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Waterfront regeneration as a political mission: Megaprojects under state entrepreneurialism

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ABSTRACT

Waterfront regeneration is a typical tactic under neoliberal entrepreneurialism, which is criticized for capturing land value and fostering gentrification. However, the political logic underlying such a project is less understood. This research investigates the governance of waterfront regeneration based on a megaproject called One River One Creek (Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek) in Shanghai. This project aims to reconnect the riverbank and construct continuous greenways for public accessibility. We explain why the project was initiated and how it is implemented. First, the changing ethos of the national state directs the new wave of waterfront regeneration. Under the central initiative of building the "People's City," a continuous pathway along the riverside becomes a flagship project demonstrating the state's commitment. Second, lower-level state actors are pressured to conduct waterfront regeneration as a political task for implementation. The state mobilizes the market and instrumentalizes public participation to achieve its goal rather than through public-private partnerships. While the state's priority has shifted from focusing on economic growth to people-oriented development, urban governance still reflects state entrepreneurialism in that the state retains a central role in decision-making and project implementation in megaprojects.

KEYWORDS

Waterfront regeneration; megaprojects; state entrepreneurialism; Shanghai

Introduction

Waterfront regeneration is a common strategy in inter-urban competition in a neoliberal context (Boland et al., 2017; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Although waterfront redevelopment can boost the local economy by providing upmarket facilities and residential properties, it is criticized for displacement, inequality, and massive gentrification (Butler, 2007; Chang & Huang, 2011; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Perić, 2020). The previous studies on waterfront redevelopment highlighted urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). Like entrepreneurs, local governments work with developers to conduct these projects as new growth poles to attract investment and reap land premiums (Koelemaij, 2021; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). However, a neoliberal explanation for megaprojects is limited as it emphasizes overwhelming inter-city competition but neglects the specific political context where a project unfolds (Robinson et al., 2022). Recent studies have identified a new trend in waterfront redevelopments, focusing on public accessibility rather than merely economic growth (Avni & Fischler, 2020; Cheung & Tang, 2015). A similar effort is taking place in Shanghai, where the government is working to build a publicly accessible waterfront area. How do we understand the nature of the waterfront regeneration project in contemporary China? Focusing on Shanghai's project, we aim to unpack (1) the rationale behind the for-people waterfront regeneration

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project, (2) the implementation of the project and the role of the state therein, and (3) the implications for urban governance in megaprojects in China.

This paper investigates Shanghai's most recent flagship project—building a publicly accessible waterfront of Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek (One River One Creek, *Yi Jiang Yi He* in Chinese). This large-scale project aims to reconnect and upgrade the shoreline of the riverfront area in Shanghai to create public spaces for people. It is claimed as a project in the public interest to "win people's hearts" (Shanghai Government, 2021). Although the local government proposed and implemented this project, the central strategic mandate—"People's City"—significantly propelled its completion as it has become a political mission. We situate the project in a recent debate on changing urban politics, highlighting the interventionist role of municipal states in pursuing goals beyond economic growth (Lauermann, 2018; Thompson et al., 2020). In this context, Shanghai's waterfront regeneration project provides a window into the transforming nature of large-scale projects and their implications for urban governance.

Our findings are threefold. First, Shanghai's waterfront regeneration embodies state rationalities and serves political ends rather than catering to external investors (Wu, 2018). This echoes a critique of neoliberal explanations for large-scale urban projects, which alternatively emphasizes the "political formations" and especially the "territorialization of states" in such projects (Robinson et al., 2022, 2024). The state ethos—People's City—adds specific politically symbolic value to the new waterfront regeneration project. Second, the new waterfront project differentiates from Shanghai's previous waterfront redevelopment programs by emphasizing the continuity and public accessibility of the riverfront area. By contrast, previous development agendas reflected entangled interests of land values and global city-making. Shanghai's waterfront regeneration now departs from neoliberal urbanism (being market-friendly) to align with the national mandate, shifting from a focus on economic growth to people-oriented development, showing intensifying central influence on the local development agenda (Wu et al., 2022). This origin differs from other people-oriented waterfront projects derived from local endogenous needs (Cheung & Tang, 2015). Third, the municipal government and state agencies mobilize various resources to fulfill the project, with little involvement from the private sector or the general public (Y. Li & Zhong, 2021). In an era of people-oriented development, urban governance reflects "state entrepreneurialism," in that the state remains central in devising and implementing urban megaprojects without a fundamental reconfiguration of state-market-resident relations (Shen et al., 2020; Z. Wang, 2024; Wu, 2018; Wu & Zhang, 2024; Wu et al., 2024).

This paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on governing waterfront redevelopments and the burgeoning literature on changing urban politics. The third section illustrates our research by positioning waterfront redevelopments under the political-economic system in China. Inspired by the framework of "state entrepreneurialism" in combining state centrality and market instruments in urban governance, this research positions megaprojects in a context of changing state ethos to understand how the state-initiated project can be achieved. The methodological section explains our research methods and details of the case. Empirical sections investigate the rationale of the project and its implementation through various governance innovations. We use the discussion and conclusion sections to rethink the nature of the for-people project and its implications for urban governance.

