



Department of  
**Geography and  
Environment**

Papers in Urbanisation, Planning and Development

# **Sanxian: Re-/un-thinking Chinese urban hierarchy with a medium-sized city**

Yi Jin and Yimin Zhao

Paper No. 10

Geography and Environment Discussion Paper Series

July 2020

# Editorial Board

Professor Riccardo Crescenzi

Professor Hyun Bang Shin

Dr Charles Palmer

All views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or LSE. The results presented in the paper are not peer-reviewed.

## **Published by**

Department of Geography and Environment  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
Houghton Street  
London  
WC2A 2AE

[geog.comms@lse.ac.uk](mailto:geog.comms@lse.ac.uk)

[www.lse.ac.uk/Geography-and-Environment](http://www.lse.ac.uk/Geography-and-Environment)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the author(s) nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form other than that in which it is published. Requests for permission to reproduce any article or part of the Discussion Paper should be sent to the author(s) directly.

# Sanxian: Re-/un-thinking Chinese urban hierarchy with a medium-sized city

Yi Jin, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, AS8 #07-01, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260; [y.jin@nus.edu.sg](mailto:y.jin@nus.edu.sg)

Yimin Zhao, Department of Urban Planning and Management, School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China, 59 Zhongguancun Street, Beijing, 100872, China; [zhao.y@ruc.edu.cn](mailto:zhao.y@ruc.edu.cn)

## Abstract

A new trend is emerging in China that categorises cities according to economic conditions and political statuses and that formulates a new urban hierarchical system. This urban hierarchy has historical echoes from several decades ago, when the country was divided into three “fronts” for geopolitical concerns. Ironically, the Chinese character of “tiers” and “fronts” is identical: “线” (*xian*). By referring to Luzhou, a medium-sized city in Western China that bears the same label as “三线” (“third tier” / “third front”) in different periods, we explore the change of urban political economy and governing techniques that are underlying these two different (yet at the same time identical) labels of a city. It turns out that the two labels of Luzhou indicate dissimilar logics of the state. The “third front” in the Maoist era, with centrally-dominated redistribution of resources, rendered the local state a passive political subject. In contrast, the recent rise of “tiers” discourse has a lot of purchases from the local state. Situating in inter-city competitions, they are empowered yet also impelled to be more active in promoting the urbanisation process and boosting “urban-ness” in partnership with capital. Here, between the territorial logic of the planned economy half century ago and the ongoing entrepreneurial local governance at present, we are invited to further reflect on how the development trajectory of an ordinary (and even overlooked) city could contribute to more global urban studies.

**Keywords:** urban hierarchy, ordinary cities, comparative urbanism, urban entrepreneurialism, China

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Prof Hyun Bang Shin and Dr Hanna Ruszczyk for their advice and help.

## 1. Introduction

The rapid urbanisation process in China witnesses not only the increase of the gross number of urban population, which reaches 831.37 million by the end of 2018 and accounts for 59.58 per cent of the total population (NBS, 2019), but also the birth of super-large cities with dozens of millions of people. During this process, a new trend is emerging in Chinese mass discourse that categorises cities according to economic conditions and political statuses and that formulates a new urban hierarchical system. Some cities, despite big in terms of its size and population, still fall “off the map” in this urban hierarchy. Indeed, the practice of urban categorisation is attending to many cities that have long been overlooked, while overlooking these cities at the same time, as it tends only to highlight those cities at the top. In this article, we investigate these cities “off the map” in China – the “*sanxian*”<sup>1</sup> cities in particular. By referring to cities “off the map”, or “overlooked cities,” we are not talking about internationally well-known metropolises, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. In contrast, here we focus on the development trajectory of Luzhou, an overlooked “sanxian” city in Sichuan Province, which characterises a large bundle of Chinese cities that are going through a double neglect – the neglect from global urban studies literature on the one hand, and the neglect within China urban experiences on the other, where (only) the so-called first-tier cities are foregrounded (see Shin, forthcoming). By looking at “overlooked cities” such as Luzhou, we want to respond to the call for theorising from the “ordinary cities” (Robinson, 2006), so as to extend the line of inquiry in comparative urbanism.

This article is based on a series of fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017 in the city of Luzhou, South Sichuan Province. It mainly uses qualitative research methods, including archival and documentary research, participant observation and interviews. To select Luzhou as the site for case study is not only because it is an ordinary city “off the map” with an urban population of 1.5 million, but also because it bears two labels – both are with “*sanxian*” in the title, yet situated in two totally different historical-geographical conjunctures. The first

---

<sup>1</sup> “Sanxian” literally refers to the Third Tier, but also bears other meanings. We will explain the meaning of this term in detail in the third section.

emerged during the “Third Front Construction” period (1964-1981). Located in the “Third Front,” Luzhou was once a “Third Front City” (*sanxian chengshi* in Chinese), the city to host several factories related from the First Front. The second label is attached by a business magazine called *China Business Network Weekly* (*Diyi caijing zhoukan*, hereafter Yicai). In 2016, when Yicai conducted its second city ranking (see Section 2), Luzhou was categorised as Third-tier City (once again, the *sanxian chengshi*) (Yicai, 2016). This echo of *sanxian* makes Luzhou an interesting case to interrogate, which could hopefully help us understand the changes of urban political economy and governing techniques that are underlying the two different (yet at the same time identical) labels with the same Chinese characters, 线 (*xian*), and to shed light on recent reflections on comparative urbanism and ordinary cities more broadly.

