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State entrepreneurialism: theorising urban development politics from China

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Introduction

In this chapter, I will use China's urban development politics as an example to illustrate how we might theorise urbanisation and urban development politics in a non-Western context. While urban entrepreneurialism is usually read as an outcome linked to, or a manifestation of, neoliberalisation, we propose to step back from neoliberalisation as a starting point of theoretical explanation. We take a broader political economy approach to see how a distinctive form of 'state entrepreneurialism' in China is generated from conjunctural development of global capitalism and its crises. I largely pursue this aim through a grounded pathway (Robinson, 2016). As an effort to de-centre global urbanism (Shin, 2021; Robinson, 2022), I observe Chinese urbanisation on the ground, or the 'context', as a starting point and understand the politics of urban development as a concrete and historical response to the crises and challenges faced by the Chinese political economic system.

Against the long-lasting debate on neoliberalism and the circulation of its ideologies and practices by adopting the principle of the market as the dominant coordination mechanism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Le Galès, 2016), and considering China's neoliberalism in particular (Buckingham, 2017; He et al., 2018; Li, 2020; Peck and Zhang, 2013; Wu, 2017; Zhou et al., 2019), I adopt two research stances in this chapter. First, instead of applying an existing theory to China, this chapter reflects an effort to 'theorise from elsewhere' (Robinson, 2016). That is, rather than focusing on the theory of neoliberalism or neoliberalisation practices, the chapter starts from Chinese historical

development and aims to reveal how a particular form of politics, in this case the trait of state entrepreneurialism which is not necessarily linked to neoliberalisation, emerged. Although this research is not comparative in itself, it may have implications for comparing urban development politics in different contexts, because entrepreneurialism is experienced in many places and because China is already connected to the global economy, meaning its development does not take place in isolation of other contexts. Our understanding of Chinese urban development politics can therefore inspire both 'generative' and 'genetic' comparisons with other cities in the world (Robinson, 2016). Second, using a conjunctural approach (Peck, 2015), the chapter situates China's changing economic governance in world historical moments, in particular in relation to major global / financial crises. This means that our view is not confined within the nation state or local territories. This approach allows us to avoid 'methodological nationalism' or 'state-centric perspectives' inherent in the analysis of the developmental state in East Asia (Wade, 1990; Shin, 2021) and the diverse outcomes of state intervention in nations' industrial development (Evans, 1995).

To understand China's new urban development politics, I propose the notion of 'state entrepreneurialism' (Wu, 2018). In this chapter, I will discuss this notion, not through a theoretical elaboration but rather through a more historical material account by observing China's urban development on the ground. State entrepreneurialism refers to a series of state entrepreneurial actions to fulfil its strategic intention to maintain economic growth, stability and capital accumulation and in turn its governance capacity, which is achieved through creating a market-like environment, using external market actors, and inventing its own agencies operating in the market. As will be seen later, this state entrepreneurialism is not a fixed and defined concept, as the state's response to major external historical moments changes and evolves. Initially, the state may introduce market mechanisms and actors. Later, the state strengthens its position by creating its own agencies such as development corporations to operate in the market. State entrepreneurialism reflects the state's utilisation and action through the market (Wu, 2020). The key difference between a more neoliberalisation-like process of urban entrepreneurialism and state-centred entrepreneurialism is that the latter aims to enhance governmentality while using the market (or state market agencies). The difference is also manifested by strong state intentionality – using the market as an instrument rather than acting 'for the market'. Even in the earlier stage of marketization, it is evident that the state's intention was to use the market only as a useful tool without abandoning state steer (Wu, 2010).