Waterfront redevelopments and changing urban politics

As a response to economic restructuring, waterfront redevelopments have been proposed globally to revitalize abandoned areas and provide conditions for post-industrialized economic redevelopment, such as in London, Toronto, Barcelona, Belgrade, and Singapore (Bellas & Oliver, 2016; Chang & Huang, 2011; Koelemaij, 2021; S. W. Lee et al., 2008; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008). From a political-economic perspective, waterfront redevelopments have been widely explained as the products of neoliberalism and urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). The nature of these waterfront redevelopments has been notoriously market-driven, property-based, speculative,

and profit-seeking (Fainstein, 2008; Koelemaij, 2021; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Waley, 2011).

Two main backgrounds set the backdrop for megaprojects in a neoliberal context. First, globalization has led to the internationalization of the financial system and property markets, creating transnational corporations and mobile capital flows. These globalization processes created new urban spaces for capital accumulation (Olds, 1995; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Second, intercity competition for jobs and capital flows reshapes local governments to behave entrepreneurially and play the capitalist game (Harvey, 1989; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). In this context, megaprojects are widely initiated to produce entrepreneurial space to demonstrate local competitiveness, attract global footloose capital, and facilitate local development (Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Wu et al., 2006). However, there is a need to conceptualize megaprojects "other than the territorialized politics of competitive local governments" (Robinson, 2021, p. 271). In doing so, transcalar politics, especially the agency of local states, need further investigation in shaping megaprojects (Robinson et al., 2022).

The state has been widely involved in megaprojects (Fainstein, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). In three Asian cities, Shatkin (2017) finds that the states motivate and steer real estate actors in megaprojects to extract "rent gaps as a source of profits for corporations and power for states" (p. 214). The assemblage of various actors evokes innovations in governance technologies (Ong, 2007). In Copenhagen, a new organization of higher-level bureaucrats was set up to facilitate a consensus among multiple actors and authorities in building a high-quality harbor (Desfor & Jørgensen, 2004). The states set up urban development corporations in the UK, Canada, and Northern Ireland to redevelop brown land on riverbanks to attract private investment (Boland et al., 2017; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008). While some states align with investors, others aim to use megaprojects for public interests. Nevertheless, compromises and negotiations are inevitable during public-private partnerships. In London, the negotiation between state actors and developers may undermine the state's interests for public benefit (Robinson & Attuyer, 2021).

Waterfront redevelopments in a neoliberal fashion may justify their validity by promising to benefit the public, yet the actual outcome is debatable. Advertised benefits include job creation, economic enhancement, and green space provision. Besides general benefits, individualized forms of public interests, including cultural, commercial, recreational, and ecological agendas, are used to solicit various groups of stakeholders (Boland et al., 2017; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008). However, perpetual critique concerns contestations, gentrification, segregation, and inequality induced by these projects (Butler, 2007; Fainstein, 2008; Slater, 2006). For example, waterfront redevelopment along the Singapore River exposes the tension between creating a global city image and preserving local culture (Chang & Huang, 2011). Similarly, Boland et al. (2017) examine the goals for public interests proposed in the waterfront regeneration project in Belfast. They find that two primary targets, enhancing employment and delivering affordable housing, have not been achieved as advertised. Lehrer and Laidley (2008) criticize that projects claiming to benefit the public may reproduce socioeconomic divisions rather than solve urban inequality. Critical urban scholars argue that supposed benefits for the people often conceal economic motives.

Recent studies have shown a new trend in waterfront redevelopments where public benefits have been highlighted rather than sidelined during planning (Avni & Fischler, 2020; Cheung & Tang, 2015). For example, a waterfront redevelopment project in Washington was proposed to mitigate social segregation and facilitate public access to the waterfront areas (Avni & Fischler, 2020). In Hong Kong, the planning aspirations of Victoria Harbor have transformed to highlight public access and local recreational use (Cheung & Tang, 2015). Residents' campaigns pressured the local government to revise the planning agenda. These new practices add nuance to understanding waterfront redevelopment rationales beyond merely attracting capital flows. Nevertheless, these cases also show difficulties in pursuing public interests during implementation. In Washington, social goals have not been prioritized during implementation, and "economic growth has been a more important motivation than social justice" (Avni & Fischler, 2020, p. 1802). In Hong Kong, local needs for recreational

waterfront areas were accommodated in outer Harbor areas, creating further exclusion between tourists and local people (Cheung & Tang, 2015).

The changing rationale for megaprojects also echoes a broad discussion on rethinking the entrepreneurial stance of local governments (Lauermann, 2018). Rather than merely collaborating with profit-driven market actors, local governments increasingly prioritize public agendas in municipal portfolios (Roth et al., 2023; Russell, 2019), leading to the transformation of urban politics and urban entrepreneurialism (Lauermann, 2018; Phelps & Miao, 2020). In particular, "municipal statecraft" emphasizes that local governments can mobilize entrepreneurial (even financial) toolkits as statecraft for extra-economic agendas, such as sustainability, smart city, and other ends (Lauermann, 2018; Pike et al., 2019; Raco et al., 2022). This resembles what Roth et al. (2023) term "radical municipalism's distinctive strategic approach to systemic change." Both perspectives offer potential explanations for public-oriented waterfront redevelopments in a new era. However, they represent different rationales for governance transformations. The former literature highlights state agencies in achieving strategic agendas, while the latter stresses radical changes stemming from local campaigns.