## 2. The birth of Chinese urban hierarchy, 2013

In recent years, the “tier city” vocabulary like “First-tier City” and “Second-tier city” is becoming more popular in China, which generates a new hierarchical urban system. This new “tier city” hierarchy was created by a Chinese business magazine called *Yicai* in 2013, which originally meant to reflect the business attractiveness and the economic potential of different cities (Yicai, 2013). The system produced by *Yicai* is based on a series of complex criteria called “synthetical business index” (*zonghe shangye zhishu*). Instead of a single parameter, such index takes a series of indicators into account, including the number of top brands that can be found in a city, GDP, annual income per capita, the number of key universities, the number of major corporations that consider this city as their key strategic cities, airport capacity, the number of foreign consulates, and the number of international air routes (*ibid.*). 400 cities in China, which cover all provincial level cities, all prefecture level cities and some county level cities, have been ranked according to this synthetical index and further classified into six tiers. In *Yicai*’s 2013 report, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen were categorised as First-tier City (*yixian chengshi*), although Guangzhou and Shenzhen are just deputy-provincial level cities in terms of their administrative status. *Yicai* coined a term “(Emerging) New First-tier City” (*xin yixian chengshi*) for the second category, indicating that they have the potential of upgrading to be First-tier City. In this 2013 report, 15 cities were

categorised as New First-tier City, including Tianjin and Chongqing, the two provincial level cities, along with nine provincial capitals, three deputy provincial level cities and one prefecture level city. At the level below, 36 cities were categorised as Second-tier City, 73 cities as Third-tier City, 76 cities as Fourth-tier city, and 200 cities as Fifth-tier city (*ibid.*).

Since 2013, this magazine has renewed its city ranking in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. In 2016, Yicai renewed and complicated the evaluation system it used to rank different cities. It introduced more indicators into this ranking system, such as the size of urban population, the number of skyscrapers and the level of air quality. These indicators have been divided into five parameters to reflect “the extent of the agglomeration of business resources, the degree of a city as transportation hub, activeness of citizens, the diversity of life, and malleability in the future” (Yicai, 2016). According to all the four rankings, each time, four cities were identified as First-tier cities, 15 cities as New First-tier cities, 30 cities as Second-tier cities, 70 cities as Third-tier cities, 90 cities as Fourth-tier cities, and 129 cities as Fifth-tier cities. Most cities remained in the same category across years. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are always categorised as the (only four) First-tier City, while 11 other cities, such as Chengdu, Hangzhou, Wuhan and Chongqing, stayed in the category of New First-tier City across all five rankings since 2013. The only major change is the order of cities within each category.

In fact, this ranking created by *Yicai* is not the only hierarchical urban system in China. However, it is the first one that has not been initiated by the state, yet still becomes nationally influential. Traditionally, Chinese cities were classified mainly based on an administrative system, which consists of three levels, namely, provincial level city (or city under the direct administration of the central government) (*zhixiashi*), prefecture level city (*dijishi*), and county level city (*xianjishi*) (see Ma, 2005). By 2019, there are four provincial level cities (including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing), 294 prefecture level cities under the administration of different provinces, and 375 county level cities under the administration of different prefectures or prefecture level cities. In addition, amongst all the 294 prefecture level cities, 10 provincial capitals, together with another five cities with political and economic significance, have been granted the title of deputy-provincial level city (*fushengji shi*). This policy makes these cities sitting above, administratively, those “normal” prefecture-level cities.

On top of this, since 2008, the Ministry of Land and Resources started to extend its monitoring of land price to 105 selected cities (MLR, 2008). Within its published reports, all 105 cities have been roughly divided into three tiers for the sake of making comparison – the

First-tier, the Second-tier, and the Third-tier (but only three tiers, which is different from the *Yicai* ranking). This report designates Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen as the First-tier; other provincial level cities, provincial capitals, and deputy-provincial level cities as the Second-tier; and all other prefecture-level cities as the Third-tier<sup>2</sup>. Although this system could be regarded as the archetype of the *Yicai* system, it only covers selected cities, and still follows the administrative hierarchy system.

The two hierarchies noted above, however, are based on one and the same singular parameter, namely, the administrative level. In contrast, the system created by *Yicai* is based on a “synthetical” index that captures different dimensions of cities, which makes the ranking more in accordance with public perception. Meanwhile, this hierarchy not only includes large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, it also incorporates many other cities that used to be “off the map,” covered by the traditional perspectives and linear narratives of cities. To some extent, every city in China could find its position in the list configured by *Yicai*. Therefore, it is understandable that within just six years, this hierarchical urban system has been so influential that it has permeated into China mass discourse, including not only everyday discourse among the public, but also official, academic and planning vocabularies. A significant evidence is: both Xinhua News Agency and *People’s Daily*, two mouthpiece press of the Party State, now adopt the tier city discourse in their reports. For instance, in January 2019, Xinhua News Agency (XNA, 2019) published an article on the current trend of migration in China, which reported that the population of Beijing and Shanghai started to decrease for the first time in the past two decades, while the gross population of some “New First-tier Cities”, such as Zhengzhou, Xian and Hangzhou were going to surpass 10 million as they became more attractive to young people newly entering the labour market. Similarly, in early 2018, *People’s Daily* (2018) called the new trend of migration as “the effect of New First-tier Cities” in one of its articles. This article also described the uneven distribution of population in contemporary China as “the First- and Second-tier cities were crowded with too many people, while the Third- and Fourth-tier cities had to compete for more talented people” (*ibid.*). In this regard, the tier city discourse is no longer limited to the land price monitoring as it first appeared, but rather widely accepted in China urban vocabularies and daily experiences.

---

<sup>2</sup> See the Report of Land Price Monitoring in Major Cities (2019 Q1), note 3. Available at <http://www.landvalue.com.cn/News/NewsRead?id=c3b908446fed4f24b2b828e25dd792e7>.



However, the formulation of the new urban hierarchy is to some extent also a practice of continuously overlooking those cities that have long been neglected. Although almost every city, including those that have long been overlooked, can find their position in the hierarchical list produced by Yicai, this hierarchical system was effectively designed primarily to target and promote those “New First-tier Cities”. In this urban hierarchy, as in many other, the presence of “ordinary cities” is not for their own sake but instead for highlighting these cities that are not “off the map,” which have much higher scores of business attractiveness and the potential of economic growth (Yicai, 2013). Beyond these cities that still dominate the top of the ranking, for those Third-, Fourth-, and Fifth-tier cities, they are incorporated into this urban system only to be overlooked in the end. The dialectics of looking and overlooking emerge here. In the next sections, we will show with more details how and to what extent the co-existence of looking and overlooking is made possible in China’s urban process, where the local and historical conditions play a critical role.

