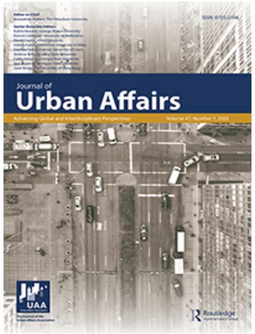

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# From layoffs to the New Silk Road: State-owned factory reform and urban regeneration in southwestern China from the 1990s to the present

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# From layoffs to the New Silk Road: State-owned factory reform and urban regeneration in southwestern China from the 1990s to the present

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**ABSTRACT**
This article examines the closure of two state-owned steel mills in the southwestern city of Chengdu by focusing on the shifting relationships between industrial communities, urban regeneration projects, and economic planning in post-socialist China. While much scholarship attributes the decline of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to their failure to be economically competitive, this paper argues that SOE restructuring was shaped by state-led urban development projects. Drawing on testimonies from former factory employees, this study explores how individuals invoked Mao-era narratives to make sense of the factory shutdowns. It connects these responses to longer-term shifts in territorial governance from the socialist to the post-socialist era, tracing how the central state employs flexible governance strategies to align national development goals with local urban initiatives. The paper concludes by highlighting Chengdu's Belt and Road rail line, suggesting that this project represents another moment in urban regeneration that promises to bring prosperity to local residents.

**KEYWORDS**
China; economic development; urbanization

## Introduction

When examining the nature of urban change since the end of the Cold War, the neoliberal turn that occurred in the 1980s has been an important frame of analysis for understanding the decline of state control and the rise of profit-driven urban reform. Scholars focused on the specific practices of Chinese urban reform since the 1980s have shown that China does not always fit neatly into the generic patterns of global neoliberal ascendancy (Cartier, 2022; K. W. Chan, 2025; S. He & Wu, 2009). China's engagement with market-driven urban practices is characterized by the strong influence of the state, a feature sometimes referred to as "state entrepreneurship," in which the government actively directs urban reform through substantial infrastructure investments and the steering of state-owned industries (Phelps & Miao, 2020; F. Wu, 2020). The decisive role of the state leads some to argue that neoliberal urban policies, which primarily focus on market forces, might not be entirely descriptive of urban formation in the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Buckingham, 2017; Buckingham & Chan, 2018; Cartier, 2020; Y. Zhou et al., 2018). These arguments have also had to grapple with the specificity of post-socialism, which brings its own historical and institutional legacies. In addition to contemporary state actions, the historical remnants of socialist state apparatuses continue to exert pressure on urban change and the Chinese economy in the contemporary period (Cartier, 2022; Kinossian, 2022; Ma, 2005).

Drawing from literature on Chinese urbanism since the beginning of the reform period (1978), which is situated between the global neoliberal turn on urban development, sometimes known as the varieties of capitalism (VoC) thesis (Peck & Zhang, 2013), and the plausible exceptionalism of the

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Chinese case, this article reflects on the historical legacies of Chinese socialism in present-day urban regimes. It examines the significance of historical precedents from socialism to post-socialism by comparing the processes of closing state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in southwest China, which began in the 2000s, with factory shutdowns during the height of Maoism in the 1960s. Such a comparison is substantiated by the discourse of former factory employees who considered these two moments in factory history to bear deep similarities, influencing their reactions to sudden state decisions to close down their steel mills. While the historical precedent of the 1960s might suggest a kind of path dependency in Chinese urban governance (Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Lei, 2009), it also reveals the potent forces of rescaling that have been definitive of China's territorial management since the Mao era (Lim, 2019; F. Wu, 2016; G. Zhang, 2023). I connect the demise of state-owned enterprises in Chengdu with the rise of new infrastructural projects in a suburban district, which are tied to the Belt and Road Initiative. These connections reveal that the contemporary Chinese state's organization of land and resources does not simply adapt from socialist-era policy models. Instead, Chinese territorial governance since the 1950s has demonstrated an inherent flexibility in scale, allowing the central government to promote both local experimentation and national economic coordination simultaneously (Lim, 2019). Moreover, I show that the Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure and trade project aimed at buttressing China's economic and political influence (M. H. T. Chan, 2018; Dunford & Liu, 2019; Huang, 2016; Johnston, 2018), is more than a project to promote China's overseas ties, as it has proven to be a new economic engine that is driving ongoing urbanization within China (Guo, 2018; Smith, 2022).

By connecting China's historic urban development with present transformations, the article reveals how land was administered and how centralizing and decentralizing policies were malleably utilized by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) during periods of economic transition. Taking a grassroots approach to state factory closures and urban regeneration, I also focus on the social relations and ideological commitments that define the uses of urban space, in particular, examining how factory shutdowns express former state factory employees' understanding of their relationship to the Chinese government. There is a rich body of scholarship that focuses on the plight of Chinese state sector workers since the beginning of the economic reforms, which diminished the role of state-owned enterprises within the Chinese economy (Andreas, 2019; Blecher, 2002; Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007; H. Li, 2023; Solinger, 2021). Such work has highlighted the institutional disintegration of the socialist workplace, the decline of social entitlements for workers, and the methods of resistance workers have deployed as a result of macroeconomic policy changes. With the slow disappearance of state-owned enterprises in the Chinese urban landscape, governance of the Chinese city has also transformed, giving rise to the privatized *shequ* (community) overseen by Residents' Committees, which serve as quasi-state organs at the local level (Bray, 2005).