We situate Shanghai's latest waterfront project within the broad discussion of rethinking the changing rationales behind urban megaprojects. We aim to understand the logic underlying such a for-people waterfront project in China's context and how it is implemented through governance innovations.

Governing megaprojects in China: State entrepreneurialism

The development of urban megaprojects in China has two significant features: interventions from the state and highly deregulated local entrepreneurial-like behaviors (He & Wu, 2009; Qian, 2011; Shen et al., 2020; Z. Wang & Wu, 2019). The Chinese state legitimizes itself by promoting economic development through conducting megaprojects. Hence, the entrepreneurial city featuring an "entrepreneurial promotional strategy conducted by the city as an entity" is a state project (Wu et al., 2006, p. 197). The state creates a market-friendly environment to attract investors and invents and deploys its own market agencies (Feng et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2020). Wu (2018) uses "state entrepreneurialism" to suggest that state centrality and market instruments are intertwined. In doing so, the role of the state is strengthened rather than weakened along with economic reform and urbanization (Wu, 2020, 2025). While place marketing and public-private partnerships are prevalent in China's urban development, the role of the state is still dominant (Lin et al., 2023; Qian, 2011; Shen & Wu, 2012; Sun et al., 2024)

Although state entrepreneurialism has been widely used in studying urban development and entrepreneurial governance in China, it must be understood in a changing historical context. First, the state, especially the central state, has increased its power and interventions in urban development. Existing studies have highlighted local governance innovations while giving insufficient emphasis on the role of the central state in shaping the urban governance agenda (He & Wu, 2009; J. Li & Chiu, 2018; Lin et al., 2023). Geopolitical tensions, economic slowdowns, and social discontent have reshaped the ethos of the central state, potentially leading to significant changes in urban practices and politics (He et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022, 2024, 2025). In particular, new political mandates such as "harmonious society," "ecological civilization," and "People's City" signify the focus beyond the local growth machine (Z. Li, 2022; Y. Li & Zhong, 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Rather than simply rhetoric, changing state mandates has led to concrete urban practices and governance innovations (Kostka & Nahm, 2017). The transformation has reshaped urban development agendas and significantly challenged the previous understanding of the growth-oriented entrepreneurial model.

Second, state entrepreneurialism has been used to understand governance innovations and state-market relationships in delivering megaprojects in China. There are various techniques for achieving the state's entrepreneurial objectives. First, the state innovates governance mechanisms to build alliances within the bureaucratic system. For example, the state-leading group is widely used to unify actions in a fragmented authoritarian system in China (Guo

et al., 2024). Besides, the state is adept at mobilizing market actors and creating market agencies to deliver megaprojects (Shen et al., 2020; Z. Wang & Wu, 2019). For example, development corporations are established by local governments to conduct various urban projects (Feng et al., 2022; Jiang & Waley, 2020; Luan & Li, 2022). The state and the market are closely intertwined by using state-owned enterprises to explore market instruments (Feng et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, interactions with communities have been limited in large-scale urban projects. Communities are both the sites for observing autonomous collective mobilization and state interference to restore a governable society (Fu & Lin, 2014; Z. Wang, 2022). Negotiation between residents, local governments, social organizations, and market actors is possible because of the state's goal of maintaining social stability (C. K. Lee & Zhang, 2013; Robinson et al., 2024; Z. Wang, 2024). Recent studies have linked urban entrepreneurial governance with practices at the neighborhood scale (Cai & He, 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2024). This echoes a recent discussion on the entrepreneurial society, which illustrates changing dynamics and urban experiments (Jokela, 2020). Based on practices in China, scholars associate state entrepreneurialism with an entrepreneurial culture to demonstrate that cultivating the entrepreneurial society, mainly through promoting self-organization and participation, is to reach a consensus on state goals (Cai & He, 2024; Mai et al., 2023; Y. Wang et al., 2024). For example, in Qinghe, the state instrumentalizes public participation to create governable subjects and achieve the state's goal (Y. Wang et al., 2024). However, urban governance under People's City may not result in more participatory planning, even though public consultation is a technique employed during the planning process.