### **3. The Third Front Construction: a geopolitical categorisation of Chinese cities, 1964**

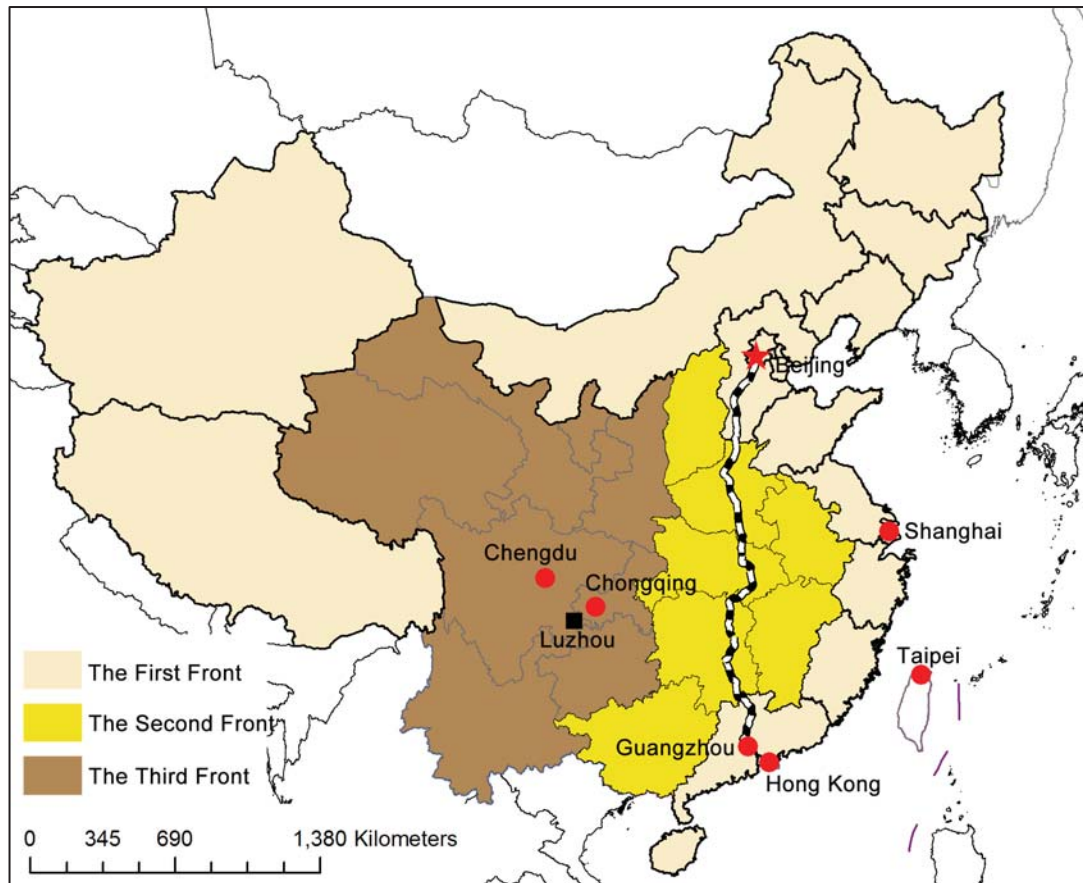
To divide all cities into different “tiers” (*xian*) may remind people of an earlier strategy of the Chinese state that divided the entire country into different “fronts” (also *xian* in Chinese) to foreground the “Third Front Construction” (*sanxian jianshe*). It was a large-scale project of industrial development for the interior provinces of China between 1964 and 1981. During the heyday of the Cold War, this project was brought to the fore with party leaders’ concern about the drastic changes of geopolitics in East Asia, particularly the beginning of the Vietnam War and the deterioration of the relationship between China and the Soviet Union (Meyskens, 2015; Naughton, 1988). At that time, the distribution of industry in China was generally unbalanced. Most industrial bases were located in strategically “vulnerable” places including the northeast (close to the border with the Soviet Union) and eastern (coastal) regions, thus jeopardising the national security. Worrying about the scenario of potential foreign invasions, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), especially Mao Zedong himself, started to figure out an alternative plan of making an even distribution of industries for defence purposes. In August

1964, the Secretariat of the Central Committee decided to launch the Third Front Construction (Chen, 2014: 7).

This is a national strategy that divides the territory into three “fronts”<sup>3</sup>. In general, the north-eastern and coastal regions are designated as the First Front (*yixian*), the mountainous inland region (except for two provinces on the border, Xinjiang and Tibet) as the Third Front (*sanxian*), and the region in-between as the Second Front (*erxian*) (see Figure 1). The central planning authority would follow this new territorial arrangement and reduce resources allocated to the First Front. It is the Third Front that was to be prioritised with significantly more construction projects to be conducted. More importantly, most factories in the First Front, especially those producing machineries and arms, together with plenty of universities and research institutes, were to be entirely or partly relocated to the Third Front for defence purposes (Naughton, 1988). Millions of employees and their family members were to migrate with these organisations as well, the number of which reached four million at its peak (*ibid.*). By and large, China devoted 205.2 billion yuan to the Third Front Construction, accounting for 39.01% of all national investment in capital construction in the same period (AROTFC, 1991: 32). With these funds, more than 1,000 industrial projects were completed, scattered across the Third Front region (Meyskens, 2015: 238). Nevertheless, this geopolitical-strategic project on the Third Front did not last for long. After 1971, as the geo-political tensions assuaged, marked particularly by the visit of US President Nixon to Beijing, the urgent motivation for establishing a supplementary industrial system in the Third Front region no longer existed. Therefore, the central planning authority ceased to give the Third Front region priority in terms of resource redistribution (Naughton, 1988: 362). In 1981, when China had already entered the reform era, the Third Front Construction was officially terminated. Some factories previously evacuated to the Third Front were relocated once again to their original places, while some others stayed where they were.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese word for “front” is “*xian*,” which literally means line. Some researchers translate *sanxian jianshe* as “Third Line Construction”. But other English writers (such as Meyskens, 2015; Naughton, 1988) translate ‘*xian*’ as “front,” which in Chinese refers to “*qian xian*” (front line). In this chapter, we adopt the latter version.



**Figure 1** The division of the three "fronts"

Source: illustrated by the authors.