In considering the experiences of average state-owned enterprise employees, early works have queried how and why workers sometimes resisted state agendas while at other times chose passive compliance (Blecher, 2002; Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007). Some have argued that the prevailing success of a market logic propagated by the state has induced urban working-class cooperation with government policies that dismantled many state-managed enterprises (Blecher, 2002). At the same time, the abundance of examples involving militant worker protests from the end of the 1990s through the 2000s reveals the seriously fragmented subjectivities of China's Rust Belt workers and the divergent circumstances of individual enterprises and urban/regional economies (Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007; Solinger, 2021).

In my case studies of two steel mills in Chengdu, I utilize oral histories and published materials focused on low-level cadres, staff, and workers. While this is a heterogeneous group, it broadly represents SOE employees who did not participate in negotiations for enterprise restructuring but bore the brunt of its negative consequences. I found that many employees accepted the closures and restructuring not only out of resignation but by drawing on Mao-era narratives of sacrifice for the national good. This acceptance was often framed through a lens of economic deference. At the same time, this acquiescence was not unconditional. Workers were sharply divided along firm lines, with only rare instances of inter-firm collaborations in resisting factory authorities (Lee, 2007). When protests did occur, they tended to target inequalities and perceived corruption among factory management rather than government policies (Hung & Chiu, 2009). Underlying much of this discontent were grievances over profits from land redevelopment and the loss of control over factory affairs.

While this article highlights previously little analyzed historical connections between the 1960s and the 2000s, it is not intended to suggest that socialist practices and political affect have stayed the same across time. Instead, it shows that the relationship between SOE employees, the state, and the Chinese city has evolved in its economic context. During the socialist period, the state co-opted SOE employees into a moral economy of mutual accountability, in which employees were promised stable employment and welfare benefits in exchange for their hard work and loyalty (F. Chen, 2003; Hurst & O'Brien, 2002). By the 2000s, SOE employees' understanding of the social contract had changed. Rather than counting on the state to care for them and their communities, they accepted a new bargain with the CCP, in which their sacrifices would lead to successful market-driven development of urban space, resulting in the production of landed value and GDP growth. These developments would, in turn, trickle down to the individual households of those who experienced layoffs and early retirement. For many SOE employees, profits from redeveloped factory land were also imagined as a collective benefit that could revitalize the restructured firm and the neighborhood economy.

This vision was often tied to larger state narratives related to projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, even as its concrete benefits have yet to materialize in the lives of former SOE employees. We may view China's newest market-driven economic direction as a transformation of the socialist project, which articulated a political vision centered on providing material abundance to the working masses. During the reform period, material abundance continued to serve as an ideological tool for pacifying those who had the most to lose as the Chinese economy sought to dismantle its socialist-era industrial institutions. Although the state continues to promise grassroots urban residents secure and prosperous futures, the economic reforms have renounced the socialist project, substituting its material guarantees and egalitarian ethos with the language of urbanization-driven market opportunities (Park, 2016). In this shift, the moral economy that once grounded SOE employees' relationship to the state has been abstracted, turned into an unspoken logic in which prosperity remains promised, but the social foundations that once made it legible have been stripped away.

Finally, this essay draws from an evolving international scholarship on gentrification, deindustrialization, and post-industrialism. Much of this work has emerged in response to shifting economic conditions in cities in the Global North (Bunnell, 2016; Cooke, 1995; Dieterich-Ward, 2016; Frieden & Sagalyn, 1991; King & Crommelin, 2021; Leary & McCarthy, 2013; Neumann, 2016; Ryan, 2012; Taft, 2018; Tallon, 2020). These conditions, which took root in the aftermath of the Second World War, include the relocation and decline of industrial production in select urban centers, the withdrawal of national governments from investing in urban renewal, and the rise of new private-public efforts at local and supra-national levels to reinvent disinvested urban neighborhoods, often resulting in new inequalities associated with gentrification. While "deindustrialization" is most often used by critical scholars and labor activists who emphasize the deprivations caused by industrial decline (High, 2013), the term "post-industrialism" carries more prescriptive weight and represents a larger ideology around the proper organization of advanced urban economies as they transition away from industrial production toward the tertiary sector (Bell, 1973; Neumann, 2016).

In the case of China, post-industrialism has been a long-time political and intellectual concern. Such conversations can be traced back to the 1980s, when the beginning of economic reforms propelled thinkers like Alvin Toffler to stardom, who famously predicted the transition of the global economy from an industrial to an information revolution (Toffler, 1981). Much less scholarship has been produced on deindustrialization in China, partly because China is still considered the manufacturing powerhouse of the world today (J. T. Miao et al., 2022; Wei & Wang, 2019). However, since the end of socialism and China's shift out of a planned economy, there has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of state-owned enterprises in the economy. While heavy industry continues to dominate the nation's industrial structure, the number of large state-sponsored factories has decreased dramatically (C. He, 2022). The closure of state-owned enterprises across the country in the 1990s has resulted in deindustrialized landscapes that bear some resemblance to those found in Rust Belt cities in North America and Europe. In response to economic and urban restructuring, city governments in China have drawn on Western planning ideals for urban regeneration, particularly those associated with the rise of the creative class (Florida, 2004; Keane, 2009, 2012; Liang & Wang, 2020; Wang, 2009; Zhao et al., 2020; Zheng, 2010). Large-scale urban regeneration projects have at times replicated the same problems their Western counterparts engendered, particularly the displacement of working-class communities and the urban poor from city centers to make room for private real estate developments that cater to the interests of elites and the middle class (F. Wu, 2015; Q. Wu et al., 2016; L. Zhang, 2006; Y. Zhang & Fang, 2004). Building on these transnational perspectives, this article argues that urban regeneration on China's post-industrial sites has similarly prioritized real estate–driven economic growth while sacrificing the urban entitlements of working-class and industrial communities. This dynamic is especially pronounced for former SOE employees, whose livelihoods and claims to urban space, once secured through China's socialist political regime, have been steadily eroded under the twin processes of market reform and urban redevelopment.

