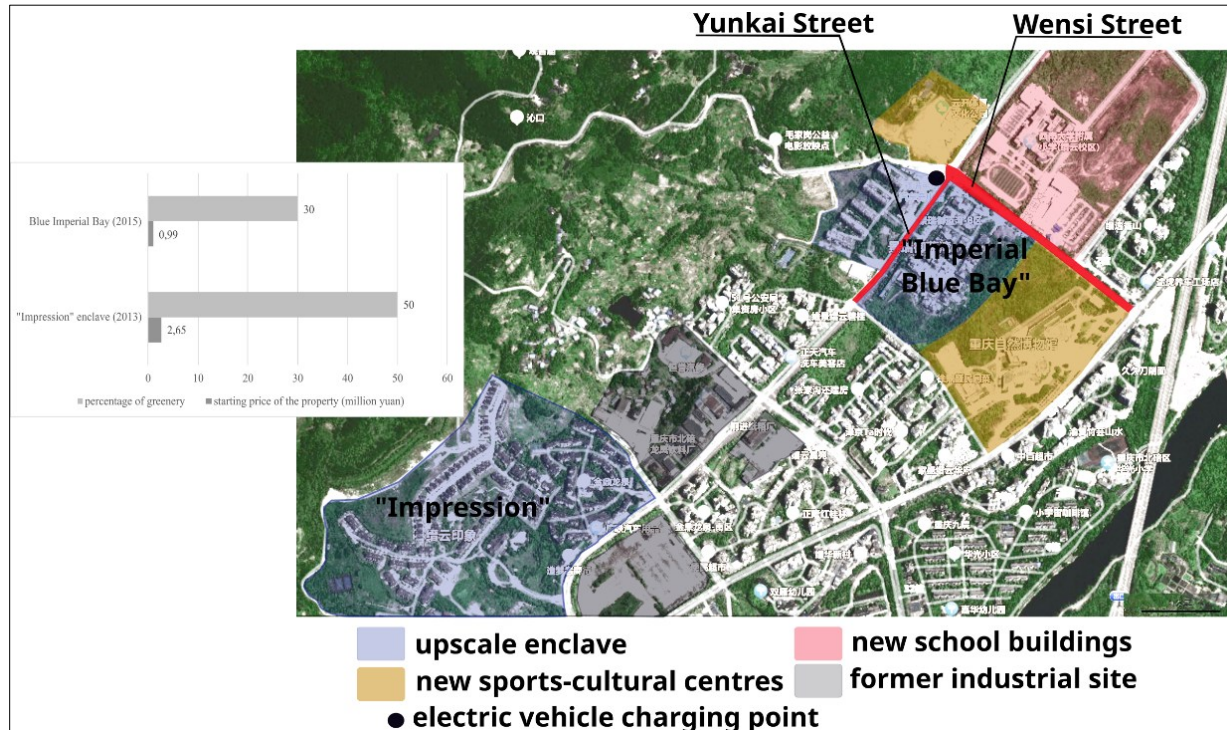


Figure 5. New residential neighbourhood with services and average value of new properties (Source: Author’s elaboration, 2023, based on satellite imagery from Baidu Ditu, fair use for academic purposes)



Figure 6. Poster related to the concept of family: “Supporting each other means making an eternal promise, giving life the most emotionally charged nuance [expression] possible” (Source: Photo by the author, 2015)



Figure 7. Poster related to the concept of family: “Family [home] is the soil in which hope is cultivated; it grows and matures through affection” (Source: Photo by the author, 2015)

Continuing to walk along the parallel of Jinyun Avenue, Yunkai Street (*Yunkai lu*) marks the boundary between the gated community and the surrounding neighbourhood. Here, the wall itself becomes a medium for an alternative form of political expression (Figs. 1 and 5). The chalk graffiti that adorns the wall presents a divergent narrative of Party ideology and power, with images of the flag featuring the five stars (Fig. 9), and the star representing the Party, accompanied by the phrase “take care of the world” (*qing xi tianxia*) (Fig. 8). The inscriptions in Figure 9 extol development (*fayang chong guang*, with *yang* rendered in traditional characters), the homeland (*zuguo wansui*), and the people (*renmin weida*). A recurring image of a horse, placed within the flag, subtly invokes a connection between the sound “ma” (horse) and Marxism, imbuing the symbolism with historical depth. Other writings, scattered across the wall (Fig. 1), describe the quotidian life of the middle class, whose timeline is marked by work, meals, and evening walks, offering a glimpse into everyday spatial practices. Among these, one finds the phrase: “The flag flutters in the wind (*wuxing hong qi yingfengpiaowu*), the loyal people praise in their hearts (*zhongshi renmin xinzhong kua*), [...] the great figure of Chairman Mao ([...] *weiren Mao Zhuxi*)”. This narrative, while evoking a communist past through the written word, lacks a substantial connection to the rapidly evolving urban fabric of the Chongqing peri-urban area. The celebration of the past contrasts with the forward-looking tone set by the broader spatial discourse, which envisions the Party’s role in guiding the present and future socio-political and economic development of the country. It is this tension between past and present that frames the posters, offering a sense of collectivity within a post-socialist context where personal interests increasingly intersect with the state’s nationalistic agenda.



