– THEORY FROM EMPTY LAND: Informal Commoning Outside/Within Economies and Ecologies of the Urban

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Debates over the ontology of contemporary urbanization have questioned the notion of a meaningful 'outside' to the urban and have called for greater attention to the socially contested construction of urban subjects and space. Ethnographic study of informal peri-urban agriculture in the rapidly urbanizing city of Chongqing in Southwest China allows for a critical examination of the everyday ecologies and economies of planetary urbanization. The state-led expansion of Chongqing since the early 2000s has created a peri-urban zone consisting of large areas of undeveloped land awaiting construction, which is utilized informally by displaced 'urbanized' peasants and migrant workers. The use of this 'empty' urban land for agriculture reveals informal practices and displaced subjects which are variously positioned as 'outside' or 'within' urban systems and values. The undeveloped land remains ecologically entangled with urban processes and is the site of a contested commoning of space which is regarded as external to urban market values. Theorizing from the kongdi (empty land) launches a novel understanding of under-studied urbanizing spaces which are positioned ambiguously outside urban governance, are under threat of rapid enclosure within urban regimes of accumulation, and spatialize the negotiation of the boundaries and meaning of the urban itself.

'I started farming here just this year. I didn't go to the urban[1] core, and since the economy got worse again lots of people were leaving. This land belongs to the state; before that it was countryside, but then after Reform and Opening the countryside was turned into a city. They took all the farmers of this place and moved them elsewhere, and then all of this land was idle. Then, as the country was developing very quickly, there was so much space here, just barren hills all covered in weeds … This land belongs to the state. It's not as if people can simply run off with it, it's just that whoever occupies this space can do whatever they want with it.'
Interview with male outsider user of the *kongdi*, C21 (April 2017)

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1   Throughout this article, the terms 'urban' and 'city' are used when translating the Mandarin Chinese term *chengshi* (城市) and 'countryside' and 'rural' when translating the term *nongcun* (农村). In Chinese these terms function as both noun and adjective.

Introduction

This article examines the contentious construction and limits of the ontology of the urban through the study of informal practices of commoning amid a process of rapid urbanization. Utilizing data from 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, it focuses on the partial urbanization of a rural zone on the northern edge of the rapidly expanding city of Chongqing, Southwest China. The state-led expansion of the city has transformed land which was largely agricultural 15 years ago into a piecemeal urban landscape where tracts of undeveloped land coexist alongside public housing estates for migrant workers and luxury housing for suburban families. These ostensibly 'empty' spaces of undeveloped land are referred to as *kongdi* (空地, literally 'empty land') and provide a domain outside of urban governance where nearby residents find space to carry out informal practices of agriculture and small-scale construction. This use of the empty land occurs spontaneously through association and negotiation between users of the land, without any organized structure or external governance. The *kongdi* thus provides a space through which residents displaced by urbanization negotiate the experience of becoming urban through the informal and improvised use of land. As an unregulated zone which allows the autonomous production of food and occupation of space, the empty land resembles a peri-urban commons under threat of enclosure from private development. However, this article does not romanticize such practices as necessarily indicating a politics of resistance and insurgency counterposed to the hegemonic values of urbanization. Instead it argues that the contentious and temporary commoning of space reveals the incomplete ontology of the urban itself. *Kongdi* is posited as a concept which explicates the negotiation of the boundaries and meanings of the urban in spaces off the map of urban studies, and which illustrates the porous and temporary constitution of urban commons in the context of rapid urbanization.

First, this article contextualizes the concept of an urban 'outside' within the recent debates over planetary urbanization, positioning the practice of urban agriculture as an empirical example of how nominally urban spaces can exist outside urban economic and ecological systems. I consider how far the phenomenon of urban agriculture offers a constitutive outside to the marketization of land, labour and health in the city, and highlight the dangers of romanticizing and anachronizing notionally rural practices within urban space. This is followed by an overview of the concept of *kongdi*, in which I clarify how such informal spaces appear in the city of Chongqing and outline my fieldwork and methodology. In the subsequent section, I relate the findings of fieldwork and analyse how the users of this informal space conceptualize their practice as existing both inside and outside urban systems of ecology and economics. Through these findings, I explore how far the materiality of urban agriculture and the commoning of undeveloped land in Chongqing create a space outside planetary urbanization. Finally, I offer concluding observations of how the category of *kongdi* is used to negotiate the formation of urban subjects, and present possible directions for future research.

Delineating the urban

Brenner and Schmid's (2014; 2015) planetary urbanization thesis has in recent years provoked a challenge to the ontological consistency and primacy of the city in urban theory. The supposition that the epistemological divide between urban and rural no longer corresponds with observed empirical reality has precedents in prior theorizations of urbanization beyond the global North (McGee, 1991). But Brenner and Schmid suggest that such a blurring and hybridization of the boundaries of the urban indicates a planetary reconstitution of space which denies urban studies a putatively 'non-urban' outside against which it might define itself. It is thus a call 'to supersede the inside/outside dualism ... and thereby, to begin to explore the mutations of an imploding-exploding urbanization process' (Brenner, 2018: 576). The recent works of Schmid and his colleagues to carry out exhaustive comparative analysis of key global sites

through a 'planetary' lens have demonstrated the empirical value of such an approach in articulating novel differences in social relations and morphologies apparent in popular (Streule *et al.*, 2020), plotting (Karaman *et al.*, 2020) and bypassing (Sawyer *et al.*, 2021) modes of urbanization.