Despite the fact that the Third Front Construction project has been widely taken as a big failure, especially in terms of its economic performance (see discussions in Naughton, 1988; Yang, 1990; Shapiro, 2001; Chan, Henderson and Tsui, 2008; Li and Wu, 2012; Wu and Zhang, 2010), its legacies have been consistent and playing a critical role in shaping the urban process of Western China – especially in those cities labelled “Third Front Cities” (*sanxian chengshi*) (Zhou, 2014). While it was a principle of the Third Front Construction project to locate factories evacuated to the Third Front in a way that could “disperse (*fensan*), conceal (*yinbi*), near mountains (*kaoshan*), and inside caves (*jindong*)” (Meyskens, 2016: 239), this was not fully implemented in practice. Indeed, many “*sanxian*” factories were not built in remote areas, and cities therein witnessed a huge increase in scale since so many factories moved nearby (Naughton, 1988: 361). With their affiliated amenities, such as hospitals, schools and shops, these factories could be seen to have produced independent towns or urban communities in themselves. Cities such as Panzhihua in Sichuan Province (Panzhihua Steel

Factory), Liupanshui in Guizhou Province (Shuicheng Steel Factory) and Jiayuguan in Gansu Province (Jiuquan Steel Factory) all exemplify perfectly this mode of industrial/spatial production (Xu and Chen, 2015; Zhou, 2014).

On top of this, after the official termination of the Third Front Construction in 1981, some factories and research institutes relocated from the First Front remained in the Third Front, thus constituting a solid foundation for industrialisation in Western China. In addition to those aforementioned industrial cities, for other cities in the Third Front, including some large cities like Chongqing, Chengdu, and Xi'an, which are now "New First-tier Cities", their industrial capacity has also been significantly enhanced because of the Third Front Construction project (Zhou, 2014). This marks an indirect yet deliberate effect of Mao's geopolitical strategy. For, regional disparities between the coastal region and the inland regions had been a general trend in the history of modern China. They were taken seriously in the Maoist era, with projects like the Third Front Construction being implemented, aiming to narrow down such disparities. These endeavours, however, melted as quickly as the Maoist utopia, because preferential policies were once again given to the coastal region after Deng's reform in the late 1970s, thus further enlarging regional inequalities (Fan, 1995, 1997; Wei, 2000).

While the term "sanxian," the third front, is referring to the mountainous inland here, which was less industrialised but being conceived as reliable places for protecting national security, its recent reappearance in the new urban hierarchy takes a brand-new perspective as noted above. In the next section, drawing on both the literature of and empirical observations in Luzhou, we will analyse the ways in which the first connotation of "sanxian" has gradually been mutated and replaced by its new hierarchical alternative in China's "urban age."

#### **4. Luzhou: being a "*sanxian*" city at the Third Front**

To better illustrate the changing connotations of "*sanxian*" in China's urban process, in the following two sections, we will look into the case of Luzhou. Established in 1950, Luzhou was once a county-level city and the administration centre of Luzhou Prefecture. In 1960, Luzhou Prefecture was merged into Yibin Prefecture, rendering Luzhou to be an isolated

county-level city for 23 years. It was upgraded again to a prefectural-level city in 1983, administering three districts and four counties now, with a total population of five million (more than 1.5 million living in the urban built-up area).

In the 1960s, as a city in the geopolitical “third front,” Luzhou got “quota” to host some factories evacuated from the vulnerable “first front”. In the original plan formulated in 1964 (see Feng, 2017: 1-5), a large-scale engineering machinery complex was to be established in Luzhou, turning this city into a hub of production for engineering machinery in the Third Front. Five factories and institutes were required to move to Luzhou to form the industrial complex, including Beijing Crane Factory, Fushun Excavator Factory in Liaoning Province, Shanghai Engineering Machinery Factory and Shanghai Construction Machinery Factory, and a machinery engineering institute located in Changde, Hunan Province. In 1965, the first three factories started to relocate. Between 1965 and 1967, 1,357 workers from Fushun, 1,100 from Beijing and 65 from Shanghai arrived in Luzhou. Their families either came with them or arrived later. After a year of preparation, in 1966, these factories started to operate (Feng, 2017: 4). But the chaos brought by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) disrupted the relocation of the fourth factory and the research institute. In addition, the three factories failed to constitute an industrial complex but instead operated separately as Changjiang Crane Factory, Changjiang Excavator Factory and Changjiang Piledriver Factory. (see Figure 2)





**Figure 2** Industrial Plants built in the 1960s

Photo by Yi Jin, 2016

In practice, the location of those factories evacuated to Luzhou did not comply with the general principle of the “Third Front Construction Project” that planned to relocate factories to remote areas. On the contrary to remote sites, it was Qiancao Peninsula, which was on the other bank of the Changjiang River, just opposite to the city centre of Luzhou, that was selected. There were two reasons for this choice. First, this location provided the proposed industrial complex with a shipping channel and easy access to an established city. Second, there was already an industrial base built on this peninsula, with infrastructural and other preparations at place, and could be easily transformed for the making of this newly built industrial complex.

The arrival of these factories to Luzhou had exerted significant influences upon the development of this “Third Front City.” First, the three factories constituted a key engine of Luzhou’s industry. Machinery manufacturing had been one of the pillars of local economy until the 1980s, exemplified mainly by the three factories (*Luzhou Daily*, 2010). Second, the three factories, with their affiliated facilities like residential buildings, school, and hospitals, have also transformed a large scale of agricultural land into the urban landscape. Since they were located right next to the city centre (across the Changjiang River), the size of Luzhou’s

urban area also expanded. Third, the arrival of migrants from the First Front cities not only physically expanded the size of the city, but also brought more “urban-ness” to Luzhou. Comparing to their hometown like Beijing and Shanghai, Luzhou was a city that lagged much behind. Mr Xu<sup>4</sup>, now a retired worker from Changjiang Crane Factory, is a Beijing native. When recalling his experience upon arrival at Luzhou, he said:

“When we first arrived here, frankly speaking, there was literally nothing in this city. Many rickshaw pullers were wandering. A lot of boat trackers along the riverside were even naked. This is the portal of the city! How could they behave like this? Only after we complained about this did they change. At that period, what did people eat? Just a bowl of porridge and several pieces of pickles. [It was hard to imagine] that’s a proper meal.” (Interview with a retired worker, 14 September 2015)

After their arrival, a distinction was generated between these migrant workers and the local residents. Workers in the three factories had the highest salary, secure employment, and better welfare provided by the state-owned enterprises. These better-off situations made native residents growing jealous. According to workers that served in Changjiang Crane Factory for long, working opportunities in their factory were highly attractive at its peak years in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the leaders of Luzhou municipal government would try to send their offsprings to work in the factory via personal ties. A ballad composed at that time also echoed this story, which goes as follows: “Little girl, grow faster. When you grow up, you might marry into the three ‘Changjiang’ factories” (CCTV, 2012).