Figure 8. Graffiti drawn with chalk on Yunkai Street (Source: Photo by the author, 2015)



Figure 9. Graffiti drawn with chalk on Yunkai Street (Source: Photo by the author, 2015)

Conclusions

Contextualising Bennett’s notion that cultural resources exert a manipulatory influence on the social fabric (Bennett 1998), it becomes evident that the Chinese state plays a central role in shaping social spaces. The ideological language “on display” contributes to the creation of a media ecosystem that propagates a specific worldview, transmitted through emerging forms of (peri-)urbanity. These spaces are primarily concentrated in areas undergoing transformation into elitist clusters, marked by the construction of gated

communities, the establishment of eco-cultural services, and the repurposing of decommissioned industrial sites. The mediascape, in this sense, interweaves the interests of local governance in resource management with the entrenched practices of Chinese propaganda storytelling. This symbolic infiltration into the context of a developing peri-urban area reflects a process of spatial reformulation driven by entrepreneurial logic, intrinsically tied to the local development trajectory.

The images displayed in public spaces, such as those in Chengnan, Beibei District, play a crucial role in narrating practices of virtue and ethics, with a strategic emphasis on urban aesthetics. This narrative is further reinforced by the integration of landscape, which functions as a contemporary discursive tool aimed at promoting a high standard of well-being. The use of landscape not only serves ideological purposes but also facilitates the materialisation of these ideals, evident in the instrumentalisation of nature to create gentrified spaces. These spaces, often framed as progressive or harmonious enclaves, are designed to attract wealthier residents, thus contributing to the ongoing processes of spatial reordering and social segregation within the city.

The propaganda posters establish a relational connection with the surrounding spaces that have become focal points of urban renewal. This connection is sustained through the continuity of meaning conveyed by the advertisements on private billboards. At the same time, these official narratives interact ambiguously with signs produced by alternative, eccentric, and at times nostalgic forms of local visual representations, as seen in the hand-drawn graffiti visible on a side street adjacent to the upscale residential estate. These graffiti sketches provoke a reflection on the potential expressive capacity of local communications, which are neither directly nor deliberately shaped by the symbolic tactics emerging from the visual narratives of the Party and urban development stakeholders. Such spontaneous and ephemeral graphic voices, which illegally occupy urban public spaces, contribute to maintaining the tension between official narratives and counter-imaginaries, fostering local micro-spatialities that are nurtured from below. While these alternative spaces are less visible in the broader urban fabric, they can become significant in shaping other discourses characteristic of the peri-urban environment. These include concerns such as escalating property values, unemployment resulting from industrial closures, and the transformation of agricultural land into buildable plots—a process that illustrates the complex local-global interactions shaping contemporary urban spaces (Massey 2005; Harvey 2008). Furthermore, considering the wall-as-agent as a fragment of an ongoing conversation (Mubi Brighenti 2010), the Chengnan case study demonstrates that both graffiti and official public service advertisements, as well as upscale real estate promotions, employ a tentacular visual tactic to reshape landscaping practices through the instrumentalisation of “purely Chinese” values. Among these, the culture of family savings and intergenerational sacrifice stands out as a central discourse intrinsic to Chinese/Han society. The (re)territorialisation facilitated through the mediascape thus emerges as both an institutional strategy and an informal counterstrategy. Their proximity is not only possible but also desirable when understood through Massey’s concept of space as plural (Pierce 2022).

By examining the exchange value of public and private advertisements in relation to the increasing use value of land, wall-based visual interventions emerge as dynamic entities with inherent agency. They actively contribute to the construction of meanings that facilitate the commodification of landscapes, the circulation of capital, and policies aimed at enforcing

more effective territorial governance. These representations engage individuals as they traverse the space, catalysing a sensory transformation of the landscape and prompting a reimagining of the local sense of place by questioning moral values and traditional culture within the context of peri-urban renewal. In this framework, spatialised images hold an implicit potential for informal education, functioning as a governmentality tool that weaves together the disciplinary aspects of visual-textual signs with current performances of civilised behaviour and spatial inequalities related to upscale housing development.

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