This theoretical intervention has in turn provoked responses which resist the supposition of a 'planetary' lens as more appropriate than a 'city' lens and note the universalizing and homogenizing trends of such an epistemology. Critics have pointed out the lack of plurality and absence of feminist voices in the canon of urban theory deemed planetary in scope (Buckley and Strauss, 2016), and contend that such calls for the necessity of unified urban theory constitute their own 'outside' of queer (Oswin, 2018) and praxis-oriented (McLean, 2018) epistemologies. The abstraction required to posit the total urbanization of society can be seen to foreclose opportunities for political contestation and resistance (Derickson, 2015). This is a particular concern for postcolonial scholarship, and tracking the contours of urbanization in the global South has problematized the utilization of a global focus to supersede the inside/ outside dualism. In differing geographic locales, the work of Jazeel (2018) and that of Khatam and Haas (2018) identify the persistence of an ideology of the city which elevates it as a space for legitimizing politics. Despite the ontological fuzziness of the city, they contend that it remains an object of political struggle beyond its economic function in the capitalist logic of urbanization. As Ruddick *et al.* (2018) identify, this insight into the contested production of the urban as a subjective category requires a refocusing of critical attention on the formation of urban subjects. Social production of an urban subject through praxis and contestation requires an understanding of these subjects' own constitutive outsides rather than imagining them arriving to the urban 'ready-made' (*ibid.*: 389). While urbanization on a planetary scale abolishes its outsides, the formation of urban subjects takes place through contestation which posits the social production of new urban spaces and other possible constitutive outsides. More recent developments in this debate have vocally disputed the desirability of an analytical 'centre' grounded in a supposedly new epistemology of the urban (Oswin and Pratt, 2021), and have argued for the utility of a planetary urbanization perspective in illuminating difference in and across multiscalar sites (Angelo and Goh, 2021). These recent interventions have, at least, tended to agree on the need for more nuanced, small and ethnographically informed interventions grounded in the everyday life of the urban in order to explore the affordances and limitations of planetary urbanization as a body of theory.

Attention to the practices and subjectivities through which the urban is produced might thus function as a timely reminder to redirect analysis of the urban inside/outside away from theoretical abstraction and towards the ethnographic study of the empirical production and practice of urban space (and *different* ways of being urban) in sites beyond the global North.

This is well illustrated through a further debate at the intersection of planetary urbanization and the literature of urban political ecology. One of the practical ways in which urbanization blurs the boundary between an urban inside and a rural outside is through the expansion and proliferation of practices of food production within concentrated human settlements. Conventional epistemologies of the urban often stress the absence of agrarian activities and the social consequences of agricultural relations of production as intrinsic to city-ness (Park and Burgess, 1984). The agrarian rural is one such constitutive outside against which the urban is then defined, with 'urban agriculture' implying something of an oxymoron, despite its widespread practice in emerging megaregions of Southeast Asia (McGee, 1991).

Currently, urban agriculture is used to describe practices of agrarian production of vegetables and crops which take place within the city, typically on a small scale and for use by the practitioners themselves rather than exchanged for profit. Much research

has focused on the creation of formal spaces of urban agriculture for individual or communal use (Buckingham, 2005; Yang *et al.*, 2010; Shi *et al.*, 2011; Atkinson, 2013; Peng *et al.*, 2015). Recent urban scholarship has also sought to identify how more autonomous practices of urban agriculture (typically occurring informally or illegally) can constitute a production of space and subjectivity which resists capitalist urbanization and posits a right to communal space in the neoliberal city. This is particularly evident in practices of so-called guerrilla gardening (Adams and Hardman, 2014), which is posited as a communal claim on the right to the city in response to neoliberal encroachment (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2021). The suggestion here is that urban agriculture does not just produce different spaces within the city, but also facilitates the formation of new subjectivities. Accordingly, urban agriculture is frequently interpreted as marking a radical break from both the *economic* and *ecological* bounds of the neoliberal city, and thus productive of a space 'outside'.

This break is economic in so far as it marks a rupture from the colonization of urban land for exchange value, and a return of use value within the city (Tornaghi, 2014; 2017). The production of communally managed spaces of agriculture within an urban landscape creates an unregulated public good whose benefits are typically distributed freely to local residents. The practice of urban agriculture is thus often understood to constitute an urban commons (Huron, 2015; Corcoran *et al.*, 2017; Sardeshpande *et al.*, 2021), and the production of such spaces a radical act of 'commoning' which contributes to the construction of a post-capitalist city (Chatterton, 2016) outside of capitalist planetary urbanization. Urban agriculture is furthermore understood as marking an ecological break in so far as it enables urban residents to circumvent their alienation from nature under capitalist urbanization. As the literature of urban political ecology has documented, urbanization has required the capture of ecological flows of water and nutrition in private and public infrastructure, and has served to alienate urban residents from the commons of the biophysical environment (Tzaninis *et al.*, 2020). The management of agricultural production within human settlements thus becomes central to the politics of governing nature (Gibas and Boumová, 2019), with communal urban agriculture potentially constituting an 'edible commons' (Sardeshpande *et al.*, 2021) which allows urban residents to regain autonomy over their environment and foodways. As McClintock (2010: 202) notes, 'the practices associated with [urban agriculture] are a force of *de*-alienation'. Urban agriculture is thereby posited as one such window to the 'outside': outside of planetary urbanization in general, and the dominance of capitalist urban economies and ecologies in particular.

Conceiving of urban agriculture as a space outside of the commodification of land and alienation of labour from its products raises the possibility of such spaces as constituting an 'urban commons', a concept which has been key to much critical urban scholarship in recent years. The work of Foster and Iaione (2016) outlines how neoliberal deregulation has broken up public and private monopolies and allowed for reclamation of urban spaces by progressive movements as common (rather than public) deregulated spaces of practice. The formal or informal reclamation of urban spaces thus provokes 'the question of how cities govern or manage resources which city inhabitants can lay claim to as common goods, without privatizing them or exercising monopolistic regulatory control over them' (*ibid.*: 285). The emancipatory potential of such a provocation lies in the nature of urban commons as 'a specific way of experiencing collective work, among strangers, to govern non-commodified resources' (Huron, 2015: 977), potentially indicating post-capitalist urban futures (Chatterton, 2016). As Kip (2015) cautions, however, the urban-ness of such spaces also demonstrates their deeper entanglement in the process of capitalist urbanization. Analysis thus demands careful negotiation of the construction, contingencies and shifting boundaries of the commons, rather than the assumption that such spaces necessarily present a straightforward alternative to hegemonic spaces and practices.