Despite all benefits that these relocated factories and their workers could enjoy, they were not sincerely welcomed by local officials. This was due to a “bar-block” (*tiao-kuai*) power structure of planned economy back at that time. Here, the bar refers to a vertical hierarchy of production and consumption, while blocks indicate localities where such state activities take place. The vertical hierarchy was constituted by the central government, Party and military units, research institutions and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Although being physically located within the jurisdiction of municipal governments, the SOEs were subject to the vertical administrative control of the bar (Lu and Perry, 1995; Hsing, 2010: 34), namely, a higher level of state agency, and, in some cases, the central government.

Changjiang Crane Factory and Changjiang Excavator Factory, for example, were under the direct administration of the First Ministry of Machine Industry of the central government

---

<sup>4</sup> This is a pseudonym as all interviewees have been anonymised.

(*bushu qiye*). Their directors ranked at the same level in the bureaucratic hierarchy as the mayor of Luzhou, which was then just a county-level city. Furthermore, because of this administrative arrangement, it was their responsibility for these directors to submit all products to the ministry for further redistribution according to the central plan. In this process, no tax or revenue were directly transferred to the local government at all. In other words, despite the factories were located geographically in Luzhou, they were by no means a part of the territory of Luzhou municipal government. Nevertheless, the local government still had the obligation to serve these factories in terms of land and infrastructure, which made local officials reluctant to bear such burdens – this has been well explained by an expert of local history:

“Previously, our mind was super conservative. After the three factories settled down here, a similar factory was planned to be relocated to Luzhou. The then mayor of our city, Mr Xu, held a passive attitude. Why? Not because these factories would cause pollution. ... He did not take the issue of pollution into account. What he cared about was what he could do to serve the workers of those factories. At that time (under the planned economy system), it was almost impossible for the city government to secure sufficient food supply for citizens, not to mention to serve more workers. Now, city officials are eager to attract external investment. At that moment, it was supposed to benefit local economy when the central government directed investment to our city. However, what he (the mayor) considered was that the local government could not supply vegetable. The investment could cause troubles. We could catch a glimpse of the rationale of governance under planned economy.” (Interview with an expert of local history, 21 November 2016)

To wrap up, the Third Front Construction was initiated by the party leaders mainly for security concerns and discontent with the uneven development of industrialisation in China. Its entire process fluctuated correspondently with the change of national and international politics. In this era, Luzhou as a “*sanxian*” city was passively receiving geopolitical tasks and political-economic responsibilities allocated by the central planning authority. Those relocated factories were operated outside the municipal territory, with the supply of land and infrastructure as the only articulation point. In this regard, the local state could hardly display any initiative, which is in sharp contrast with the state behaviours in the era to come.

## 5. Towards a “*sanxian*” city, half century later



In 2016, Luzhou was categorised as a “Third-tier City” by *Yicai* in its city ranking, along with 69 other cities, including some provincial capitals, like Lanzhou, Yinchuan and Xining, as well as many prefectural-level cities in the coastal region (Yicai, 2016). “Third-tier City” (*sanxian chengshi*) marks an identical label in Chinese as “Third Front City” (*sanxian chengshi*) in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> As the intention of *Yicai* to conduct such city rankings is to highlight the New First-tier Cities, it did not provide detailed scores for cities in other categories. But this label itself already tells a newly given marginal status of Luzhou. This ranking induces local urban effects before long. To make this city stand out among other prefectural-level cities in Sichuan Province, in terms of procuring more resources allocated from higher levels of the authorities as well as external investment from elsewhere, Luzhou municipal government is actively branding the city as a sub-centre of provincial economy (*quansheng jingji fuzhongxin*; Sichuan Daily, 2018). In the tension between the “*sanxian*” label and the endeavours of being a sub-centre, we can recognise this city’s new development strategy. Shin and Zhao (2018) put it that urbanism has to some extent become a state project, and Luzhou is not an exception in this scenario. Here, urbanisation is indeed a strategy of state-led and land-based accumulation, remarked by some researchers as the Chinese version of speculative urbanism (Hsing, 2010; Shin, 2014). This is the urban political-economic basis of Luzhou’s transformation from an old “third front” city to this new status of “third-tier” city.

In 1983, when Luzhou was upgraded to be a prefecture-level city, the administration of the three factories have been gradually transferred to the municipal government. Industrial development was hence foregrounded in local economic strategy, with the designation of four industries (natural gas, machinery manufacturing, coal and Chinese liquor) as the “mainstay industries” in Luzhou (see a review in *Luzhou Daily*, 2010). However, since the 1990s, when the system of planned economy in China was replaced by the so-called “market economy” – as part of the economic reform – these industrial sectors were badly beaten by more competitive counterparts in coastal regions and those from overseas (*ibid.*). This also happened to the three engineering factories moved here in the 1960s. According to local residents, a large proportion of their employees were laid off amid the reform of state-owned enterprises in late 1990s. The local government struggled hard to revitalise these local industries. For example, in 2001, they tried to rebrand Luzhou as “the City of Chemical Industry in Western China” (*zhongguo xibu huagong cheng*) (*People’s Daily*, 2001); this still centred on the city’s effort in existing

---

<sup>5</sup> But this is the only case. In the other four rankings, Luzhou has been categorised as “Fourth-tier City” (*sixian chengshi*), along with many other alike prefecture-level cities in the central and western regions (Yicai, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019).

industry, and reaffirmed the industrial pillar of the local economy, though machinery manufacturing had been replaced by a new focus on harbour along Changjiang River (*Luzhou Daily*, 2010). Unfortunately, apart from investment in the built environment, these measures to boost local industry were generally not effective.