Different historical moments are also utilised by the state to solve its internal crises of capital accumulation. In short, my overall theoretical stance is still a critical political economic analysis, although such a narrative is sensitive to local histories and geographies. In this chapter, I do not abandon a political economic stance. Looking back, the characterisation of urban development politics in western market economies as 'urban entrepreneurialism' originated from the understanding of political economic conditions rather than as part of an ideological or policy shift (Wu, 2010). Before the use of 'neoliberalism', the term 'flexible accumulation' was used in Harvey's original paper From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989, see his commentary, Harvey, 2016: p. 158). This suggests that he stressed the 'political-economic shifts behind the rise of urban entrepreneurialism' (ibid), rather than seeing the adoption of neoliberalism as an ideology. Thus urban entrepreneurialism is understood as a reaction to these 'political-economic shifts' rather than part of the ambitious policy circuits of neoliberalism seeking to transform local government (Peck, 2014). Surely, there might be different responses to these shifts, even within western economies (Clarke, 1995). The flexible regime of accumulation, originated in the West, provides some historical co-ordinates for the phases of development for China's industrialization. In other words, China and Western industrial economies both experienced the impacts of capital mobilities under the flexible accumulation regime, though in different ways. It is therefore illuminating to observe the entrepreneurial turn in China at these moments: 1979, 1992, 2001 and 2008. These national political moments periodise China's changing urban development politics, from an initial application of market mechanisms, through to export-oriented industrialisation, a fully developed world-factory model backed up by the state, and finally to state-centred financialisation.

From this political economic perspective, it can be seen that state entrepreneurialism deploys a remarkably similar toolkit to neoliberalism but at the same time it does not exclude more regulatory or interventionist methods. From this more state-centred or 'state-theoretical' view

(Jessop, 2002b), we reveal the types and variation of the state role, echoing the varieties of capitalism argument (Peck and Zhang, 2013). However, differently from Peck and Zhang, I suggest that the latter might not be applicable to China, because as a socialist market economy, China may not be in a 'phase transition' towards one of the capitalist varieties. But China has certainly changed its governance through a historical response to the evolving capitalist world.

While paying attention to the imperative of capital accumulation inside China and later transnational circuits after China became the world-factory, the perspective adopted in this chapter is also historical and geographical. We argue for a more strongly state-centred political economy approach. For example, we illustrate the state's deployment of financial means rather than seeing this as the overwhelming impact of financialised capitalism (Wu, 2021). That is, we do not regard local urban politics as a variegated scalar reflection of wider capitalist development. Instead, we stress the role of the national state in reasserting its sovereignty by adopting various governance changes. While understanding inter-territorial connections and supra-territorial scalar relations as in a spatialised conjunctural analysis (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020), we stress the long lasting governance capacities of the Chinese state, because it does not follow neoliberalism as an ideological shift. Rather, the principle of 'planning centrality, market instrument' provides a governance framework for urban transformation in China. As a result, in the urban territories, our perspective is sensitive to the assemblage developed by multiple actors – global, national, municipal or grassroots actors – through negotiation and contestation. The role of the state is still visible, as Robinson and Attuyer (2021) show in London where the state utilised planning gain and negotiation with private sector developers to finance affordable housing and infrastructure investment.

In the following sections, we provide a detailed account of the histories of state entrepreneurialism in China. For the readers who might be more interested in comparative urbanism in this handbook, we try to keep this account necessarily succinct. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, our understanding of state entrepreneurialism is historical, grounded and generative instead of arising from theoretical deduction. Hence, the description of historical moments serves to provide an example of how governance changes are triggered by

specific state territorial actions in crisis management and in relation to changing global political economies.

Constrained urbanisation and the centrally planned economy (1949–1978)

Here we try to understand the emergence of entrepreneurialism within the contradictions of state socialism. Although China is not a 'capitalist-like state' (Jessop, 2002a), its economy is still subject to the imperative of capital accumulation. In other words, the form of governance corresponds to its specific economic operation. The role of the state in resource allocation and social reproduction is required by the need to maintain the structural coherence of the regime. From 1949 to 1978 during the Cold War, China adopted an import-substitution economic strategy and developed its economy through 'self-reliance'. Investment in heavy industries became a priority. The state owned the means of production, and the labour market was absent. In cities, the state had to organise collective consumption, while keeping the urban and rural sectors separated. The state devoted the surplus extracted from the rural sector to support the state industrial sector. China maintained a very low level of urbanisation. The percentage of urban population was kept below 20 per cent of the total population until 1978 (Zhou and Ma, 2003). Compared with its industrial capacity, China was under-urbanised with a clear urban-rural divide.