A further critical perspective on the notion of supposedly rural practices as a direct line to the 'outside' of planetary urbanization is brought by the work of Angelo (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Angelo, 2017; Angelo and Goh, 2021), which engages constructively with planetary urbanization theory and its implications for urban political ecology. Angelo (2017) identifies a persistent 'city lens' in research purportedly examining the limits of the city as an epistemological object, and notes urban agriculture as one example of the tendency of urban researchers to romanticize, anachronize and generalize 'when confronting signs of the not-city in the wrong places, such as the "urban peasant"' (*ibid*.: 158). Critical engagements with urban agriculture must guard against this tendency to identify the presence of 'nature' and 'rural' within urban spaces as an endogenous social good contra the neoliberal city. Criticism of the urban/rural binary demands a recognition that nominally rural practices and lifestyles do not *in themselves* constitute a space outside the urban, and that such spaces remain entangled and contested within urban politics.

This is indeed evident in the emerging urban spaces of East Asia, where a geographically and historically specific mode of statist entrepreneurial urbanism, export-oriented economic development and rapid growth of urban settlements has typified a distinctive urban landscape of the global East (Shin *et al.*, 2016; Waley, 2016). In this context, 'rural-urban integration' has provided a basis for the expansion of the city and for expropriation and marketization of rural land (Zhang, 2018). Speculative schemes have imagined formal urban agriculture as a strategy for managing surplus rural populations (Peng *et al.*, 2015), providing a new mode of marketized entertainment (Yang *et al.*, 2010) and greenwashing accumulation by dispossession (Caprotti *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, informal practices of urban agriculture within the urban spaces of China in particular remain marginalized (Rock *et al.*, 2016) and stigmatized as uncivilized behaviour (Zhu *et al.*, 2020). Engel-Di Mauro (2016) has suggested that the reappropriation of marginal urban land for social reproduction by migrants can be interpreted in itself as a form of activism on behalf of the dispossessed. The case study of *kongdi* in Chongqing below extends and complicates this discussion through explication of how the everyday practices and politics of urban agriculture themselves negotiate the boundaries and meaning of the urban itself, as its users exhibit conflicting interests and attitudes towards the urban.

Delineating *kongdi*

This article suggests that the category of *kongdi* provides a key theoretical tool for examining the contours and contestations of the formation of new urban subjectivities and spaces in cities of the global East. *Kongdi* is the term which is typically used by those who make use of parcels of undeveloped urban land for informal purposes (agriculture and construction). Commonly translated as 'vacant land' or 'open space', *kongdi* can be utilized in a manner similar to the English word 'wasteland' to describe specific spaces or a broader category of space. Although this term is used widely across mainland China and applied to areas of land which are perceived to be underdeveloped or awaiting substantial development, the use and function of the *kongdi* in urban systems has not been subject to prior study from an urban studies perspective.[2] In contrast to other non-English terminology which has been proposed in anglophone urban studies—most notably *desakota* (McGee, 1991) and *jiehebu* (Zhao, 2020)—I suggest that *kongdi* indicates not a geographic location between urban and rural but a temporal (and temporary) position awaiting an imagined future of urban development.

To demonstrate the relevance of this category to the production of new urban space, *kongdi* is defined in this article as describing a space which is: (1) beyond the

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2 Zhu *et al.* (2020) and Rock *et al.* (2016) address the phenomenon of informal gardening but focus on small marginal plots rather than extensive peripheral spaces of *kongdi* (and do not describe these spaces using this term).

formal management of urban governance, resulting in ambiguity of use and ownership; (2) subject to autonomous and informal land use which is presumed to be temporary and foreclosed in the future; and (3) a space through which the economic and ecological limits of the urban are negotiated.

The research which informs this article largely took place in one specific area of *kongdi* in the neighbourhood of Dazhulin, in Yubei district on the northern periphery of Chongqing. However, it is important to note that the category of *kongdi* thus defined is not unique to this particular location in Chongqing; nor is it distinct to Chinese urbanism or to Asian urbanism in general. The label of *kongdi* within China is applied to different forms of built environment, including building sites, slums, sites of disinvestment and newly urbanized land. The term *kongdi* may apply either to a small and enclosed area or to a broad and varied landscape, but indicates that such zones are awaiting future improvement and may be thought of as temporarily empty (although such spaces are often far from empty in reality). The designation and creation of idle 'waste' lands on a temporary basis in anticipation of future development is a common feature of urbanization in both state-led and privatizing contexts (Yiftachel, 2009; Baka, 2013; Christophers, 2019), and the popular and improvisational use of such spaces has been recorded in a wide array of contexts (Freeman, 1991; Simone, 2010; 2018; Caldeira, 2017; Streule *et al.*, 2020). The *kongdi* thus defined functions as a provocation for how we might trace the temporality, improvisation and limits of the urban through such 'empty' spaces, by drawing on the extremely rapid and extensive urbanization of one peripheral location in a peripheral city. In doing so, I wish to respond to the calls of Robinson (2002; 2016), Roy (2009), Lawhon and Truelove (2020), Shin (2021) and many others to explore how empirical ethnographic work in peripheral urban spaces designated as 'empty' or 'off the map' might serve to launch urban concepts and theory which respond to the global empirical difference of urbanization.

The city of Chongqing has undergone rapid urban expansion and agglomeration since 1997, when the city region was separated from Sichuan province, granted the status of direct-controlled (province-level) municipality, and made the beneficiary of a series of policies designed to boost growth and urbanization in China's underdeveloped western regions. Since the mid-2000s, the municipal authorities have pursued a strategy of territorial expansion and attempts to attract investment in high-tech manufacturing, aiming to usurp coastal production hubs such as Shenzhen (Roast, 2020). This has been exemplified by the urbanization of Yubei district, which has transformed a largely rural and agrarian district into a manufacturing hub for consumer electronics and cars which are exported to the global market via an inland export-processing zone. The territorial expansion of Chongqing into Yubei district commenced in 2004. Villages and townships were urbanized, with agrarian land expropriated, village governments subsumed into municipal governance, and rural villagers granted 'urban' citizenship status and housed in resettlement housing. In 2011, a further attempt to attract manufacturing investment to Yubei saw the creation of a special economic zone granting tax breaks and subsidized utilities to prospective industries, and the creation of a large number of public housing units intended to provide cheap migrant labour for these manufacturers. Further developments from the mid-2010s began to infill the remaining unbuilt land with luxury private housing estates.