The final remedy, it turned out, was the land-centred accumulation system in line with those successful models that had emerged from coastal cities in the 1990s (Hsing, 2006). Since 2005, Luzhou's plan for boosting the local economy no longer focused on industries only. While attracting external investment on new industries is still at the centre of local agenda, this endeavour has been by and large extended to the investment on built environment, such as the creation of industrial parks and new urban areas, as well as the construction of transportation infrastructure (*Luzhou Daily*, 2010). The state-run land transaction centre<sup>6</sup> was established in 2000 (OLC, 2001: 188). From then on, land revenues have become a critical portion of extra-budgetary income of the local government. In 2017, the peak year, Luzhou's land revenues reached 18.23 billion yuan high, which was 1.25 times as the budgetary fiscal revenue in total (14.6 billion yuan)<sup>7</sup>.

The transformation of Qiancao Peninsula exemplifies the shift of urban development strategy. As noted above, Qiancao was once a hot spot of industrialisation in the Third Front Construction era. In 2014, the local government decided to relocate all factories and existing residents on Qiancao Peninsula and demolish most of the existing buildings, so as to transform it into Pudong<sup>8</sup> of Luzhou (newssc, 2015). In their ambitious vision, this area will be able to accommodate "modern finance, commercial service, creative industries, urban tourism, and eco-inhabitancy" in the future (LDRC, 2014: 1).

As urbanisation becomes the most significant strategy for local development, the size of Luzhou expanded significantly as both an outcome and an instrument. As shown in Figure 3, throughout the 1990s, the size of Luzhou remained relatively stable, increasing from 15 square kilometres to 23 square kilometres (although it was already a 50 percent expansion). However, after 2000, when Luzhou adopted the urban-oriented development strategy, its size increased nearly seven-fold within 19 years, from 23 square kilometres in 1999 to 169 square

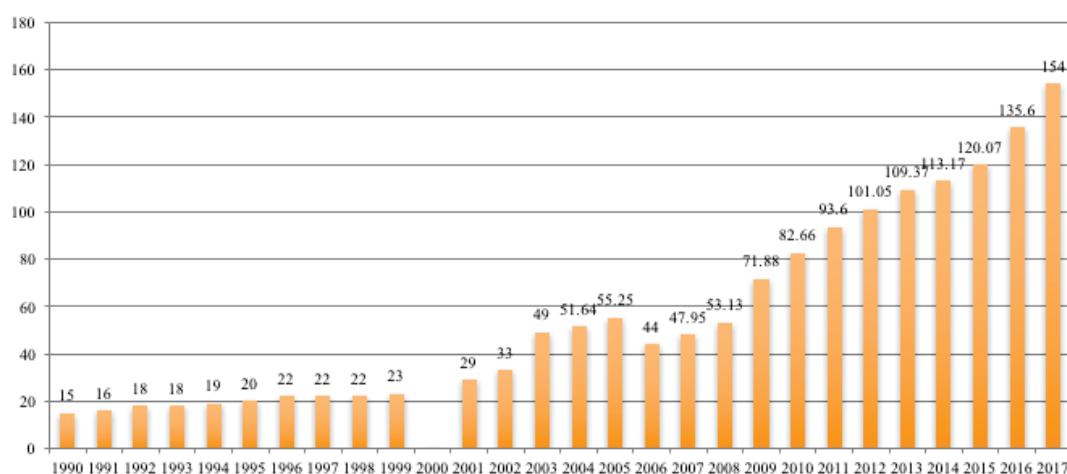
---

<sup>6</sup> The land transaction centre is the only place where the land use right can be transacted. Ordinarily, the land use right is leased by the state.

<sup>7</sup> The figure of Luzhou's land-related revenue is available at: [www.chyxx.com/data/201802/610142.html](http://www.chyxx.com/data/201802/610142.html); the figure of Luzhou's budgetary revenue in 2017 is available at: [news.lzep.cn/2018/0120/260242.shtml](http://news.lzep.cn/2018/0120/260242.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> Pudong is a newly developed district of Shanghai. Within less than twenty years, it is now become the central business district (CBD) of Shanghai.

kilometres in 2018<sup>9</sup>. In this same period, the urban population of Luzhou also grew from 0.27 million to 1.61 million, which is a six-fold increase. Using the criteria set up by the State Council (2014), Luzhou has grown from a “small city” to a “big city.” But this is not the end of the play. According to a recent regional plan of Chengdu-Chongqing urban agglomeration, issued by the National Development and Reform Committee (NDRC, 2016), the size of Luzhou metropolitan area will further expand to 200 square kilometres by 2020, with two million urban population, and in so doing to make it the second largest city in Sichuan Province.



**Figure 3** The expansion of Luzhou's built-up area

Unit: square kilometres. Source: *City Chronicles of Sichuan*, *Sichuan Statistic Yearbook* (1999-2016), and the Annual Work Report of Luzhou Municipal Government (2018). Notes: the figure for 2000 is not available. The reason for the figures from 2006 to 2008 being smaller than those from 2003 to 2005 cannot be verified. It is highly possible due to the change of statistic criteria.

In addition to the expansion of city size, the local government also actively seeks to collaborate with various capital to enhance the city’s “urban-ness”. For example, from 2015 to 2018, five large shopping malls, including a Wanda Plaza<sup>10</sup>, have been completed in Luzhou, with several others already being scheduled. These commercial complexes have brought in plenty of international high streets brands, such as H&M, Starbucks, Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein, which could make the city looks fancier (Scol, 2017). More spectacular public

<sup>9</sup> The number of urban population in 2018, see: [scnews.newssc.org/system/20181214/000929843.html](http://scnews.newssc.org/system/20181214/000929843.html).

<sup>10</sup> Wanda Plaza is a business complex developed by one of China’s real-estate magnates, Wanda Group. By 2018, there are 282 Wanda Plazas across China.

buildings and high-rises were also built to make the city more eye-catching (see Figure 4). In terms of the transportation infrastructures, Luzhou municipal government also endeavours to accelerate the construction of two new high-speed railways, open up four to five international air routes (there is none at this moment), and construct several light railways across the city (LMG, 2019).