In sum, we aim to unravel the rationale and implementation of a waterfront regeneration project to understand urban governance in large-scale urban projects in contemporary China. First, echoing the debate on rethinking the entrepreneurial stance of municipal states (Lauermann, 2018), we aim to investigate the logic behind waterfront regeneration in the context of changing central state ethos (Wu et al., 2022). Second, we strive to understand the role of the state in implementing the waterfront project through various governance techniques. In doing so, we contribute to understanding the implications for urban governance.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the One River One Creek project in Shanghai (Figure 1), which aims to build publicly accessible pathways along the riverbank of two rivers and revitalize the waterfront area. This case is selected for three reasons. First, the One River One Creek project is designed and implemented for public interests, resonating with a new trend of waterfront redevelopments and potentially contributing to understanding changing megaproject rationales. Second, this project is advertised as a demonstration of People's City, which provides an example of unpacking urban development practices in the context of changing state ethos in China. Third, the waterfront regeneration project is high-profile. Based on the project, we aim to unravel the logic and governance mechanisms underlying such a large-scale project for public interests.

This research relies on our fieldwork and archival analysis. We conducted three field visits in 2023. First, we interviewed government officials, planners, and scholars about the history, design, and rationale behind the One River One Creek project. Second, we visited three communities affected by the waterfront regeneration project. Third, we interviewed residents to gather their thoughts about the project. We conducted 17 interviews, including five government officials, two planners, seven scholars, and three residents, to triangulate our understanding of the project. Besides, we collected various sources of archival data during the fieldwork, such as the official documents of the One River One Creek project published by the Shanghai Municipal Government. These first-hand data were complemented by media coverage and policy documents to flesh out the details of the process. We analyzed the data thematically to examine how the megaproject was proposed and implemented.

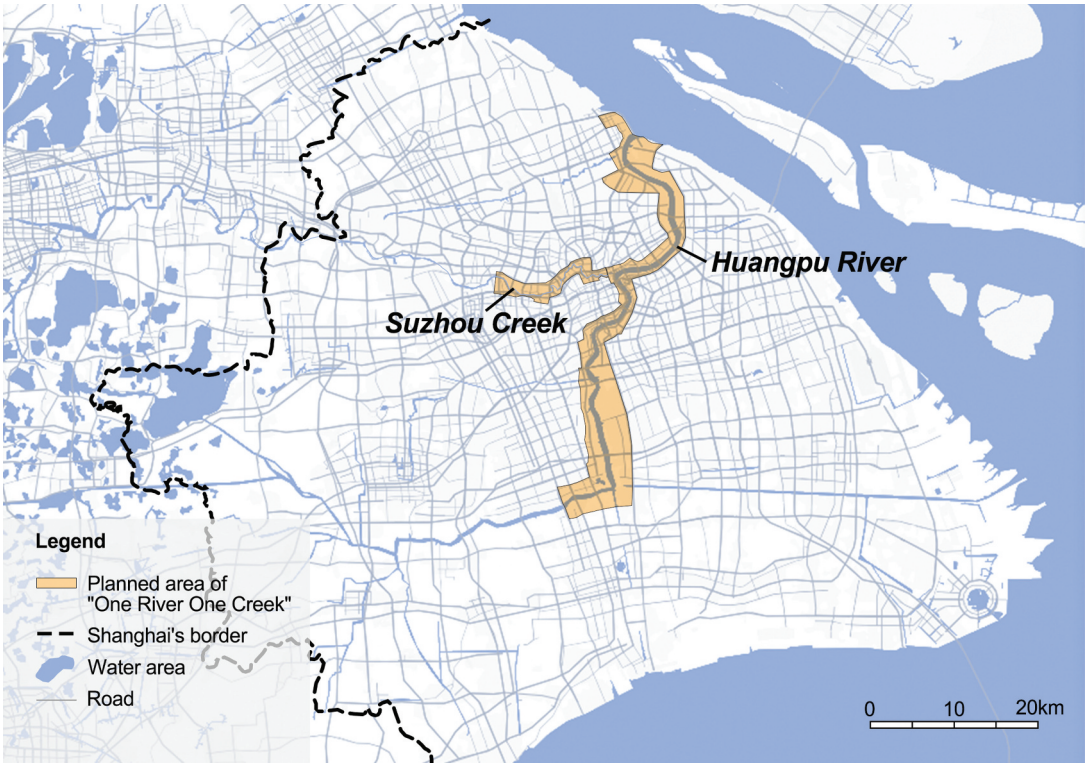

Figure 1. Planned area of One River One Creek project in Shanghai. Source: Authors.

Megaproject as a political mission

Two major rivers run through Shanghai: the Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek. In 2019, the initiative "One River, One Creek" was formally proposed. It aims to revitalize the waterfront areas of the two rivers and provide continuous, public-accessible greenways and associated green facilities. Situating this initiative in the history of waterfront redevelopment in Shanghai reveals a changing logic behind waterfront regeneration.

The original idea of waterfront regeneration was associated with economic restructuring and industrial upgrading in the 1990s. Shanghai's industrialization began after its opening in 1843, leading to industry development along the Huangpu River and the Suzhou Creek. However, industries along rivers started to decline in the 1990s. The relocation of manufacturing industries and the repositioning of transportation functions left many riverside industrial and storage facilities unoccupied. Industrialization and human activities near the river also led to water pollution. Hence, the Shanghai government has started waterfront redevelopment and pollution treatment since 1996.