At the time of fieldwork in 2016, approximately one-third of the area in the region of Dazhulin was undeveloped land which had retained an obviously rural character despite the district having been formally 'urbanized' for over a decade.[3] In these areas of *kongdi*, the contours of previous field divisions, roads and buildings remained visible. Much of this land had already been sold to private housing developers who had postponed construction until the housing market improved (Fangtianxia, 2017). As a

3   Estimated from satellite imagery of Dazhulin and Kangzhuang subdistricts.

result, the empty land of the *kongdi* had been informally reoccupied by local residents. The former farmland had been returned to agricultural use: small plots of vegetables and fields of corn had been created, with paths running between them and stones delineating their boundaries. Sheds, small houses, fences and compounds had been built, some of them outfitted with electric generators. The users of this land consisted of 'locals' (*dangdiren* 当地人) and 'outsiders' (*waidiren* 外地人). The former were the original farmers and villagers of the district who had been urbanized and relocated to adjacent resettlement housing during the 2000s, while the latter were residents of neighbouring public housing (migrant workers from rural areas and households displaced by the redevelopment of the urban core) who had arrived since 2011.

The Chinese system of land ownership retains a division between rural and urban systems inherited from the socialist era. Most non-urban land under agricultural use is nominally owned by village collectives, which in practice act as shareholder organizations capable of negotiating the expropriation and use of land with urban governments. Urban land is formally owned by the state, but in practice the use rights for urban land and property have been freely traded since the 1990s, creating a land market with extensive property speculation, where the local state still retains some instruments of control over the supply, pricing and use of land (He and Wu, 2009; Hsing, 2010). Land can only pass from rural (i.e. collective) to urban (i.e. state-owned with marketable use rights) usage through expropriation and processing by the municipal state itself. In rapidly expanding cities such as Chongqing, the municipal state attempts to influence land and housing prices by controlling the supply of 'new' urban land from the reserves of rural land it expropriates from neighbouring villages (Zhang, 2018). The *kongdi* in Chongqing represented areas of land which the state had 'reserved' for future sale as well as land already sold to private developers who were raising capital or delaying construction (Roast, 2020). The expropriation and commercialization of rural land by the urban state allows the municipality to extract revenue from the dispossession of rural residents, resulting in a surplus population of urbanized rural residents resettled within the city (Hsing, 2010; Li, 2010; Lin, 2014).

The informal use of the *kongdi* by these dispossessed former rural residents and newly arrived migrants was largely tolerated by officials of the local government. In conversation, officials emphasized that there was nothing remarkable about the *kongdi* being used for informal purposes while it was awaiting development, and stressed the temporary nature of this use. Officials of the neighbouring community (*shequ* 社区) felt that because the *kongdi* was formally owned by the state but had no specific use, the informal use could continue until such time as the land was required for construction.[4] A higher official of the subdistrict government (*jiedao* 街道) stated that the informal use of land for agriculture was inappropriate, as it indicated that despite the formal urbanization which the area had undergone, the residents remained 'rural' in their agricultural practices and disregard for formal land ownership. The official expressed the hope that gradual exposure to urban habits through the continued development of the district would raise the cultural level of the residents who made use of the *kongdi* and bring an end to such practices.[5] The persistence of informal agriculture within the urbanizing district was regarded as troubling the image of a prosperous, modern and 'civilized' suburban district which the state and private housing developers otherwise sought to construct.

Fieldwork focused on an area of the *kongdi* covering approximately 75,000 square metres which lay directly adjacent to both public housing, resettlement housing and a luxury housing construction site (see Figure 1). This area was easily accessible by both 'locals' and 'outsiders' and was chosen because it was used by residents with

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4   Conversation with officials during tour of resettlement housing, 23 November 2016, A21.
5   Conversation with official, 6 January 2017, B26.

FIGURE 1   The *kongdi* seen from the roof of neighbouring public housing (photo by the author, March 2017)

whom I had established contact during an earlier stage of fieldwork. The land had originally been encompassed by farmland and homesteads of Shiliangqiao village, prior to its expropriation and demolition in 2004. The development rights for the land had been sold to a private developer in 2012 at a price of 2,003 yuan per square metre (Chongqing Loushi Guangcha, 2017). When one approached this area of the *kongdi* from the neighbouring housing, the impression was of a construction site, as the concrete walls surrounding it were covered in propaganda posters issued by the municipal government which envisioned a prosperous urban future. But when one passed through a gap in the wall, the landscape of the *kongdi* instead revealed a patchwork of green fields, small structures, marshes and hillocks. The temporary nature of this use of land was confirmed in early 2018 (after fieldwork had concluded), when the informal constructions of the *kongdi* were demolished and construction by a private developer on the site commenced.

Interviews were conducted with the farmers of 36 plots on the *kongdi*.[6] Several of these interviews were relatively brief semi-structured encounters based on a survey; others were persistent relationships that evolved into friendships. Some of the interviews were conducted by myself alone, while others were conducted with the assistance of a local documentary maker. Most interviews were conducted in late afternoon and early evening, when the *kongdi* was busiest. The location of the plots of land farmed by interviewees was tagged using GPS and mapped through cross-referencing satellite imagery and photography. These interviews covered only a minority of the total number of people making use of the *kongdi*, yet provided a rich picture of

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6   Interviews conducted as part of this survey are coded C01–C36. Other interviews conducted during fieldwork were coded A01–A48 to indicate formal interviews that were fully recorded and transcribed, while other interviews which were not transcribed but recorded through fieldnotes are coded B01–B46.

the daily life of this informal space, supplemented with observation of the space over an extended period of time through video and field recordings.

Ethical consideration was given to ensuring that the identifiable details of participants engaged in these informal activities were not included in published research (with the necessary exception of interviews conducted using video, which have not been published) and to minimize external attention attracted to these activities during fieldwork. Typically participants expressed an explicit lack of concern for any official repercussions or censure for their informal use of the land, and indeed the rapid enclosure and transformation of the *kongdi* for construction shortly after the fieldwork was completed removed any risk of the publication of details of such activities being linked to specific individuals.