The strategy of 'economising urbanisation' (Chan, 1994) – not investing in urban development — led to its own contradiction of capital accumulation. Urban consumption, though necessary, was 'unproductive' in this model. Investment in urban development could not generate a surplus, or in market terms, overcome low profitability. There was a lack of 'effective' demand, though the need for social reproduction was acute in the 'shortage economy'. Under the import-substitution strategy, the state suppressed the cost of labour and consequently consumption. The accumulation of capital relied on production, whereas consumption was not a driving force for economic growth. The rural sector saw a large idle labour force, and the state-owned urban sector was inefficient. The idle labour could not be put into production because import-substitution industrialisation (pursued at this time) is capital intensive and does not absorb the labour force in large quantities. Governance was administratively centred or

'centrally' planned. The lack of further scope for expansion or 'accumulation space' in the production sphere is remarkably similar to the over-accumulation crisis under capitalism (Wu, 1997).

Initial market-oriented reform and the embryonic market economy (1979–1991)

In the period of the 1980s China saw 'liberal' components of market regulation inserted into its rigid centrally planned economic system (Huang, 2008). This was not intended to replace the system of state planning with the market as a governance principle. Rather, the market was brought in alongside planning to form a dual-track system. In other words, the market was not seen as a governance principle for the whole economy but rather as a new space in which to expand accumulation. This market turn brought a supplementary space of accumulation and was accompanied by 'local development corporatism' (Oi, 1992).

Starting with rural reform, cadres engaged in the business of township and village enterprises (TVEs). Market-oriented reform was more successful in rural areas. Rural de-collectivisation through the introduction of the 'household responsible system' significantly increased the incentives and productivity of agricultural production. In short, entrepreneurial activities and entrepreneurialism emerged in the rural areas outside the formal state space. As the market price is higher than the price of state allocated resources in such a dual price track system, some officials used their power to sell their controlled resources in the market for a profit, leading to corruption. The regulatory context also tended to lead to rent-seeking by the predatory local state. In order to solve this problem, more radical price reform in the late 1980s was initiated but triggered hyperinflation and eventually political and social contention in 1989.

Throughout the 1980s, the development of the urban sector expanded the space of accumulation but it did not evolve on such a scale that it could overcome its constraints. The fundamental contradiction was low purchasing power. While entrepreneurial activities prevailed in relation to industrialisation, the *governance* principle did not shift to reshape urban governance in the direction of urban entrepreneurialism. According to Jessop and Sum's (2000) definition, the market development in this phase created entrepreneurial activities in the

city but not the entrepreneurial city. The conjuctural moment is symbolized by the relocation of labour intensive manufacturing industries from developed economies in the West and newly industrializing economies in East Asia to China. The economic development was largely fostered by "exception" given to rural households and villages, while more exception was extended to the local government later to build "entrepreneurial cities" after Deng's southern tour in 1992.

Export-oriented industrialisation and emergent urban entrepreneurialism (1992-2000)

Deng Xiaoping's Southern China tour in 1992 marked an important shift in capital accumulation. With the inflow of foreign capital, the local state had to offer preferential treatment to external investors to attract investment, similar to US local governments. The influx of foreign investment and inter-city competition transformed governance to become more market friendly. In the 1990s, China initiated a series of market-oriented reforms in labour, land, housing and social services, which could be regarded as the road to capitalism (Walk and Buck, 2007).

The marketized rural economy suffered as large number of TVEs went bankrupt and pushed rural labourers into the urban labour market. Under competition from foreign investment, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) underwent large-scale bankruptcy after the mid 1990s, and cities experienced consequential welfare retrenchment as the iron rice bowl or welfare net associated with SOEs was dismantled (Solinger, 2002). Development zones became widespread, where central planning mechanisms were suspended by special policies and market exchange prevailed. With rising market opportunities, government officials directly participated in profitable sectors such as real estate and developed coalitions with external investors in production activities, which is referred to by Duckett (2001) as 'state entrepreneurialism'. This is different from using regulatory power to extract rents in the earlier dual price track system as marketization was now prevailing in the Chinese economy. This use of the notion of 'state entrepreneurialism', however, does not mean state strategic policy guidance (Wu, 2018), as in the literature which places urban entrepreneurialism within the context of circulating neoliberal policies. Rather, this involved a shift from earlier rent seeking behaviour, for

example, imposing a fee on TVEs because the local state was able to restrict their activities, to a more productive market engagement, for example, providing cheaper land to external investors and forming coalitions with the private sector in economic development zones.