The second stage started in 2002 when waterfront redevelopment was associated with a mega-event—the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. To host the event on the riverside of the Huangpu River, the Shanghai government accelerated waterfront redevelopment. Nearly 3,400 enterprises along the Huangpu River were relocated. Meanwhile, the Huangpu River waterfront was redeveloped into green spaces, residential and office buildings, and public facilities. Land-based financial innovations were used to redevelop waterfront areas in Shanghai (Chen, 2022). At this stage, economic incentives were nested with the strategic goal of making Shanghai a global city, showing neoliberal features, such as capturing land value, being market friendly, and attracting external investors.

In the third stage, the focus of waterfront redevelopment began to shift. The municipal government put forward a three-year action plan to redevelop the Huangpu River waterfront in 2014, aiming to

transform the riverfront space from a productive function to a lively shoreline. The original plan did not include a continuous pathway because of fragmented land ownership along the river. However, Han Zheng, Shanghai's municipal party secretary, was determined to elevate the redevelopment project to a new level (Shanghai Municipal Management Committee of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2021). In 2016, Han Zheng commented on the redevelopment of the Huangpu River waterfront area,

> The focus should be on achieving connectivity first and enhancing the quality later. All relevant departments in Shanghai should fully support this endeavor. The five affected districts should take their jurisdictional responsibilities and expedite the process. Institutes and enterprises along the river should support and cooperate, making a greater contribution to the connectivity and publicness of the waterfront area. With the joint efforts of the entire city, we must ensure that the 45-kilometer public space along both banks of the Huangpu River is fully connected and open to the public by the end of 2017. (Han Zheng, reported by CPC News, 2016)[1]

Due to Han Zheng's determination, building a continuous walkway along the Huangpu River became a government priority. Since state-owned enterprises (mainly owned by the Shanghai government) occupied the riverfront area, they were persuaded by the government to relinquish their land along the riverbank to facilitate the waterfront regeneration project. Finally, a continuous 45-kilometer pathway along the Huangpu River was completed by the end of 2017.

The fourth stage is an era of "One River One Creek." Shanghai expanded its waterfront regeneration project to include Suzhou Creek in 2018, compiling construction plans for the waterfront areas along the Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek. The Huangpu River waterfront focused on improving the quality of already connected public spaces. Suzhou Creek prioritized achieving "connectivity along the shoreline in principle by the end of 2020" (Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, 2018). Constructing continuous public spaces along Suzhou Creek was more challenging than the Huangpu River because land ownership was more complicated. Hence, the original plan only set a cautious target, modified by the phrase "in principle."

Nevertheless, the One River One Creek project has been propelled by the central mandate of "People's City." President Xi Jinping visited the Huangpu River waterfront in 2019 and commented, "Cities are built by the people and for the people." This statement defines "People's City" and has become the guideline for urban (re)development in China in the new era. Prompted by this, the Shanghai government proposed a series of plans to interpret and fulfill the "People's City" in 2020 (Shanghai Municipal Committee of the CPC, 2020). The One River One Creek project has become the flagship project for building a People's City.

People's City challenges the neoliberal rationale of promoting land value, being market-friendly, and attracting investment that directed urban development projects in the past decades. Instead, People's City "prioritizes people's benefits, reserves the best resources for the people, and puts people at the center of urban development, demonstrating the characteristics and institutional advantages of China."[2] This shift is based on reflections on the previous development model featuring land-centered growth-oriented development, which led to housing speculation, massive dispossession, and social discontent. Previous studies ascribed local entrepreneurial governance to the state's legitimization through promoting economic development (Wu et al., 2006). By promoting people-oriented development, the state seeks to legitimize itself in a new way.

While the central state introduces new mandates, local governments can interpret and implement them based on local circumstances. The One River One Creek project is Shanghai's materialization of the new mandate. Before President Xi Jinping's visit, the local government did not prioritize the waterfront regeneration project. However, after the vision of People's City, the Shanghai government screened its project proposals and found that the waterfront regeneration project was appropriate to demonstrate its alignment with the central state. Therefore, it prioritized the waterfront project as a primary target in building a People's City. Since then, the One River One Creek project has gained traction.

Shanghai's case illustrates a significant shift in the rationale behind waterfront regeneration. Before 2014, such a project combined economic restructuring, built environment upgrading, and land revenue generation. Since Han Zheng took office in 2014, the waterfront regeneration project has become a political mission. However, Han Zheng's vision of waterfront redevelopment was associated with building Shanghai as a global city, echoing a neoliberal logic of place marketing. More recently, the One River One Creek project has prioritized the objective of "reserving the best resources for the people" (Shanghai Municipal Management Committee of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2021) The new national state mandate, People's City, has fundamentally altered the nature of waterfront redevelopment, emphasizing the state's political commitment over other considerations.

Implementing the One River One Creek project

Mobilizing multi-level governments

The state is committed to creating continuous pathways along the Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek. Multi-level governments are at the frontier of implementation. The Shanghai government uses governance innovations to monitor the process, unify various state actors, and accelerate project delivery.