## Urbanization from the Mao era to the reforms

In China after 1949, the socialist state built thousands of government-owned and managed factories across the country with the hope of industrializing an agrarian nation. Mao-era industrialization treated the city as spaces dedicated to collective production rather than capitalist exchange and consumption (K. W. Chan, 1994; French & Hamilton, 1979; Guo, 2018). These industrial neighborhoods were meant to become self-contained factory districts at once sites of labor, residence, political participation, and social welfare distribution. Throughout the socialist period (1950s-1970s), state mandates to construct SOEs built up the urban environment and provided these new industrial districts with growing populations and budding infrastructural networks. When the economic reforms began to challenge China's command economy in the late 1970s, new markets and services sprang up rapidly in and around state-owned enterprise neighborhoods. Areas once located on the urban fringe were slowly incorporated into the urban core.

During the socialist period, urban planning served the needs of the planned economy and its central focus on industrialization. Mao-era urban planning practices drew from Soviet experiences, as well as the imperative to incorporate proletarian perspectives by sending engineers, professors, and students to the countryside to learn from peasants (Hou, 2018; Lin, 2004; F. Wu, 2015). It was not until the end of the 1970s that university programs and the production of textbooks on urban planning resumed with some degree of normalcy, uninterrupted by highly politicized mass campaigns. The 1980s were an era of intense internationalization in urban planning knowledge, during which Chinese practitioners gained renewed access to planning methods from outside the Eastern Bloc (Hou, 2018). The Chinese Communist Party permitted an increased flow of knowledge from the capitalist West into the country. Urban planning journals began publishing historiographies, analyses, and translations of planning paradigms prevalent in the United States and Europe (Jia & Jin, 1984; Sha, 1985; G. Zhang, 1991; Zhong, 1987).

A new set of planning logic inspired by American urban planning textbooks evolved among Chinese practitioners, who considered large industrial neighborhoods located near city centers an inefficient use of urban space (Chengdu Urban Planning Commission Office & Chengdu Urban Planning Design Institute, 1984). This shift in perspective was reinforced by changes in China's fiscal policy environment, which increasingly pressured local governments to treat urban planning as a vehicle for boosting municipal budgets. A key legislation released in 1989 called the City Planning Act codified the mandate of local governments to structure the city in fiscally responsible ways, giving way to the rise of "rational" city planning (F. Wu, 2020). Such trends in urban development were reinforced by the 1990 City Planning Act, which granted urban governments additional control over land parcels and their management in the interest of local economic objectives (F. Wu, 2015). The City

Planning Act was further animated by the 1994 Tax-Sharing Reform, which placed significant pressure on localities to increase their own budgets, as the central government began to absorb a much larger portion of the total national fiscal revenue (Y. Liu & Hung, 2023). The management of urban land thus became an important tool and a key to generating income for local governments (Hsing, 2010). By planning and responding to real estate investors, urban planners and the municipal leaders they served hoped to foster urban economic growth through increased local GDPs and higher tax income.

The impetus for Chinese urban planning transitioned from fostering cities through industrial production to cultivating cities for dynamic economic development based on a market economy. In a 2014 promotional text written by the Chenghua District government in Chengdu, which underwent a significant urban regeneration program to make over its industrial neighborhoods, the preface opens with the question, "Whom does a city serve?" (Chengdu Chenghua District Office of Local Chronicles [CCDLC] 2014, p. 1). However, this question was never directly answered in the body of the text. The authors leave a clue in the title of the preface: "a Chengdu for the future." One might interpret the future as future generations, but the term could also suggest something more financial: the generation of future value through the right kinds of urban investments. In a 2017 government-published gazetteer on urban reform in Chengdu since the 1980s, authors named dramatic increases in real estate value as one of the most admirable outcomes of urban reform in recent years. The gazetteer states that rapid real estate development "provided significant gains in local state revenue while making room for the optimization of the local economic structure" (CCDLC 2017, p. 115). Four decades after the end of socialism, the Chinese city no longer served the socialist vision of nationwide industrialization and collective welfare. Instead, it had been retooled to function as an engine for capital accumulation, driven by the strategic allocation and valorization of urban land.

## Two steel mills in Chengdu

The transformation of urban space through real estate development and the pursuit of landed value did not occur in isolation. It profoundly reshaped the fate of some state-owned enterprises. The two steel mills at the center of this paper, Chengdu Iron and Steel and Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory, both major employers and landholders in Chengdu, offer a window into how reform policies were economic and spatial. In the early stages of reform, the 1980s and early 1990s, SOEs were positioned as laboratories for market experimentation, encouraged to adopt competitive practices and diversify revenue streams (Heilmann, 2008). By the mid-1990s, the central government began releasing more and more firms into the competitive market by slashing subsidies and loans, resulting in waves of bankruptcies and layoffs (Steinfeld, 1998, Naughton, 2007). This did not mean the wholesale abandonment of all state-owned industry. Through a policy of grasping the large and letting go of the small (*zhuada fangxiao*), larger enterprises in key industries were reintegrated under firm government control (Borst, 2025; Leutert, 2024). Enterprises that remained strategic to central state interests subsequently engaged in a series of corporate mergers to absorb many other large to mid-sized enterprises, a process that expedited the restructuring of SOEs nationwide (X. Li, 2020; The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2001). Moreover, the mergers facilitated a series of collaborations between enterprises, municipal governments, and private developers that propelled urban regeneration programs aimed at relocating old factories away from city centers.