**Figure 4** The Skyline of Luzhou

Photo by Yi Jin, 2015

Looking into these efforts of the local state, we could get better ideas on the new urban hierarchy, formulated by *Yicai*, as a “synthetical business index.” To a large extent, this index does capture the major development trajectories widely adopted in Chinese cities. For Luzhou, as a medium-sized city off the map, its capability to procure resources is limited and its position in urban hierarchies is marginal. Facing the relatively small urban population (even though the scale of population has been as huge as 1.6 million), the lower status in the administrative system of the state (as a prefectural-level city), and the recent label of “Third-tier” (which is translated as with limited business attractiveness), Luzhou has been struggling hard to capture seemingly trivial infrastructures and other kinds of urban materiality to enhance its “urban-ness.” For many other cities “on the map,” such elements as international air routes, the metro system, and large shopping malls with high street brands are quite ordinary. But they are taken by Luzhou, a “third-tier” city, as a new channel to showcase their viability and hence get higher scores in the new city ranking system. In this regard, for an overlooked city “off the map,” a reasonable trajectory of development is to imitate those “successful” cities “on the map”. This

is why and how this new capital-oriented urban hierarchy initiated by *Yicai* has been influential in many cities like Luzhou, be they the “second-tier,” “third-tier” or even lower. They are now incorporated in one and the same system of comparison, one that is at best a ranking system and at worst an inter-city competition machine.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, by referring to Luzhou, a medium-sized city in Western China that bears two labels as “*sanxian chengshi*” off the map at different periods, we explore the dynamics of urban political economy and governing techniques in Chinese cities. The two labels, both as “*sanxian chengshi*,” bear sharply different meanings. One of them associated with the Third Front Construction was the product of a temporal geopolitical tension during the Cold War period. Following the territorial logic of the planned economy era, the central state could arbitrarily divide the entire nation into fronts and redistribute resources for strategic purposes, rendering the local state a passive subject. As shown by the case of Luzhou, local officials were reluctant to bear more obligations to boost local economic development. In contrast, the recent tier city discourse introduced by *Yicai* suggests a broader image of inter-city competition. A series of marketisation and decentralisation reforms have empowered the local state in China and impelled more entrepreneurial local governance (He and Wu, 2005; Shin, 2009; Wu, 2003, 2018). The local state becomes increasingly active, as being evidenced in Luzhou, to promote urbanisation and boost “urban-ness” in partnership with capital forces.

For Luzhou, which has been labelled “*sanxian chengshi*” twice, the two titles indicate its double marginal situations as a medium-sized city. Indeed, the division of three “fronts” is embedded in an enduring horizontal disparity between coastal and interior regions. The Third Front Construction, though initiated mainly for defence purposes, narrowed down the regional gap for a certain period. However, with its termination and the commencement of the economic reform that re-prioritised the coastal region, the horizontal regional gap has been widened once again (Fan, 1997, 1999). On the other hand, the new urban hierarchy reflects a mode of vertical disparity. Within each “tier,” there are cities from both the coastal and the interior region. But those cities with higher administrative levels, namely, the provincial-level cities, provincial

capitals, and deputy-provincial level cities, have a much higher opportunity to rank in upper categories (31 out of 36 rank as Second-tier City or higher). For an ordinary city like Luzhou, which is off the map and marginalised both horizontally and vertically, it has to struggle even harder to showcase its viability and procure external resources and opportunities, so as to get a better position in the hierarchical urban system.

The development strategies of the “*sanxian*” city in China, as exemplified by Luzhou, could also shed light on comparative urbanism and ordinary cities literature more broadly. The endogenous production of urban hierarchies within China resembles a long-assumed global urban hierarchy that puts together “innovative global cities” and “imitative third world cities” as a dichotomy (Robinson, 2006). By creating the urban hierarchy with pre-given criteria, First-tier Cities and New First-tier cities have been situated as a model for cities ranking lower to imitate the development trajectory. Constrained by their conditions and pressures of inter-city competition, these medium-sized and “ordinary” cities have to follow rather than to innovate. This is how Luzhou, as many other cities off the map in China, are looked at and overlooked simultaneously in the new urban hierarchy. In this pattern, we can see the third-tier cities (or more generally, non-First-tier Cities) are more often than not situated in a “double neglect,” a neglect not only from local urban experiences and narratives but also from the global urban studies (see also Shin, forthcoming). In this regard, we think more works are needed to figure out how and how far we could understand – and theories – the ordinary cities when the power-capital nexus has been consistently shaping our urban experiences. One possible way, as has been experimented in this paper, is to attend to historical and political-economic conditions and to critically interrogate the local making of the aforementioned dichotomy.



## References

- AROTRC (Adjustment and Reform Office of the Third Front Construction) (1991), *The Third Front Construction*. Beijing: Unofficial Publisher.
- Chen, D. (ed) (2014), *The CCP and the Third Front Construction*. Beijing: Publishing for the CCP History.
- CCTV (2012), City Stories of Luzhou, episode 4. Available at:  
<http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C35153/6f34956c58154ee79703a07dcfa88a0e>.
- Fan, C. (1995), Of Belts and Ladders: State Policy and Uneven Regional Development in Post-Mao China. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 85(3): 421-449.
- Fan, C. (1997), Uneven development and beyond: regional development theory in post-Mao China. *IJURR*, 21(4): 620-639.
- Feng, K. (ed.), (2017) *The Third Front Construction in Luzhou (volume on Jiangyang)*. Luzhou: Unofficial Publisher.
- He, S. and Wu, F. (2005), Property-led redevelopment in post-reform China: A case study of Xintiandi redevelopment project in Shanghai. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 27(1): 1-23.
- Hsing, Y. (2010), *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LMG (Luzhou Municipal Government) (2019), The special implementation plan of transforming transportation structure within three years. Available at:  
[www.luzhou.gov.cn/zw/zcfg/szfwj/lfbf/content\\_595358](http://www.luzhou.gov.cn/zw/zcfg/szfwj/lfbf/content_595358).
- LRDC (Luzhou Reform and Development Committee) (2014), *Plan for the renovation and relocation of old industrial bases of Shawan-Qiancao-Lantian in Luzhou*. Document provided by the Urban Planning Bureau of Luzhou Municipality.
- Lü, X. and Perry, E. J. (eds.) (1995), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe.
- Luzhou Daily (2010), The development trajectory of Luzhou: from 'Tian-Chang-Di-Jiu' to 'Four-Four' Strategy. Available at  
[snews.newssc.org/system/2010/10/27/012943612.shtml](http://snews.newssc.org/system/2010/10/27/012943612.shtml).
- Ma, L. J. (2005), Urban administrative restructuring, changing scale relations and local economic development in China. *Political Geography*, 24: 477-497.
- Meyskens, C. (2015), Third Front Railroads and Industrial Modernity in Late Maoist China. *Twentieth-Century China*. 40(3): 238-260.
- MLR (Ministry of Land and Resources) (2008), Notice on Enhancing the Urban Land Price Monitoring. Available at  
<http://www.landvalue.com.cn/News/NewsRead?id=ec9e4b853d4e48aea934bc15f3e5a7e5>.
- Naughton, B. (1988), The Third Front: Defence Industrialization in the Chinese Interior. *The China Quarterly*. 115: 351-386.