The project has been implemented through a top-down campaign style. First, the municipal government set up a leading group for the One River One Creek project in 2019, where the mayor has taken the lead (Figure 2). The group includes leaders in 13 municipal departments and two development corporations related to the project (Shanghai Municipal Management Committee of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2021). Multiple departments are incorporated to facilitate the project delivery by dealing with controversial land issues. The waterfront area is occupied by various landowners,[3] including the military, state-owned enterprises, and residential communities. Obtaining consent from these landowners is a prerequisite for building a continuous pathway on the land. Each department handles specific land disputes. For example, the Municipal Development and

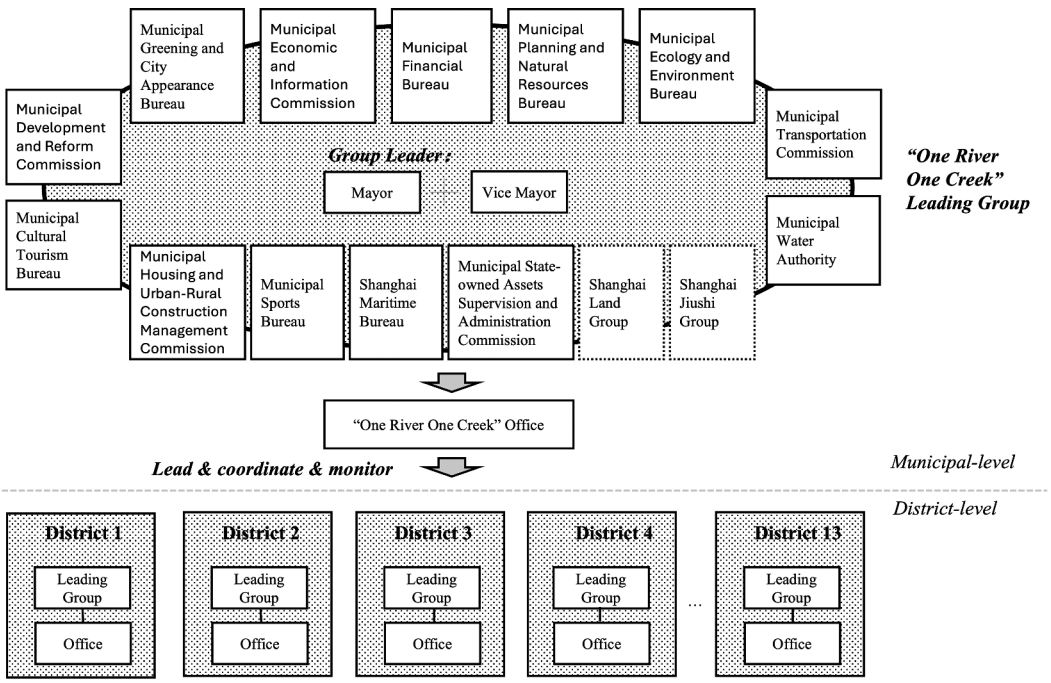

Figure 2. The governance mechanism of the One River One Creek project. Source: Authors.

Reform Commission is responsible for negotiating with the troops for land occupied by the military. For land owned by state-owned enterprises, the Municipal Economic and Information Commission negotiates with the central state-owned enterprises. At the same time, the Municipal State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission is responsible for persuading municipal state-owned enterprises to give up their waterfront land. In cases involving land owned by communities, district governments take the lead, mobilizing Street Offices and Residents' Committees to negotiate with homeowners.

Under the guidance of the leading group, an *ad hoc* project office was established to carry out the municipal government's requirements. This office further assigns tasks to district governments. Echoing the municipal-level governance structure, district governments also set up their own leading groups and working offices for the waterfront regeneration project. District governments must deal with practical issues to achieve the municipal government's vision, while the municipal government propels, monitors, and facilitates the process.

In particular, the connectivity of the waterfront area has become an extraordinary political mission as the Shanghai government regards the One River One Creek project as its supreme commitment to the public. For example, Ying Yong, the mayor, investigated the progress of building a continuous pathway along Suzhou Creek several times in 2020, and he commented that,

> Achieving the connectivity of public spaces along the Suzhou Creek is a solemn commitment to citizens. Relevant districts and institutions must thoroughly implement the spirit of President Xi Jinping's talk during his visit to Shanghai, adhere to the people-centric development concept, and follow the decisions of the municipal government. We should make sure that a 42-kilometer pathway along the creek can be connected and open to all by the end of 2020, continuously enhancing the sense of gain for our people. (Ying Yong, reported by the office of local chronicles in Putuo district, 2019)[4]

The mayor's commentary denoted the political importance of the One River One Creek project, which shows the adherence to building a People's City. To achieve this goal, the municipal government set a deadline for connectivity. This put pressure on district governments, which further assigned the task to lower-level governments, including Street Offices and Residential Communities. Re-connecting waterfront spaces became a mandatory target included in the performance evaluation of multi-level government officials. They must fulfill their tasks to complete their annual assessments. For example, a district-level government official mentioned in the documentary of the waterfront project, "We [district government] were really in a hurry in getting everything done. It felt like we [district government] were at war. There is no room for excuses. The project for connectivity has no excuses, only goals to achieve" (Shanghai Municipal Management Committee of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2021). Local government officials were subject to significant political pressure to fulfill the task on time.