A large proportion of those making informal use of the *kongdi* were retired. Local users of the *kongdi* tended to be older (mean age = 62) and split evenly along gender lines. Outsiders were younger (mean age = 50), predominately women (67%, n = 19) and more likely to be in paid employment. Plots of land farmed by locals tended to be smaller and marginal within the *kongdi*, while plots tended by outsiders tended to be larger and clustered around the centre and eastern edge of the *kongdi* facing onto the public housing (see Figure 2). Locals had farmed the *kongdi* for an average of four years, compared to an average of two to three years among outsiders. Forty-three percent (n = 16) of interviewees farmed only for personal consumption, with the majority of others saying that they ate some of their crop and sold the rest.

Material ruptures

The informal practices which took place in the field site intervened in the land and drew on both urban and rural materialities of the *kongdi*. Against the assertion of the local officials that 'no one looks after [this land]'[7] and the impression that its informal use represented a temporary suspension of urban progress, the users of the *kongdi* carefully managed and cultivated the land over an extended period of time. These material interventions into the *kongdi* produced a space which was ambiguously positioned in relation to the neighbouring city. The *kongdi* was constructed by its users as a space enmeshed within the material flows of urbanization, but also conceptualized as materially 'other than' and beyond the urban.

The farming techniques employed on the *kongdi* were sophisticated and demonstrated consistent practice and investment in a plot over an extended period. Trellises were constructed from bamboo, plastic sheeting was used to encourage the growth of young plants during the cold and wet winter, and turf was dug from the marshy land and used to enrich the soil elsewhere. Irrigated fields of standing water were constructed where water spinach could be grown. Several interviewees had constructed composting bins and deliberately cultivated organic crops. There were also multiple semi-permanent free-standing constructions on the *kongdi* that had been built and maintained over several years. These ranged from small sheds built out of wood, plastic and other spare materials to multi-room buildings and compounds with chicken coops, locked doors and electric generators.

These material interventions sought to appropriate urban flows of waste and water and redirect them to assist in the cultivation of the *kongdi*. An informal public toilet was created in an old building which stood on the edge of the *kongdi* facing the busy road. An improvised latrine allowed human waste from passing pedestrians to drop into a pit from which it could be collected and used to fertilize crops. Water pipes running near the road were tapped with hoses which ran into the *kongdi*, to feed small pools where farmers could fill buckets to water their crops during the hot summer.

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7   Conversation with officials during tour of resettlement housing, 23 November 2016, A21.
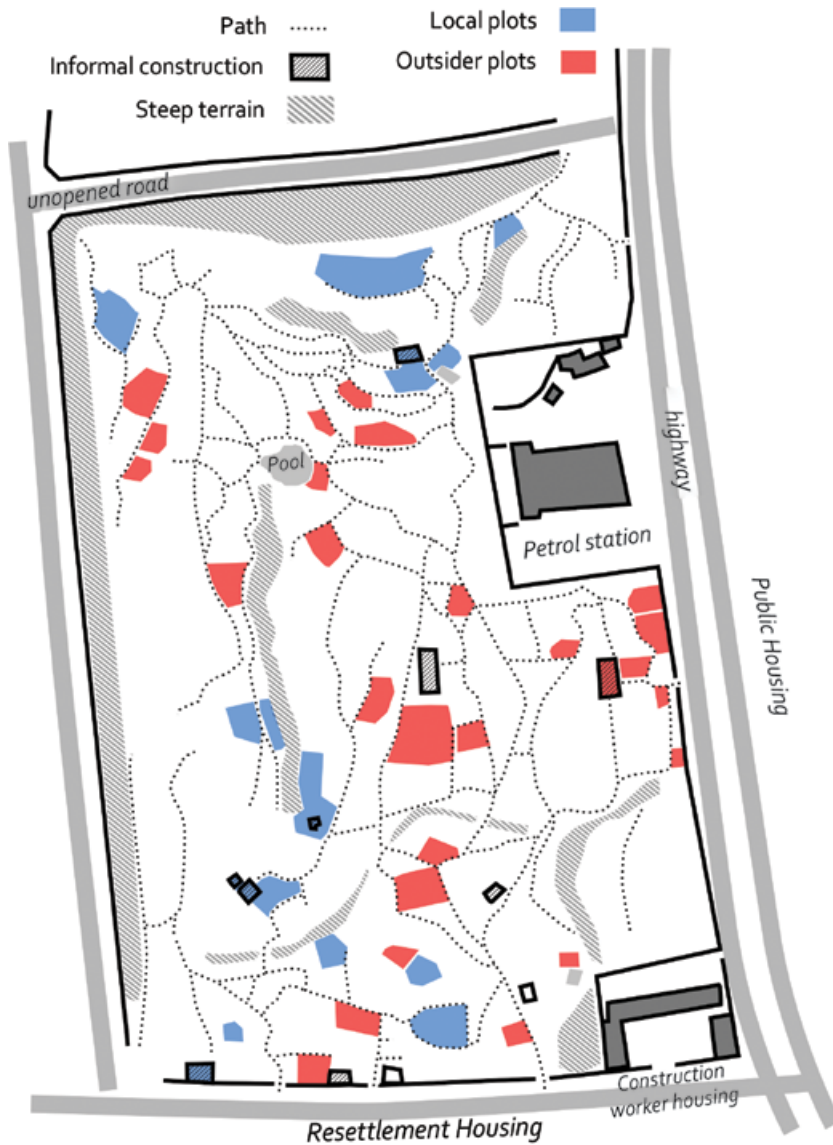
FIGURE 2 Map of the *kongdi* showing main features and land use by interviewees (map produced by the author)

The daily life of the *kongdi* also made use of the remaining material traces of the agrarian past. One local family who had been urbanized and given homes in the resettlement housing a decade beforehand continued to return to the ruins of their former home in the *kongdi* to socialize and barbecue food at the weekends. Half-standing remains of rural homesteads were converted into sheds to store equipment, the surface of the winding country road which passed through the area had been broken up and used to demarcate the boundaries of plots, and the remains of old outhouses were adapted into pools for gathering fertilizer and compost (see figure 3).