Chengdu Iron and Steel, built in a suburban district in Chengdu during the Great Leap Forward (1958), reveals how the economic reforms briefly encouraged iron and steel SOEs to become financially independent in the 1990s, only to hijack their reform efforts through new policies of industrial readjustment and urban reform. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Chengdu Iron and Steel performed exceptionally well in China's booming construction economy. However, by the mid-1990s, sales of steel plummeted. Austerity measures the central state introduced prevented SOEs from gaining access to bank credit, and a general slowdown of the economy resulted in discouraging sales numbers starting in 1994. Many SOEs around the country shuttered their doors (Naughton, 2007). Chengdu Iron and Steel was able to reverse course with cost-cutting measures and significant managerial reforms under a new director (C. J. Miao, 1998). Despite Chengdu Iron and Steel's ability to successfully transform itself into a profitable business in a capitalist market, Chengdu's municipal government mandated that the steel mill merge with the much larger Sichuan steel producer Panzhihua Iron and Steel (also known as Pangang) in 2002. This merger was preceded by Pangang's absorption of Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory two years earlier and followed by a larger merger between Pangang and Anshan Iron and Steel in 2010.

Chengdu Iron and Steel employees who endured hardships during the lean years of the late 1990s felt a sense of ownership in the factory's success, as many employees volunteered for early retirement and layoffs in order to save the livelihoods of their family members and colleagues. Those who remained on the job endured pay cuts and loss of welfare benefits, believing that their sacrifices would allow the factory to survive. A factory cadre shares the prevailing sentiment among the industrial community after the factory's successful revival in the late 1990s, "Chengdu Iron and Steel is a factory built with the sweat and labor of Chengdu Iron and Steel workers. The factory should be for us to use and benefit from. The equipment and our labor should provide for Chengdu Iron and Steel people" (J. Chen, 2017). It is in this context that the central and local state suddenly intervened and facilitated the merger between Chengdu Iron and Steel and other major firms in Chengdu and around the country. The reason for this intervention is both to consolidate and limit excess capacity in the steel industry and to enable Chengdu's ambitious urban regeneration plan.

## Relocation

These merger policies worked alongside a new set of urban reforms in the city called the Eastern Adjustment Campaign, directing the new mechanism of local economic growth toward urbanization. In 2001, the Chengdu municipal government announced the campaign for Eastern Adjustment (*dongtiao*), meant to move more than a hundred industrial SOEs from the eastern and northeastern part of the city to the suburbs and redevelop these areas as new commercial and residential hubs. Through this campaign, the municipal government was eager to rid the city of dilapidated and aging SOEs that no longer contributed to the municipal budget. Moreover, a national discourse around urban environmentalism further fueled the local state's sense of urgency, as municipal leaders argued that the decrepit conditions of the old industrial district were clearly polluting the city environment (Chengdu Eastern Suburb Industrial Restructuring Office, 2007). In government memoranda produced from 1999 to the early 2000s, the Chengdu Municipal Party Committee and the municipal government reiterated environmental concerns as justifications for relocating large state-owned factories in eastern Chengdu (CCDLC 2017). This theme of environmentalism was also referenced in my interviews with former factory employees. However, neither the published record nor former factory employees could attest to the actual environmental impact of such urban restructuring projects. Districts further removed from Chengdu's city center were zoned as industry-focused areas, resulting in the zoning rather than the elimination of pollution (Buck & Walker, 2007; Sichuan Provincial Department of Construction, 2005). Environmentalism in contemporary China has served as a means to strengthen the power of the state and achieve its political and economic objectives (Y. Li & Shapiro, 2020). In the case of SOE relocation in Chengdu, environmentally charged urban projects allowed the local government to seize control of land parcels previously managed by state firms. The environment became a convenient explanation to industrial communities for why their factories had to be relocated or closed.

As part of the *dongtiao* project, the local state utilized a land-financing strategy called "*jijia shougou, quan'e fanhuan*" (acquisition at a base price and repayment after land rights sales). This policy allowed the government to assess each parcel of land and provide an estimate of its value. The local state then took out loans using the land as leverage and paid enterprises 65% to 70% of the estimated value for them to relocate. When land use rights were successfully sold to real estate developers, the state paid the enterprises the difference between what they received initially and the price at which the land use rights were sold (Xie, 2003).

Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory fell within the Eastern Adjustment relocation plan and was forced to move. Chengdu Iron and Steel is located in the peripheral Qingbaijiang District, a satellite town that is still partially zoned for industry. After the merger, Panzhihua Iron and Steel cadres, in negotiation with Chengdu municipal leaders, decided to combine Chengdu Seamless Steel and Chengdu Iron and Steel, leading to the construction of a new production area a few miles from Chengdu Iron and Steel's old site. This move was costly but generated massive cash income for the post-merger corporation. In 2003, Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory's 2,000 *mu* or around 330 acres of land was estimated to be worth more than 10 billion RMB (Xie, 2003). Employees at the factories were not consulted in the decision-making process of the relocation plan. After the merger and relocation, the factories gradually reduced steel production and ultimately stopped producing in 2015. In 2014, 9,181 employees, out of the 15,000 still working at the factory, were laid off and received severance pay, a process known as *maiduan* (a permanent end to employment relations in exchange for compensation based on the number of years worked). In 2016, an additional group of approximately 3,000 employees followed suit (China Machinery, Metallurgical, and Building Materials Trade Union, 2015; Yap, 2015). Contrary to the prevailing scholarly narrative that SOEs failed during China's economic reforms because they could not adapt to a competitive market, in the case of these two Chengdu firms, corporate mergers and urban reform programs facilitated by the state played a decisive role in their demise.

## Factory closures and flexible governance

Many cadres at Chengdu Iron and Steel saw the need to merge with Pangang as a central government mandate that was not too different from the industrial management policies of the Mao era. A former security and asset management cadre states the merger resulted from "the nation's economic readjustment. There was nothing anyone (at the factory) could do about it" (Wang, 2017). Retired departmental Party secretary Liu Qiang explains, "This time Chengdu Iron and Steel' closing (*xiama*) had to do, for one, with overproduction and, for another, with environmental pollution" (Q. Liu, 2017). In describing the gradual collapse of the factory after the merger, he chose the term *xiama*, literally meaning dismounting and often used to describe being ordered to cease operation. *Xiama* was also used repeatedly by Liu and other former employees, as well as in the factory gazetteer, to refer to the brief closure of Chengdu Iron and Steel between 1962 and 1965 due to the Great Leap Forward famine. In the eyes of industrial employees, Chengdu Iron and Steel closed twice: once as a result of the Great Leap famine in the 1960s and a second time in response to concerns about urban reform and industrial restructuring from the 2000s to the 2010s. While the political context has shifted, industrial employees perceived these two events as parallel, both representing the closure of the factory to accommodate the imperatives of the national economy. Despite decades of liberalizing reforms that tried to separate the enterprise's economic management from the state, employees at the factory never questioned the idea that their SOE's economic interest was subservient to the central state's national economic plan.

The invocation of *xiama* by Chengdu Iron and Steel employees to describe both the factory's closure in the 1960s and again in the 2010s underscores the recurrence of certain patterns of CCP governance in moments of macroeconomic adjustment. And the historical resonances do not end with factory closures. Mass layoffs of state factory employees, known as downsizing (*jingjian*) in the early 1960s, serve as another precedent for what occurred within SOEs since the 1990s (Brown, 2012; Lei, 2009). Rather than marking a clear break from the Maoist past, contemporary industrial and urban reforms reveal how the alternation between centralization and decentralization has long been a constitutive feature of territorial management by the Chinese Communist Party (Lim, 2019). During the Mao era, the unleashing of the Great Leap Forward granted significant agency to local governments to invest in heavy industry and collectivization (Meyer et al., 2002). This decentralization played out spatially in the dramatic expansion of urban municipal boundaries, as cities enlisted rural land to build factories (G. Zhang, 2023). This decentralization, however, was always subordinate to the developmental interests of the national economy, best embodied in the 1959 policy slogan "the whole country a chessboard" (*quanguo yipanqi*) (Lim, 2019, p. 9).

Economic reforms since the 2000s have expressed similar dynamics of both centralization and decentralization. While the central state released SOEs into the private market and permitted widespread bankruptcies, it also reasserted control over key industries and larger enterprises, orchestrating corporate mergers that eroded local managerial power within individual firms. These top-down interventions coincided with and contributed to decentralized experiments in urban regeneration at the municipal level. In Chengdu, this dual process can be observed in the Eastern Adjustment campaign. Yet this campaign was only one of several overlapping urban renewal projects designed to align with national development goals while also positioning the city competitively, as Chengdu vied with other localities for investment capital and skilled labor (Trémon, 2023; Yang, 2022). These dynamics exemplify the Chinese central state's strategic flexibility, which enables the coordination of national priorities while encouraging local initiative and improvisation.

## Restructured hopes

Many employees from both Chengdu Iron and Steel and Chengdu Seamless hoped that the merger would prove beneficial to their firms, as it elevated their local firms to the level of a centrally managed governmental enterprise (*yangqi*) and guaranteed significant landed income from Chengdu Seamless Steel's relocation. Government officials and factory leaders promoted the merger to Chengdu Iron and Steel employees by focusing on the economic opportunities this change presented. Assurances about the post-merger factory's potential growth comprised the bulk of speeches made by notable personages at the restructured firm's unveiling ceremony. The Sichuan Party secretary, Zhou Yongkang, designated the newly incorporated company a future "aircraft carrier" of the steel industry in the Southwest (Y. K. Zhou, 2002). The chairman of the board at Pangang Group, Hong Jibi, promised that Pangang Group Chengdu Iron and Steel would one day produce two million metric tons of steel and gross more than 6 billion RMB per year (Hong, 2002). The relocation of Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory was promoted for its creation of landed income that could finance the construction of more efficient workshops and the purchase of new equipment. In a speech by Chengdu vice party secretary Ge Honglin at the relocation commencement ceremony on June 26, 2002, Ge expressed the municipal leadership's excitement at what the factories might accomplish together: "We sincerely hope that Pangang Group Chengdu Iron and Steel Incorporated can take advantage of this relocation as an opportunity to realize the optimization and streamlining of its product line, to make the enterprise bigger and stronger" (Ge, 2002).

