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Memories of Hyperdevelopment: Chongqing Trip Report

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By Jacob Dreyer

Like any good Shanghai resident, I am more or less terrified by the China that exists outside of metro line 3. However, I had been obsessing for months about the municipality of Chongqing, a radically unusual city even by the standards of contemporary China. When I found that I had a spare weekend, I finally took a trip there to explore. Instead of describing my trip, or offering a journalistic take on the city à la Christina Larson, whose piece in [Foreign Policy](#) does that more competently than I could hope to, what follows is a series of meditations on Chongqing's urbanism, in text and images. A Buenos Aires to Shanghai's Paris, Chongqing has the air of being a forgotten or undiscovered metropolis, completely overshadowed by a more worldly and prominent counterpart. Shanghai's new cityscape has received thorough attention from photographers such as [Greg Girard](#), but Chongqing hasn't yet been the focus of such work. Here, I've tried to initiate such an exploration of the city.

The development of Chongqing is unprecedented in modern Chinese history: for its scale, for the ambition of its planning, for the rapidity with which it has sought to transform the rural into urban. Not an urban melting pot, Chongqing is a boiling cauldron of energy, analogous to the local specialty, hotpot.



Chongqing hotpot, originally developed by the bangbang men, those whose duty it is to haul loads up endless stairs, froths with heat. The heat setting on this was intermediate.

This incarnation of Chongqing (on a scale so much larger than even that of its earlier heyday as a wartime capital for the Guomindang) is a city seemingly summoned entirely from the imagination, a reflection of the most pressing desires of the urbanizing multitudes of China's hinterland.

From the Jiangbei airport, I taxied downtown, staring out of the car's windows all the while. Out of the mist and fog, a million steeples and towers arose—the metropolitan region of Chongqing has approximately 32 million inhabitants. Sliced away from Sichuan province in 1997, it is part of the central government's attempt to develop the west. There are so many poor people in China that it would be incomprehensible for all of them to come to Beijing, Shanghai, or the booming factory towns

of the Pearl River Delta that include Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Therefore, the government is trying to develop inland metropolises, most notably Chongqing, in order to provide the urban structure perceived as necessary for development. The result is a ghost city, one rendered more ephemeral by the cloud of smoke hovering over the city, one of the most polluted in the world. In Chongqing, myriad phantom possibilities are left half-realized in the form of architecture.



Chongqing skyline on a clear day.

A dream zone, a purgatory, a vast terrain linked by every manner of transportation—cablecars, monorails, and boats.



Wharfside.

Chongqing is, like Southern California, a series of independent and discreet urban centers that converge around a megalopolitan core (although this core itself is difficult to recognize as such). The city's culture seems deliberately perverse: a mountain city, the central metaphor is of stairs, and endlessly climbing to reach a new and essentially meaningless place.



Hongyadong public art installation, recalling the history of the city.

The intense air pollution means that sunlight is scarce—ironically a benefit, as white skin is deemed beautiful in Chinese culture.

I alternately walked and drove past the endless tower blocks, jostling down the pavements seeping with mud. It was hard to comprehend the reality of 32 million separate destinies playing out within a one-hour radius of Jiefangbei (the liberation monument—liberation here from the Japanese, though I like to consider the possibility of a city as a form of liberation). This toxic realm, the food repulsively spicy and oiled, the air unbreathable, cigarette smoke everywhere, even inside of taxicabs—Chongqing was a poisonous hive, swarming with beauty. The thickness of the air, a naturally occurring climactic condition augmented by human activity, made the streets full of misty wraiths—as in Dickens' London, the fog was so heavy that some days during my visit, I could see no more than 3 feet ahead, even in broad daylight. In the never-ending labyrinth built around a Yangtze littoral, millions of devious plots were incubating—strange glances, ramshackle residences, the pavement periodically interrupted by bonfires.

The murky air made it hard to know where the city ended and the countryside began; perhaps nobody knows, for it is constantly in flux. The urban blankness of highways and tower blocks quickly fades into the monotony of the rural without a beat.



Residence seen from the platform of the Jialing cablecar. It becomes clear how the government's advocated "forest Chongqing" can take shape: the city and the junglish mountaintop merge into one in the architecture of Chongqing.

Chongqing is a vicinity, a concept of organization. As Jacques Derrida wrote of LA, "[this city] is not anywhere, but it is a singular organization of the experience of 'anywhere.'" [1] As such, its expansion will be continual and multiple, as the space continues to contort itself into an ever more complex form, one that even as it seems to be a simulacra of other cities (Chongqing, like Shanghai, has a Xintiandi; it even has two Wangfujing's, one more than Beijing) resembles nothing in particular—a smudge on the horizon, a boiling cloud, a city that proffers utopia and dystopia at every corner.

[1] Referenced in *Messianic City: Ruins, Refuge, and Hospitality* in Derrida, Puspa Damai, Discourse 27.2 and 27.3, p. 68. Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 2007.

All images taken by the author.

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