This material continuity with the past was reflected in perceptions of some of its users that the *kongdi* was a space that remained ecologically distinct from the city and thus offered them a chance to escape the notionally unhealthy metabolism

FIGURE 3   The ruins of an old homestead form the basis for a composting pool (photo by the author, June 2017)

of the urban. Interviewees contrasted the healthiness of farming on the *kongdi* to the unhealthy practices that they associated with the city. Several emphasized the physical labour of farm work as an important element of their motivation to engage in informal farming (e.g. local user, male, 70s, April 2017, C33). For some interviewees, urban life was perceived to be hazardous and linked to dangerous flows of unknown chemicals and pollutants, and the *kongdi* offered some escape from such flows. A local resident who had grown up farming explained her concerns about buying live ducks from a farmer on the street corner:

> Of course, we like to imagine these ducks are organic because they're from the countryside, but we know really they feed them chemicals. But now we're urban people we don't have any choice (interview, local resident, female, 50s, 20 October 2016, B11).

Consumption of food bought in the city required placing trust in other parties who could not be guaranteed to keep foodstuffs free of chemicals. By contrast, farming the *kongdi* restored a degree of autonomy by providing a guarantee that users weren't consuming dangerous chemicals or pollutants. This was particularly important for farmers who had young children in their households (outsider user, female, 20s, June 2017, C17; outsider user, female, 30s, April 2017, C30).

However, for others the idea of the *kongdi* as a healthy space separate from the city seemed laughable. One farmer who had grown up in the area described how the city had already intruded into the land of the *kongdi*, and the extent to which urban flows of pollution had already compromised its status as a space of bodily health:

There's no way [to use the land as we used to before]. There's too much pollution, no way. In the original farmland the water was clear. Even if it was muddy you just had to take it home [and] wait for the impurities to settle before you can use it for cooking. Nowadays there's no way you could do that … And this is social progress? This is a rural area. I used to plant crops. Now they're using the land to build houses. More people are living in this area. More people are moving in, that's just how it is. If there's more people, there will be more pollution. All kinds of rubbish, what they eat, what they shit, what they use, everywhere (interview, local user, male, 60s, January 2017, C25).

For this local farmer, there was no point in practising organic farming on the *kongdi*, since its natural resources had already been compromised by the intrusion of urban life. As a result, he used chemical fertilizers to wring the best-quality crops he could from the soil. Having lived in the area his whole life and witnessed the urbanization of the last decade, he saw any idea that the *kongdi* was separate from the city as fanciful: the socio-natural processes of the countryside had already been irrevocably damaged by contact with the urban.

Although the uses of the *kongdi* were temporary in so far as they anticipated the impending enclosure and development of the land, the material practices of the space nonetheless demonstrated an extended, continuous and careful human intervention into the space. The users of the *kongdi* invested time, effort and resources into constructing the space, despite the recognition that its use was temporary and would be destroyed in the near future. Moreover, these material interventions were significant for the ways in which they appropriated the ecological flows of the surrounding urban space for the benefit of the users of the *kongdi*: water and human waste were redirected to nourish the growth of organic vegetables. While some aspects of the *kongdi* provided a material rupture from the ecology of the surrounding settlement, its continual entanglement in urban flows of water, waste and pollution demonstrated that the practices of informal urban agriculture and their ostensibly 'rural' character did not in themselves create a space outside urban ecology.

Ownership and production

The association of practices of urban agriculture with the formation of rural commons and spaces of co-production in opposition to the market values associated with urbanism was deeply relevant to the particular production of the *kongdi*. None of the users of the space had legal right to do so, and their occupation of the land and enjoyment of benefits derived from it was managed autonomously without any overarching structure. As such, the question of the legitimacy of land use and ownership rights was a common topic of conversation with users of the *kongdi*. Their attitude was generally permissive and conceptualized the land as free for public use in a manner which we might recognize as a commons. The grounds through which this common use was legitimized varied. For most users of the *kongdi*, it was the temporary nature of the space and its 'empty' status within the teleology of urban modernization which granted them permission to make informal use of the land:

The state already expropriated [this land], but it is only reasonable that we should be able to farm here. Normally it would be illegal, but the government has no rules which state that once the land has been expropriated nobody is allowed to use it (interview, outsider user, female, 30s, April 2017, C30).

This response also notes the legal status of the *kongdi* as state-owned land, even though its use rights had already been auctioned to private developers. Several interviewees understood their right to use the *kongdi* as stemming from its ultimate ownership by

the state, and even referred to the collectivization of land in the revolutionary period to justify their use (outsider user, male, 30s, April 2017, C23; local user, male, 50s, March 2017, C28). Other interviewees suggested that they had earned the moral right to use the land by investing their time and effort into its cultivation, and conceived their temporary ownership of the land as stemming from an opposition to waste and a commitment to hard work which represented a distinctly rural set of values (outsider user, male, 30s, April 2017, C21; outsider user, female, 60s, June 2017, C11).

The users of the *kongdi* gained varying degrees of economic benefit from their access to the land. The majority of interviewees stated that their household ate some of crops produced from the *kongdi* and sold the rest, with only 10% producing solely for market. One key interlocutor ran a meat-smoking business from a self-built structure on the *kongdi*, which was his main form of employment for much of the year. Older female farmers often described their day as being structured around the unpaid work of childcare and regarded urban agriculture as a hobby which could be easily integrated with this work. Younger interviewees typically had paid work in nearby factories or doing menial labour for the local government. The majority of those interviewed reported a largely recreational motive for engaging in food production, describing it as enjoyable and good exercise, while the earnings from selling vegetables was just pocket money.

The conceptualization of the *kongdi* as a space where urban values of private ownership were suspended and rural commonality persisted extended to the relationships between users of the space:

> It has always been this way in Chongqing, ordinary people can all get along together fine. The police don't come here, the government don't care. If the police come and tell me to move, then I'll move (interview, outsider, male, 50s, 15 January 2017, B27).

Most of those interviewed described the relations between users of the *kongdi* as harmonious. In one instance, I questioned several farmers whether the use of the *kongdi* could really be as harmonious as they claimed. They responded by asking what jobs my parents did. When I replied that they worked in education, one farmer explained that if I was a city person it was natural that I would not understand this rural way of organizing land and daily life (outsider user, female, 50s, April 2017, C10). The conceptualization of land as a common resource that could be harmoniously shared among users was viewed as necessarily incompatible with urban values and epistemology.