- NBS (National Bureau of Statistics) (2019), Statistic bulletin of national economy and social development, 2018. Available at: [www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201902/t20190228\\_1651265.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201902/t20190228_1651265.html) (accessed 19 June 2019).
- NDRC (National Development and Reform Committee) (2016), Development Plan of Chengdu-Chongqing City Agglomeration. Available at [www.ndrc.gov.cn/zcfb/zcfbghwb/201605/t20160504\\_800780.html](http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/zcfb/zcfbghwb/201605/t20160504_800780.html).
- newssc (2015), Transforming Shawan-Qiaocao to be the Pudong New City of Luzhou. Available at [lz.newssc.org/system/20151214/001809671.html](http://lz.newssc.org/system/20151214/001809671.html).
- OLC (Office of Luzhou Chronicles) (2001), *Chronicle of Luzhou* (2000). Beijing: Chronicle Press.
- People's Daily* (2001), Luzhou, the rising city of chemical industry in Western China. Available at <http://data.people.com.cn/rmrb/20011225/5>.
- People's Daily* (2018), How to elevate the “marsh land” of talents. Available at <http://data.people.com.cn/rmrb/20180601/17>.
- Robinson, J. (2006), *Ordinary cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London: Routledge.
- Scol (2017), International brands in different cities in Sichuan. Available at [bbs.scol.com.cn/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=15183605&extra=&highlight=%C9%CC%D2%B5&page=1](http://bbs.scol.com.cn/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=15183605&extra=&highlight=%C9%CC%D2%B5&page=1)
- Sichuan Daily* (2018), As a big city, Luzhou is striving to become the sub-economic centre of Sichuan province. Available at [epaper.scdaily.cn/shtml/scr/20180813/197864.shtml](http://epaper.scdaily.cn/shtml/scr/20180813/197864.shtml).
- Shapiro, J. (2001), *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shin, H. B. (2009), Residential Redevelopment and the Entrepreneurial Local State: The Implications of Beijing's Shifting Emphasis on Urban Redevelopment Policies. *Urban Studies*. 46(13): 2815-2839.
- Shin, H. B. (2014), Contesting speculative urbanisation and strategizing discontents. *City*. 18(4-5): 509-516.
- Shin, H. B. (forthcoming), Theorising from where? Reflections on de-centring Global (Southern) Urbanism. In McFarlane C and Lancione M (eds.) *The Handbook of Global Urbanism: Essays on the City and its Future*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Shin, H. B. and Zhao, Y. (2018), Urbanism as a state project: Lessons from Beijing's green belts. In M Jayne (ed.) *Chinese Urbanism: Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge: 30-46.
- State Council (2014), Notice on the change of scaling cities. Available at [www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-11/20/content\\_9225.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-11/20/content_9225.htm).
- Wei, Y. (2000), *Regional Development in China: States, Globalization and Inequality*. London: Routledge.
- Wu, F. (2003), The (post-) socialist entrepreneurial city as a state project: Shanghai's reglobalisation in question. *Urban Studies*. 40(9): 1673-1698.



- Wu, F. (2018), Planning centrality, market instruments: Governing Chinese urban transformation under state entrepreneurialism. Urban Studies. 55(7): 1383-1399.
- XNA (Xinhua News Agency) (2019), The population of Beijing and Shanghai decrease and several “New First-tier Cities” are to have 10 million people. Available at [www.xinhuanet.com/local/2019-01/07/c\\_1123958604.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/local/2019-01/07/c_1123958604.htm)
- Xu, Y. and Chen, X. (2015), The Implications of the Third Front Construction for industrial economy and urbanisation in China. Contemporary China History Studies. 22(4): 81-92. (in Chinese)
- Yang, D. (1990), Patterns of China’s Regional Development Strategy. China Quarterly: 230–257.
- Yicai (2013), The newest city ranking in China. Available at [www.yicai.com/news/3236894.html](http://www.yicai.com/news/3236894.html).
- Yicai (2016), Chengdu, Hangzhou Top List of 15 Emerging New First-Tier Chinese Cities in 2016. Available at [www.yicaiglobal.com/news/chengdu-hangzhou-top-list-15-emerging-new-first-tier-chinese-cities-2016](http://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/chengdu-hangzhou-top-list-15-emerging-new-first-tier-chinese-cities-2016).
- Yicai (2017), 2017 “New First-tier City” ranking. Available at [www.yicai.com/news/5293378.html](http://www.yicai.com/news/5293378.html).
- Yicai (2018), 2018 “New First-tier City” ranking. Available at <https://www.cbnweek.com/articles/normal/20992>
- Yicai (2019), 2019 “New First-tier City” ranking. Available at [www.yicai.com/news/100200192.html](http://www.yicai.com/news/100200192.html).
- Zhou, M. (2014), The Third Front Construction and Urban Development in Interior China, 1964-1980. China Economic History Studies. 1: 142-151. (in Chinese)