China's market-oriented reform in this period was once again closely related to world-historical moments. The initial opening and development of the Pearl River Delta was closely related to the newly industrializing economies in East Asia, especially Hong Kong. The nationwide reform was driven by major global conjunctural moments. For example, the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 intensified trends of housing commodification. As a response to the decline of both foreign investment and exports, the state tried to 'boost domestic consumption' through promoting housing commodification. The system of public housing provision was abandoned. The actual measures of housing privatisation were in fact more dramatic than those recommended at the time by the World Bank. Since then new housing has been predominantly developed through the market, which triggered widespread urban demolition in the late 1990s, continuing into the early 2000s. In this period, China applied the toolkits of neoliberalism such as welfare retrenchment, housing commodification and the establishment of development zones, and also experienced its symptoms such as excessive encroachment of rural land, informal settlements ("urban villages") and urban poverty experience by laid-off workers The 'neoliberal' reforms by the nation state in the 1990s prepared China for joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO), introducing the global conjuncture moment to China, which will be discussed in the next section

The world-factory model and the 'double movement' (2001–2007)

China joining the WTO in 2001 marked the maturating of export-oriented development. China had become the world's factory, linked to the global conjuncture and changes in new international division of labour (NIDL). The rapid expansion of export markets led to the influx of rural migrants into Chinese cities. Market reforms in the 1990s had led to a competitive pricing of production factors, including labour and land with relatively well developed infrastructure. Different from the development zone model in the 1990s, the world-factory model was no longer a model of 'state exception' (Ong, 2006). The operation of the world-

factory requires more broad-ranging state assistance and intervention, as shown by 'planning for growth' (Wu, 2015) in which the local state (through its development corporations) organises land acquisition and levelling and infrastructure provision (Hsing, 2010; Lin, 2014; Liu, 2019). In this form, state involvement in development is remarkably different from neoliberal planning.

The state plays a critical role in maintaining the structural coherence of accumulation. Facing increasing social tension and the crisis of social reproduction, the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao starting in 2002 shifted the policy from welfare retrenchment through laying-off state industrial workers in the 1990s to establishing a basic social security system. Its development approach changed from Deng Xiaoping's 'growth-first' to 'scientific development'. This is not mere rhetoric but rather reflects a version of a Polanyian 'double movement' involving a suite of policies to respond to social tensions and to support labour through labour protection, the development of a socialist countryside, basic agricultural land and environmental protection. The state strengthens its regulatory power as a result of the double movement but also due to the rampant land development (Hsing, 2010). The urban entrepreneurialism of the 1990s did not last long, due to the contradictions and social tensions and urban environmental problems it created (Xue and Wu, 2015). To promote land market transparency (Xu and Yeh, 2009), the state strived to develop a competitive land market through open auction and bidding. This in turn fostered a more market-oriented land development. However, at the same time, the state was able to impose greater control over the quantities of land development. In this period, Chinese cities, as the base of the global factory, managed to build massive infrastructures, and extensively integrated into the global production networks (GPNs). With the booming real estate market, Chinese cities also experienced rapid suburban development and the redevelopment of traditional neighborhoods.

Financialised state entrepreneurialism (2008–present)

In the world-factory model, the state role has been strengthened. But the changing global political economy in 2008 further required the state to enhance its crisis management capacity (He et al., 2020). In response to the global financial crisis in 2008, then premier Wen Jiabao

initiated a fiscal stimulus package of 4 trillion Yuan, equivalent to 13.3 per cent of GDP (So and Chu, 2016). The stimulus package, however, did not allocate capital but rather allowed local governments to secure debt financing (Bai et al., 2016; Naughton, 2020). Still, the policy was not a strictly fiscal policy because it was not the local government acting directly through fiscal expansion but rather indirectly through SOEs involved in urban development under local government control. But this was more like a financial programme and different from the Keynesian approach of taxation, welfare and collective consumption. The stimulus package included investment in railways, highways, airports, affordable housing, rural infrastructure, technological innovation and environmental projects. In short, the package relied on infrastructure-led development. Local governments were required to offer 'matching capital' in order to get credit through the stimulus package to bring forward infrastructural investment. To find ways to raise capital for co-investment from the capital market, the local state borrowed from banks through various conduits, often off the banks' balance sheets, for example, through wealth management products. The stimulus package cast a long shadow of financialisation (Bai et al., 2016).