There were examples of cooperation between those engaged in food production, as resources such as fertilizer pools and tapped water supplies were freely shared. Compost heaps, shed space and tools were often shared between neighbouring plots according to informal agreement. Several interviewees noted that knowledge of farming techniques and food production was shared among informal farmers. One outsider who had migrated from Guizhou province described how she had sought assistance from local farmers when she began to grow vegetables in the *kongdi*, since the climate and soil quality differed subtly from that of her hometown (outsider user, female, 70s, April 2017, C27). In other instances, novice farmers were taught how to grow vegetables by their neighbours:

> Many people don't like farming, and initially I didn't like it either. Nothing would grow and I got so frustrated. I didn't know what I should be growing in which season, or anything like that. For example, I didn't know which was the right season to plant corn, or when I should fertilize the soil, or when I should plant vegetables. I had to ask those next to me about everything. But after a year or two, I became addicted to it! Now I think it's great (interview, outsider user, female, 30s, April 2017, C30).

Despite this apparently harmonious sharing of space, resources and knowledge, determining access to or 'ownership' of particular plots was occasionally a source of conflict. Only one local farmer claimed to have farmed the same plot of land consistently since urbanization a decade prior (local user, male, 60s, April 2017, C03). Interviewees described acquiring their specific plots by removing weeds and rubble to 'open the wasteland' (*kaihuang* 开荒) for themselves, or being given plots by other users or friends. Several outsiders acknowledged that nonetheless the original 'local' farmers had legitimate claim to the land which superseded their own:

> There was nobody using the land, so I came and started farming. If the original owner returned and wanted the land back, of course you'd give it back'
> (outsider user, female, 30s, April 2017, C30).

However, the temporary nature of the pause in urbanization which allowed the *kongdi* to emerge as a space of informality also conveyed its ultimate enclosure. During fieldwork, the users of the *kongdi* believed that the eventual reurbanization and development of the empty land was inevitable (indeed, they frequently assumed that I was an employee of a developer due to my interest in the space). The transformation into a construction site shortly after fieldwork concluded marked the realization of this anticipation, and the enclosure and destruction of the *kongdi*.

Prior to enclosure, the threat of impending development raised the issue of whether any of those occupying the land would be eligible for compensation. Formally, the land had already been expropriated a decade beforehand, but among interviewees there was widespread expectation that informal farmers would receive some small monetary payoff for the re-expropriation of the land they had worked. The prospect of receiving this 'green sprout fee' (*qingmiaofei* 青苗费) was stated by some as their chief motivation for continuing to farm the land (outsider user, male, 30s, April 2017, C21), with rumours that farmers would receive several thousands of yuan per plot (local user, male, 60s, April 2017, C03; outsider user, female, 40s, January 2017, C15; local user, male, 70s, April 2017, C29).

Significantly, this informal compensation was not expected to be awarded equally. Those who expected to receive compensation were all locals, and so they linked their right to compensation to their 'native' status as the original farmers of the land. 'Outsiders' who had been displaced from elsewhere to the public housing and started farming the *kongdi* more recently did not expect to receive any compensation (outsider user, female, 30s, April 2017, C30). One of the outsiders who would thus lose out was a migrant worker who had been displaced to the city by the need to look for work. She had farmed a plot on the *kongdi* for a few years and was sure that she stood no chance of receiving monetary compensation for the work she had put into it.

> Those who planted this land, dug out all of these places, pulled out the stones—all of them are outsiders who came here looking for work. In general it's the outsiders who do the most farming around there, the locals don't do so much … It's not easy for outsiders who come to find work in the city. The state has never given us compensation for urbanization. Everything we have [we] have worked for with [our] own two hands … I've been farming now for a year or two. I used to grow crops over there [indicating the construction site] before we were pushed off. There were trees planted there, and I chopped them down and planted in the soil. I had no idea whose the land was originally, but when we were finally pushed off the owner came and claimed the green sprout fee. So there you go, we just wanted to grow crops to exercise and stay healthy. If you're not a local, then there's nothing you can do. If somebody comes and tells you the land is theirs, you have no way of knowing if it's true or not. But we didn't argue about this. It's just money anyway (interview, outsider user, female, 40s, January 2017, C15).

Her experience revealed the superposition of several logics of ownership and economic value at work in the *kongdi*. The moral (notionally 'rural') logic of ownership among outsiders stressed the right to use the *kongdi* based on the time and effort invested in cultivating the land and cooperation with neighbours. Against this, a traditional logic of ownership which stressed continuity with the recent past predominated among locals, for whom the claim on the land persisted despite its expropriation and urbanization. Finally, the exchange value of the land as a future site of urban development presaged the imminent enclosure of the space and its incorporation into the commercial land use of the urban. The *kongdi* was produced at the interface of several contradictory logics: perceived to be state-owned land despite already being leased to a developer; understood as a space of harmonious rural relationships but still enclosed by the anticipation of the re-expropriation of common land into urban commodity housing; a fictive asset worth billions of yuan in the state-owned land reserve, while the earth itself was still worked by dispossessed farmers and displaced migrant workers.

From the perspective of many of the interviewees, the economic function of the *kongdi* did indeed stand outside and in opposition to the hegemonic values of the urban. It was understood to exist outside of the logic of private ownership and land-as-commodity which they associated with urbanization—rather it was subject to a rural moral economy which presumed a 'harmonious' coexistence of displaced and dispossessed residents sharing the use and benefits of the empty land. This was illustrated by the farmer who rebuked me for approaching the land with an 'urban' logic when I questioned how the right to use the land was determined. However, this image of a peri-urban commons was undercut by the impending development and complete urbanization of the *kongdi,* which raised the prospect of enclosure and the common land being inscribed again with the value of a commodity. Thus, the local farmers sought to occupy areas of the *kongdi* to draw financial benefit from the compensation of the 'green sprout fee'. The politics of a nominally autonomous quasi-urban commons came up against the politics of anticipation (Simone, 2010) which recognized the future urbanization and realization of the exchange value of the land.