Utilizing marketized tools

Shanghai has utilized development corporations as market instruments to finance and conduct waterfront redevelopments, particularly along the Huangpu River. In the initial phase of waterfront redevelopment, the model was "government-led and market-operated" to address the financial issue (Shanghai Government, 2003). The Shanghai government established a development corporation called Shanghai Shenjiang Liang'an Development Construction Investment (Group) Co. (Shenjiang Group for short) for implementation in 2002. The corporation collaborated with district governments that undertook jurisdictional responsibilities along the river. Shenjiang Group established joint land development corporations with five district governments. Their joint bodies conducted waterfront redevelopment, land preparation, and infrastructure construction. These corporations obtained riverside land without paying land conveyance fees to the government at first. Then, they used the land as collateral to raise money for developing the waterfront areas. After the development was completed, the

government reclaimed the serviced land and sold it to developers. Final gains from land sales income were used to repay the previous land preparation and facilities construction costs. In 2016, Shenjiang Group was merged into Shanghai Land Group (another municipal-level development corporation) because the initial land redevelopment along the Huangpu River was completed. Nevertheless, district-level waterfront redevelopment corporations remain. For example, Shanghai Xuhui Riverfront Development and Investment Corporation is 50% owned by Shanghai Land Group and 50% owned by the Xuhui district government. It is still the main body responsible for redeveloping and managing the waterfront area in the Xuhui district in Shanghai.

People-oriented development is emphasized in the new era of One River One Creek. While market instruments are still used, profit-making is not the priority. The commitment to the state ethos is the core. One typical example is waterfront redevelopment in the Yangpu district. President Xi Jinping visited the waterfront area in the Yangpu district in 2019. Previously occupied by large factories, this area has been redeveloped into green open spaces. President Xi praised Shanghai's efforts and gave a famous talk about People's City here. A museum was built on the site he visited to commentate his new concepts regarding urban development in 2020. This museum is Yangpu Riverside People's Urban Construction Exhibition Hall (Figure 3). It was built by Shanghai Yangpu Riverside Investment and Development Corporation (Yangpu Binjiang for short), which is owned and managed by the Yangpu district government. The exhibition hall is not for place marketing but to demonstrate the local government's commitment to the new state ethos in urban (re)development (Wu & Zhang, 2024). It has become a famous site for party-building activities, attracting party members and branches nationwide.

The role of development corporations in waterfront redevelopment is to achieve the government's goal through market innovations. For example, the chairman of Yangpu Bingjiang commented that,

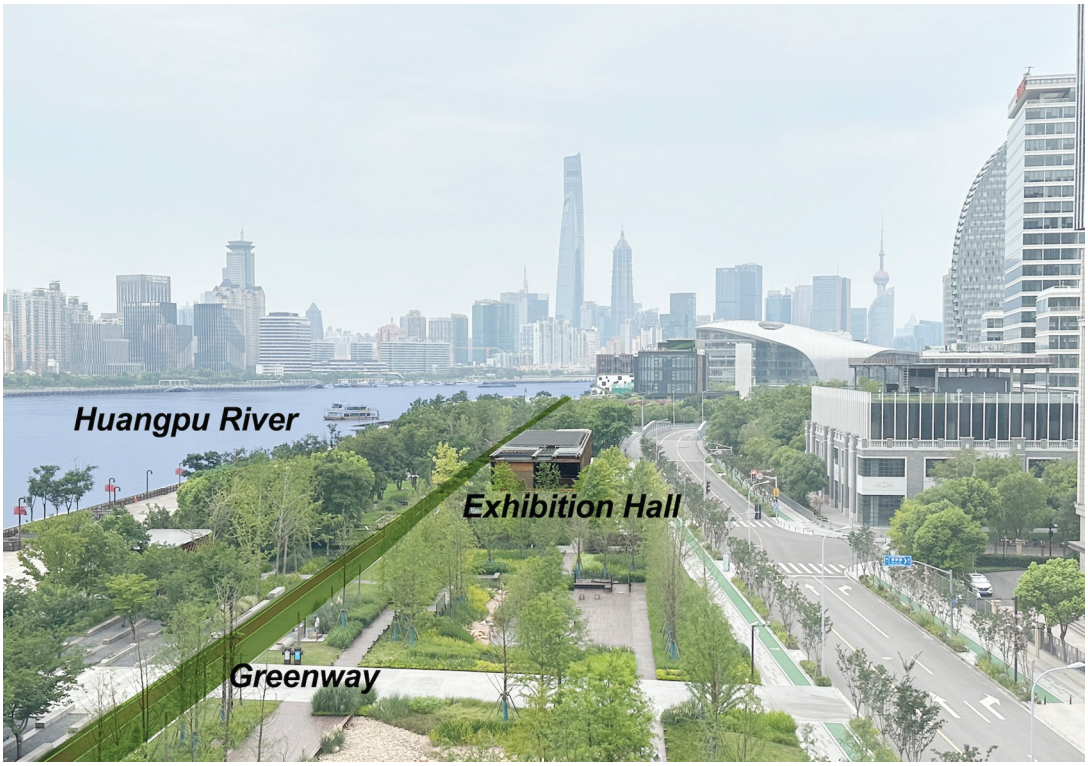

Figure 3. The Yangpu Riverside People's urban construction exhibition hall. Source: Authors.