The capital market is dominated by state-owned banks. Financialisation was aimed at leveraging savings deposited in banks into investment, as China is a country with a high savings rate. One common approach was to use various local investment platforms (Feng et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2017; Tsui, 2011). Notably, the earlier development corporations were readily transformed into LGFVs to raise capital. These corporations are SOEs owned by any entity within the hierarchy of government. The state, then, is at the centre of this financial operation (Wu, 2021). This means that local states no longer compete for external investors but rather use their own financial vehicles to raise capital. As a result, urban development politics in this phase is characterised by 'financialised state entrepreneurialism' because the local state uses financial approaches to mobilise investment capital for development (Pan et al., 2021) but does not rely on capital inflow from the global financial market. Post-crisis land development is not so much about profitability but rather about state leverage of land ownership and the assets of state-owned enterprises for development finance. This financial approach actually strengthens rather than weakens the state's role (Wu, 2021), in contrast to financial dominated mega urban

projects in Europe (Raco, 2014; Swyngedouw et al., 2002) and austerity urbanism (Peck, 2017; Peck and Whiteside, 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter uses the Chinese example to explain how its urban development politics has transformed along with the state's strategies to cope with political economic contradictions, challenges and crises. In doing so, we do not apply the theory of 'urban entrepreneurialism' to China. The term has its US roots and is associated with the process or policies of urban neoliberalisation. Rather, we delink the term from neoliberalisation and repeat its investigation in China. As such, we have paid particular attention to China's institutional settings and historical developments. Our analytical approach is similar to the political economic analysis of Harvey (2016). Our empirical finding is similar to that of Harvey, too, in terms of identifying changing urban politics with greater association with the market (or so-called entrepreneurialism) in response to global economic dynamics, but dissimilar in that the entrepreneurialism is more state-centred. We also stress the shared conjunctural moments of global crisis and change in which China and more advanced market economies are both enmeshed, as with 'flexible accumulation'. This imposes both opportunities (e.g. exportoriented industrialisation) and crises (e.g. the financial crisis). Such opportunities gave rise to the world-factory model (with the global crisis associated with the deindustrialization of western contexts in the 1970s) and to varying forms of financialised entrepreneurialism. We illustrate that urban development politics evolved in response to the distinctive China crises of the world factory model, namely, social reproduction and environmental crises of export-zone industrialisation. Further, thinking through conjunctural moments, urban development politics have been strongly influenced by the national state's strategy in each phase, for example, to cope with the 2008 global financial crisis which pushed the Chinese state to adopt financial mechanisms. These conjunctural moments did not reduce the role of the state. Rather, they motivated and "forced" the state to manage the crises. The actual responses from the state are variegated and are very much dependent upon the local context and state own perceived priorities (Jessop, 2022b; Wu et al., 2022). In short, we explain the changing development politics from special economic zones and development zones (Ong, 2006;), to land-based intercity competition (Hsing, 2010; Lin, 2014), to planning for growth (Robinson et al., 2020; Wu, 2015; 2018), and finally to financialised state entrepreneurialism (Feng et al., 2021; Wu, 2021). These changes reflect the state's endeavour to maintain its governance while expanding the scope of accumulation and dealing with external challenges and internal crises.

The understanding of Chinese state entrepreneurialism thus highlights a 'territorial logic'. The original thesis of urban entrepreneurialism stresses the 'capitalist logic' of the state's responses to post-Fordist crisis. Arrighi (2007, p. 212) suggests that "Harvey seems to assume that all market processes (including trade, commerce, labour migration, technology transfer, information flows, and the like) are driven by a capitalist logic". Instead he argues that both the capitalist logic and the territorialist logic should 'refer primarily to state policies'. The territorialist logic (the art of governance as power maintenance) is not purely derived from the capitalist logic (e.g., fixing the over-accumulation crisis). The territorialist logic was further developed by Cox and Mair's (1991) account of local interest dependencies for all kinds of actors, which reveals the need to understand their politics. What we have described in this paper is the importance of paying particular attention to not only local politics but also national 'state policies' in a relational assemblage (Allen and Cochrane, 2014), in response to historical moments. That is, the concrete crises faced by the state. In response, the state strives to reconfigure its institutions, which is sometimes read as 'neoliberalisation'.