One retired cadre from Chengdu Iron and Steel recalls that he was glad that the merger elevated Chengdu Iron and Steel to a higher administrative status, prompting him to advise his son to keep working at the factory as a transportation department dispatcher: "After the merger, it was like bringing us up to a new level. We had become a centrally owned enterprise (*yangqi*), whereas before we were local, managed by the Chengdu municipal government . . . . So I told my son to stay there (and not quit his job)" (Tian, 2017). A former supplies department manager states that the real estate income was enough to help Chengdu Iron and Steel break into new sectors and businesses: "Because we had more than 8 billion RMB, we didn't have to do iron and steel anymore. Besides, iron and steel were at overcapacity in our country" (Ye, 2017).

However, the restructuring did not immediately lead to an improvement in work conditions, and the landed income was nowhere to be seen by the average employee. The merger combined the personnel at the two factories. To adjust for the different wages that employees of the same ranks received across the two enterprises, managers from the Pangang Group announced that they would decrease wages for employees at Chengdu Iron and Steel and increase wages for employees at Chengdu Seamless Steel. The news of possible wage decreases resulted in protests. In November 2002, tens of thousands of Chengdu Iron and Steel employees and their families gathered around the northern area of the factory campus, staging a mass demonstration. Employees built tents and barricades outside the factory, blocking its entrance and one of Qingbaijiang's main roads (Chenggangbao, 2002a). Protesters demanded that factory administrators retract the decision to decrease wages at Chengdu Iron and Steel. An article in *Chengdu Iron and Steel News* categorized additional issues raised by protesters: the welfare of employees, cadre corruption and leadership problems, the different cultures of the two factories, the contribution of investment funds between the two factories, and the promotion of certain cadres over others. After days of disturbance that drew municipal officials and Pangang Group's corporate leaders to Qingbaijiang, the immediate demand to maintain existing wage levels for Chengdu Iron and Steel employees, including those already retired, was granted. Factory officials continued to assure workers that the merger was a step in the right direction and that wages would even rise in the future (Chenggangbao, 2002b).

As these agitations put on display, the restructuring of two firms resulted in competition and resentment between employees. These responses highlight how SOE employees navigated their exclusion from restructuring negotiations and the fiscal promise they bore. Pronounced critique and discontent over the outcome of these policies, especially those voiced by low-ranking enterprise cadres, had to do with how managers at both Chengdu factories lost control over their enterprises, as they were replaced by top executives from the much larger Panzhihua Iron and Steel. As a result of this loss of control, they were also left out of the gains of real estate dealings involving selling Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory's land, all of which flowed into the pockets of Pangang. A human resources department cadre from Chengdu Seamless Steel recalls large bonuses paid to high-ranking cadres following the factory merger. Even though she could not explain where the money came from, this experience made it clear that the factory had become somebody else's cash cow. Others at the steel tube factory summarized the whole affair by calling themselves a "conquered people whose factory was taken by outsiders" (S. Chang, personal communication, July 2, 2024).

Whereas Chengdu Seamless Steel was struggling economically at the time of the merger, Chengdu Iron and Steel was a profitable firm, which engendered an even stronger feeling of loss and grievance among its employees. Tensions between employees of Chengdu Iron and Steel and those transferred from Chengdu Seamless Steel reflected more than just inter-firm rivalry. For those at Chengdu Iron and Steel, criticizing these divisions became a way to articulate a deep sense of disempowerment. It also helped express their grievances about the growing distance between decision-makers and the industrial workforce. Cadre Su Jun from the design department describes how much he struggled to fit into the post-merger enterprise culture, "I did not identify with their management style, which heavily resembled behaviors from a planned economy or from inside a government agency, not market economics. We (at Chengdu Iron and Steel) are accustomed to market economics, and we believe that things should be done quickly" (Su, 2017). Su further complained about the ascendancy of a group of high-ranking leaders in the factory who had little expertise and knowledge about its operations. He was punished for disagreeing with design instructions from a cadre who "did not understand the work" (Su, 2017).

Morale at Chengdu Iron and Steel completely collapsed after the merger. Not only did the steel mill's existing cadres grow disillusioned, but workers and staff also saw little incentive to do their best. One retired cadre who worked for many years in the rolled steel workshop discusses how frontline workshops after 2002 were poorly managed and did not motivate workers and staff:

> Everyone started eating out of the big rice pot (*chi daguo fan*). . .. Those people from the big factories, they were very wasteful . . . . We provided a lot of feedback, but it was pointless. Our feedback didn't even make it up the chain of command . . . . It got so bad that, after I retired, even the team leaders (*banzhang*) were not doing production work. Not only were they not doing production, they still had higher bonuses than the workers. (Yan, 2017)

The return of work conditions reminiscent of the socialist period, symbolized by the phrase "eating out of one big pot," did not mean that workers and staff were protected from layoffs. In the years after the merger, Pangang Group sank significant investments into building new workshops and acquiring equipment, but employees saw little improvement in their lives from these projects. The reason for this disjuncture between manager priorities and the firm's overall health can be attributed to the fact that SOEs were no longer expected to be profitable by the government after the 2000s. One steel mill SOE manager from Hebei stated in a China Business Network interview in 2012 that "(high-ranking) cadres in state-owned steel mills want political achievements (*zhengji*). Expanding enterprise capacity represents *zhengji*. Whether or not the enterprise makes money is not relevant to the cadres. Their pay doesn't go down" (Tencent News, 2012).