Kongdi within/outside the city

These informal uses of empty land for urban agriculture illustrate the contentious patterns through which urban subjects and spaces are produced. In both the material ecology of growing vegetables on this land, and the internal economies and rights of its users, the *kongdi* appeared as a space simultaneously entangled within and distinctly outside of the urban. For the peri-urban residents who made informal use of the space, the opportunities it provided for autonomous use of land constituted a space through which the contours and limits of urban life could be negotiated. For dispossessed and urbanized farmers and displaced migrant workers, access to the *kongdi* enabled practices of food production and physical labour which detached them from the unhealthy foodways of the city and allowed practices of co-production that formed a commons against the commodification of urban land. However, these elements of a space outside the urban were undercut by the persistent entanglement of the *kongdi* within the ongoing urbanization of the region: the ecology of the land was fed by urban flows of waste, water and pollution, and the economy of the land was haunted by anticipation of its future enclosure.

The *kongdi* in Chongqing also contributes a study of urban agriculture which is formally similar to practices of 'guerrilla gardening' but illustrates the difficulty of recognizing such practices as straightforwardly constituted in opposition to urbanization. Many of the farmers of the *kongdi* recognized the value of urban agriculture as practice which allowed economic and ecological decoupling from urban logics, yet the space also illustrated the ultimate impossibility and transitory nature of any rupture from the extension of the urban. This utilization of the *kongdi* by displaced residents provokes the same questions raised by the notion of the commons: how to manage resources in an environment in which city dwellers can exercise use rights over

goods without privatization or state regulation. The *kongdi* represented a meaningful practice of commoning in so far as it was constituted through 'collective work, among strangers, to govern non-commodified resources' (Huron, 2015: 977) in a conscious break from marketized urban practices.

However, the politics of the *kongdi* did not stand in straightforward opposition to capitalist urbanization, but rather negotiated a position within and outside the city through local histories of dispossession and displacement and the particular temporality of urbanization in Chongqing. The expectation of the urban future promised by further development provoked some users to seek to accumulate land for private gain, a politics of anticipation (Simone, 2010) which illustrated the limitations of the *kongdi* as commons. This illustrates the risk of understanding such ostensibly 'non-urban' practices as evidence of a vestigial rural remainder. Against the tendency to romanticize, anachronize and generalize such spaces (Angelo, 2017), they must be interpreted as already entangled in urban politics. Nonetheless, the production of such a space of urban agriculture in an entirely autonomous fashion, without impetus or supervision from any NGO, activist or formal organization, demonstrates the spontaneous production of peri-urban commons in emerging landscapes of planetary urbanization.

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined a definition of the *kongdi* as a category of space which lies outside of formal urban management, is subject to autonomous but temporary use in ways distinct from the urban, and through which the limits of the urban are negotiated. The specific contours of urban agriculture in the *kongdi* illustrate the uneven production of planetary urbanization. Against the extensive restructuring of space, dispossession and commodification of rural land which underpins the expansion of Chongqing, the delayed development of the *kongdi* allowed a space for nominally rural practices of food production and common land use to emerge. These practices remained firmly entangled within the urban, yet were perceived by the users of the space as offering a constitutive outside through which their own experience of becoming urban could be negotiated. The *kongdi* in this sense offers a demonstration of 'dialectics at a standstill' (Benjamin, 2002: 10; see also Roy 2011) in the production of planetary urbanization. More importantly, it demonstrates the possibility for spaces and practices outside the urban to exist within this temporarily empty land.

The *kongdi* is not simply a space within the urban, but a space through which *becoming urban* is negotiated, and alternative uses of space and constitutive outsides are worked out. The production of planetary urbanization is indeed 'an open process determined through praxis, by actual people making the world they inhabit' (Ruddick *et al.*, 2018: 3), and the *kongdi* provides one such example of how a temporary urban commons can emerge autonomously within this process. It also highlights the culturally specific local forms through which such spaces emerge (Jazeel, 2018), dependent on understandings of the constitutive outside which are distinct to the particular history of post-socialist development in China (Hsing, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2020). The supposition of the *kongdi* as a space temporarily beyond the urban affords a constitutive outside against which the urban can be defined and negotiated. It allows the constitution of urban subjects whose practices and identity remain distinct from a normative vision of 'urban civilization'.

Moreover, this article contributes an empirical case study of the social and spatial relations of the *kongdi* to the specific context of understandings of urbanization in China. In describing the diverse role of this one (relatively small) specific space in negotiating the value and everyday meaning of the urban, I hope that this study stands to illustrate the importance and critical potential of empirically engaging with such notionally 'empty' places (and previously displaced subjects) which are ubiquitous within many landscapes across China. Amid national discourses of poverty alleviation and 'common prosperity' which are closely aligned with projects of urbanization, the

need to critically engage with questions of how spaces and subjects become urban demands consideration of the function and enclosure of other *kongdi* in this process, alongside that of other peri-urban commons which remain 'off the map' of urban studies.

This article closes by returning to consider the position of the *kongdi* of Yubei district within the production of urban theory, and the affordances of ethnographic knowledge for dislocating urban studies. The displaced users of the *kongdi* who spoke of their occupation of this space, and the investment (and sharing) of time, resources and expertise in it, speak from a position seldom heard in debates over planetary urbanization. The *kongdi* of Chongqing offers a site from which to launch urban theory which is triply peripheral: peripheral to the global network of academic knowledge production, to the large coastal metropolises which are typically the site of Chinese urban studies, and to the urban core which remains the focus of urban epistemologies.

The commoning of the *kongdi* points to the different urban worlds created amid such peripheries, and the potentiality of such spaces for disrupting epistemologies and ontologies of the urban, planetary or otherwise (Robinson, 2016). It is a case which illustrates the practice of 'working the edge' described by Tsing (2015), through which, she suggests, a peri-capitalist commons might be salvaged from the ruins of planetary transformation. Greater attention is needed to the theorization and long-term empirical study of such spaces within and outside the urban. Extant literature makes note of many such spaces in urbanizing landscapes where informal practices are temporarily allowed to manifest beyond the remit of urban governance, but rarely explores how these relate to practices of becoming urban. The 'empty' spaces generated by the extended urbanization of the global East offer opportunities for reappropriation and the renegotiation of what it means to be urban *beyond* negating the hegemonic norms of the city and preserving the notionally rural and traditional.

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