The context matters, as in a 'state-theoretical' understanding of governance changes (Jessop, 2002b). For example, Peck (2017) announced the demise of urban entrepreneurialism as what he terms late entrepreneurialism evolved into financialised governance, because the 'routinised play of growth machine politics is being eclipsed by a new generation of debt-machine dynamics' (Peck and Whiteside, 2016: 235). In contrast, we do not limit conceptualisations of entrepreneurialism to the growth machine. Instead, the emergence of entrepreneurialism in China is associated with the state's endeavour to unshackle the constraints of socialist era 'economising urbanisation', through 'planning' (Wu, 2015) and assembling multi-scalar actors (Shen et al., 2020). Similarly, to cope with the financial crisis, the central state encouraged the used local financial vehicles to mobilize capital. Later, in order to control the local government debt, the state created local government bonds (LGBs) to re-finance previous accumulated debts

(Li et al. 2022). Urban entrepreneurialism has thus been financialised but at the same time remains a necessarily state entrepreneurial operation.

Finally, in relation to comparative studies and methodology, we hope to illustrate the value of grounded studies and embedded conceptualisations of urban development politics. Our approach starts with theorisation from the Chinese context, paying more attention to the nation state and inter-related global economies and international political changes. While discussing Chinese political economic histories, we bear in mind the insights ('theories') derived from other contexts. Although comparison is implicit in this way, we made an effort to maintain theoretical conversations without adopting their existing perspectives. Through this bottom-up narratives and grounded scrutiny, we hope to provincialize and contextualise those theories. Because this chapter aims to build insights from the Chinese case, the discussion has been less theoretical and more concrete about Chinese urban development politics (i.e. 'a non-theoretical pathway'). Importantly, what is intended here is not to apply a set of existing theories; but such a 'local' study does not exclude insights gained from elsewhere. That is, even without direct comparison, in an interconnected urban world (Allen and Cochrane, 2014; Hart, 2018), with significant shared global 'conjunctural' moments, we need to think with elsewhere (Robinson, 2016) when we try to understand the local specificities. However, the context or particularity plays such a role that it is generative of distinctive and perhaps instructive insights (Robinson, 2016) rather than reflecting variegation of pre-existing or structural processes (Robinson et al., 2020). Thinking in this way, the understanding of urbanisation and urban development politics in a non-western context (a) does not apply an established theory; (b) is concrete in analysis of its histories and geographies, and (c) involves actors and politics in contingent and conjunctural processes. This understanding echoes recent debates on the 'exceptions' produced by state policies and actions in global city building (Murray, 2017; Ong, 2006), on urban regimes and variegation of entrepreneurialism (Harding, 1997; Phelps and Miao, 2020), and on a new municipal statecraft (Beswick and Penny, 2018; Lauermann, 2018; Pike et al, 2019).

The aim is not to generalise some theoretical understandings from these local studies, as such a universalisation from non-western contexts is equally problematic because it detaches the context where so-called theories have to be understood and based (Hart, 2018). Moreover,

instead of thinking the difference between generality vs particularity, this paper has shown the potential to consider these different contexts together (e.g China and the "west"), as they are genetically related in shared 'conjunctural' moments. Moreover, different urban contexts are enmeshed in multiple transcalar dynamics (Robinson et al., 2020; Robinson, 2022). In other words, urban development politics are always concrete, contextually specific, and generalisable only in the sense of distinctive repetitions (Robinson, 2022). The Chinese context is not singular and isolated. Its urban development politics is both situated in a wider political situation of the Chinese state and associated with changing moments of globalisation.

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Further readings

Wu, F. (2018) Planning centrality, market instruments: governing Chinese urban transformation under state entrepreneurialism. *Urban Studies*, 55, 1383-1399. (An overview of China's urban development and the perspective of state entrepreneurialism)

Wu, F. (2022) *Creating Chinese Urbanism: Urban Revolution and Governance Change*. London: UCL Press (The book explains, from a long historical perspective, how marketization has led to a visible state in China. The book is free to download from UCL Press website).

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