After the merger, wages for workers and staff stagnated and then declined, which became a cause for some limited inter-firm solidarity in labor protests. Tian Chao, who stayed at the lay-off and retirement services department for a decade after the merger, called this period of his tenure "the most harrowing ten years," plagued by frequent episodes of worker dissent at the factory over low wages and layoffs (Tian, 2017). He also complains that his son's wages as a transportation dispatcher decreased several times, posing the threat of financial insecurity for their family. In 2012, workers agitated for higher pay at the plant, claiming that the 1,200 RMB (less than 200 USD) a month they were paid was not enough for them to survive. In January 2012, workers organized protests and demonstrations fighting for their voices to be heard. More than 10,000 workers showed up holding red banners that stated, "We demand wage increases" (Ji, 2012). Confrontations reportedly escalated between protestors and the police. It is not clear if workers' demands were met to their satisfaction. At the time of publication of a Radio Free Asia article on January 6, 2012, cadres at the enterprise offered an increase of around 200 RMB a month, but workers rejected this proposal for being insufficient (Ji, 2012).

## New urban promise

Meanwhile, a new round of urbanization was unfolding not only in Chengdu's urban core, where Chengdu Seamless Steel was displaced, but also in Qingbaijiang District, the site of the post-merger factory. Promoted as a future logistics hub under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Qingbaijiang became the focus of ambitious plans to transform former industrial zones into platforms of global connectivity (Xu, 2022). In Chengdu, The New Silk Road project, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, harkens back to the "Develop the West" policy from 1999. This policy was reaffirmed by the CCP in 2010 (Summers, 2016). In 2013, President Xi Jinping officially promulgated the Belt and Road Initiative, with two major trade routes that would connect China to the globe. One was the Silk Road Economic Belt, extending from China to Europe through Central Asia, and the other was the Maritime Silk Road, connecting China's eastern coast to Central Europe and the North Sea (Johnston, 2018).

State propaganda framed these developments in optimistic terms, linking infrastructure upgrades and spatial restructuring with new economic opportunities for local residents. In so doing, it absorbed the narrative of industrial decline, suggesting that the sacrifices made during earlier rounds of reform would ultimately be redeemed through urban regeneration and participation in China's global economic ambitions. The BRI represents a shift in China's reform strategy, in which large-scale urbanization, rather than privatization of the economy, serves as an engine of growth. State discourse promotes visions of prosperity, rising property values, and integration into global markets as a way to contain the grievances of those who continue to face economic woes, such as former SOE employees. Yet for many former workers, staff, and cadres, these promises have yet to materialize, leaving them peripheral to the benefits of China's ongoing pursuit of economic expansion.

In the early 2010s, with policy directives from the central government focusing on developing the West, several municipalities, including Chongqing, Xi'an, Lanzhou, Wuhan, and Zhengzhou, announced plans to construct transportation hubs that connected China with Central Asia and Europe. The BRI represents another moment in which the dynamic relationship between local and central governments is flexibly leveraged to advance the changing priorities of the national economy. In 2013, Chengdu completed a railway linking Qingbaijiang to Lodz, Poland, and in 2015, the district was chosen by the central state as one of three Chengdu National Free Trade Experimental Zones

(Shui, 2017; M. Zhang & Wen, 2022). This competitive dynamic is central to the BRI's implementation, as municipal governments across China actively positioned themselves as key nodes in national and international logistics networks, each seeking to align local development with the central government's strategic goals (M. Zhang & Wen, 2022).

The investments and potential economic value generated by the BRI have led to a new official discourse that utilizes urban prosperity as a future horizon to redress existing inequalities in the Chinese economy. In a promotional book published by a Chengdu press celebrating the Belt and Road Initiative called *The New Silk Road*, the author provides examples of how the construction of logistics centers in Qingbaijing will lead to economic opportunities for its residents (Shui, 2017). Examples include a retired couple who purchased a storefront with their savings in 2008. After the BRI programs began in Qingbaijiang, they were able to lease the store to a restaurant and collect rent to supplement their income. They conclude that the BRI projects were chiefly responsible for the success of their real estate investment, as the district's growing logistics and transportation sector raised new consumer demand for dining services. Another story in the book details how a veteran struggled for years to find good-paying work locally in Qingbaijiang. After the BRI logistics park was built, he was finally able to find a new job as a semi-truck driver, serving the growing needs in transportation in the area. Doing so allowed him to stay close to his family and avoid becoming a migrant laborer. The book also features a man interested in opening an online store importing European milk powder, part of China's explosive e-commerce industry. Relying on railway transportation and advantageous government policies of the Free Trade Zone, he was able to establish an online business that sells milk powder and other baby products from European countries to Chinese consumers. These stories of success reveal how state propaganda narrates new urbanization projects of the BRI as a budding economic initiative that would lead to more passive income and well-paying jobs for Qingbaijiang residents. As income levels increase and more people gravitate toward the suburban district, the book argues, real estate value would also rise, benefiting all homeowners in the area.

Yet for many former employees of state-owned enterprises in Qingbaijiang, these stories of upward mobility and entrepreneurial success bear little resemblance to their own experiences, as the promised transformation has failed to materialize in their everyday lives, leaving long-standing economic precarity largely unchanged. Tian Chao recalls that, in the 2010s, the factory administration published a number of pathways for employees after the plant closure, including *maiduan* (severance), early retirement, re-training, and recruiting for competitive contract positions in Pangang. He saw them not as support, but as "hateful methods aimed at punishing workers" (Tian, 2017). Cadre Wu Bin's son, a *maiduan* employee, joined small-scale protests in 2015 to demand slightly better severance packages, knowing that the sums offered would do little to secure a stable future. Though the buyout scheme provided around 6,000 RMB per year of service, most workers lacked the savings, age, or transferrable skills to restart their lives. Wu Bin complains about his son's despondency and lack of interest in finding new work after leaving the factory. As of 2017, the former worker, who was in his 50s, spent his time idling away at local tea shops playing mahjong, scraping by on his severance package. Despite his annoyance, Wu concedes that it would be difficult for his son to find work in private enterprises, since he is no longer a young man and unable to keep pace with contract workers accustomed to much more exploitative conditions (B. Wu, 2017). Others tried to remain in the workforce in diminished roles. Cadre Liu Qiang's children also experienced *maiduan*. His son, previously a senior electrician, found temporary work at the factory's now-privatized hospital as a custodial worker. Tian Chao's son was lucky to hold on to his job after the factory stopped producing and was still a staff member of the Pangang transportation department. However, pay had gotten so low that he started driving for the local ride-share app Didi after work hours in order to make his mortgage payments. The gap between the state's triumphant narrative of economic reinvention and the lived experiences of former SOE workers proves stark.

These disparities were not just economic but ideological. For many, the state's treatment of their factory signaled a betrayal. Cadre Chen Jianguo likened the closure to the Great Leap Forward, describing how workers watched as machinery was dismantled and sold off:

> It reminds me of the Great Leap Forward . . . . During that time, everything belonged to the state, and if the state wanted to prop up a project, it would become reality. But it is not necessarily the state itself. For instance, Pangang represents the state. If they wanted to end a project/enterprise, it also became a reality . . . . They could do whatever they wanted. Chengdu Iron and Steel workers saw it all happen and felt such heartbreak. (J. Chen, 2017)

Cadre Jiang Lei echoed this disillusionment:

> I really feel that our factory, Chengdu Iron and Steel, was wronged (*yuanwang*). When we made money, we took that money to do technology upgrades. We also took out loans from the banks to improve the enterprise. But what we created ended up belonging to the state, not to the enterprise employees. To hell with "everything belongs to the people"; to hell with "everything belongs to the working class." Those are all lies. (Jiang, 2017)

These reflections highlight employees' economic plight, as well as their struggle to make sense of the twin dynamics of state control over industry and urban land and its abandonment of the urban industrial workforce. In the ongoing reforms of the national economy, the government has both consolidated its power to direct the economy while renouncing its responsibility over the economic welfare of those affected by its policies. Ongoing urbanization drives, from the seamless steel tube factory's massive landed income to BRI projects in Qingbaijiang, appear to promise eventual market compensation for those who have gained little in China's economic miracle over the past four decades. However, these promises seem perpetually deferred, as industrial communities are left reinventing their lives without much assistance from the government.

The experience of Zhang Ni, a former worker at Chengdu Seamless Steel, also corresponds to these narratives of stagnation. Her transfer from urban Chengdu to Qingbaijiang and subsequent purchase of a home show that BRI did little to elevate her economic fortunes. Originally from the countryside, Zhang Ni joined Chengdu Seamless Steel Tube Factory in 1992. She missed the first wave of property appreciation in the 1990s because she did not purchase a home in urban Chengdu and was relocated to Qingbaijiang after the corporate merger in the early 2000s. In Qingbaijiang, she bought an apartment but saw little increase in property value since the mid-2000s. After the factory shut down in 2015, Zhang found contract work in a small, private factory, where workload and wages fluctuated wildly from month to month depending on how much business the firm had, resulting in serious financial instability for her family. Despite the BRI-led redevelopment around her, Zhang remains disconnected from its benefits. Now retired, Zhang supports herself with a small pension and occasional informal work at a neighborhood cigarette stand. Zhang knows little about the BRI developments in her district and feels that these changes have not altered her living environment nor the local economy (S. Chang, personal communication, June 24, 2024).

Zhang Ni and other former SOE employees' stories in Qingbaijiang reveal the limits of China's urban-centric development model, in which narratives of national rejuvenation and global integration obscure the persistent struggles of industrial communities. While the BRI and related urbanization projects promise inclusion through infrastructure, real estate, and logistics, they have ultimately left behind those most affected by industrial restructuring, offering few meaningful pathways back into economic security.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how the restructuring and closure of two major SOEs in Chengdu were not merely outcomes of market inefficiency but rather products of a dynamic state-led process that involved both central economic planning and local initiatives to pursue a new urban development agenda. It shows how strategies of centralization and decentralization have long coexisted in Chinese governance, stretching from the Great Leap Forward to the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese state's repurposing of land and rearrangement of industrial communities reflect a rescaling of territorial management to respond to changing exigencies within the national economy.

The voices of former employees complicate official narratives of regeneration and prosperity. Their testimonies point to a material disjuncture between the government's rhetoric of urban progress and the lived reality of downward mobility for industrial communities. While the state's official discourse projects a future of economic thriving through logistics infrastructure and global connectivity, former employees of Chengdu Seamless Steel and Chengdu Iron and Steel largely remain structurally disconnected from the rewards of urban transformation. The urban redevelopment of SOE districts, first through the relocation of Chengdu Seamless Steel and second through the BRI projects in Qingbaijiang, reveals a broader transformation in China's political economy, in which the promises of collective welfare have been turned into individualized, speculative futures tied to real estate and urban growth.

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