> As a state-owned enterprise, first and foremost, Yangpu Binjiang should carry out the strategic goals and riverside redevelopment goals of the Yangpu district government. However, as an enterprise to achieve this goal, it is essential to incorporate reforms, innovations, and internal management mechanisms to speed up the waterfront redevelopment. (Chairman of Yangpu Binjiang, interviewed by Architectural Practice, 2020)[5]

Therefore, Yangpu Binjiang's role is to fulfill the target set by the local government without emphasis on economic benefits. Its main business is conducting construction projects proposed by the local government. These projects' revenue accounts for more than 60% of Yangpu Binjiang's total revenue. Unlike private developers, Yangpu Binjiang prioritizes compliance and loyalty to the government agenda. This practice echoes state entrepreneurialism in that the local government uses its own market instruments to implement projects (Wu, 2018).

Moreover, People's City provides a new ground for waterfront redevelopment. In 2022, Shanghai Land Group signed a contract with Yangpu Bingjiang to comprehensively redevelop the Yangpu district's waterfront area. These two corporations set up a new company called Shanghai Yangpu Binjiang New Development Corporation with a capital injection ratio of 6:4. The joint corporation focuses on the development of Fuxing Island next to the Huangpu River, aiming to build a demonstration area for People's City. Although the plan remains unclear, the impact of the new concept of People's City on the redevelopment of waterfront areas is apparent. Municipal and district-level development corporations are mobilized to fulfill the latest (re)development agenda.

Interactions with communities

Y. Li and Zhong (2021) argued that the public did not initiate the waterfront project in Shanghai. State actors "paradoxically enhanced residents' right to urban space and denied citizens' right to participation" (Y. Li & Zhong, 2021, p. 836). The Shanghai government has to transform the communities' collectively owned land into public use. According to the Property Law, homeowners have the legal right to decide the use of waterfront areas inside their communities (Figure 4). Hence, the local government invited homeowners from affected communities to participate, aiming to gain their consent to open the waterfront areas to the public. Other users, such as tenants, migrants, and

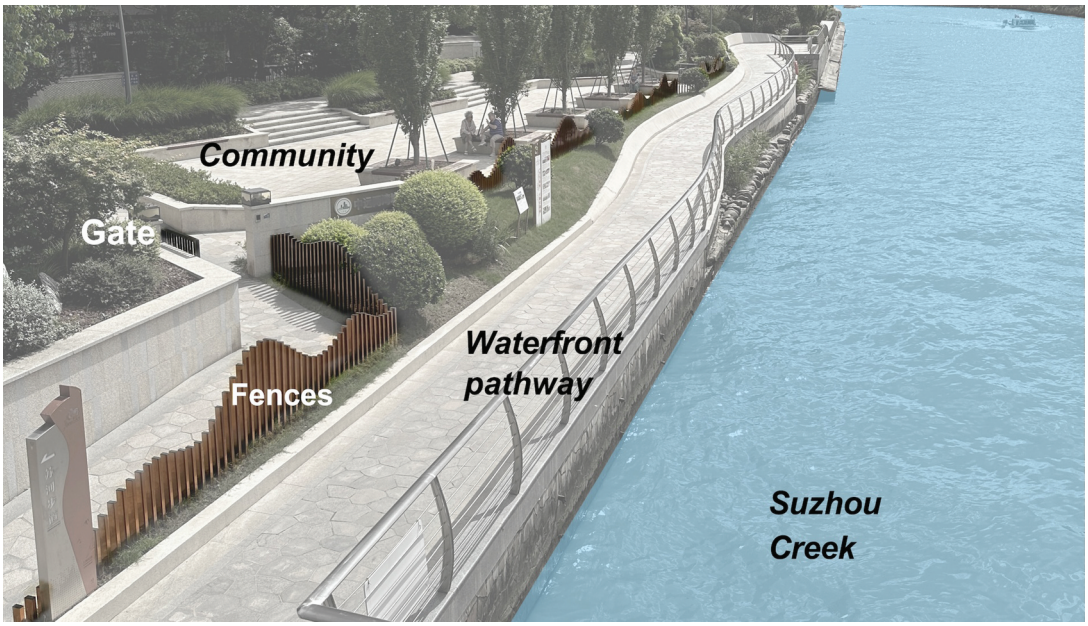

Figure 4. Shallow fences and gates separate the community from the waterfront pathway. Source: Authors.

residents in nearby communities, are affected by the waterfront project but are not legally empowered to be consulted. Finally, the local government provided funds to affected communities to acquire their consent. Hence, public participation takes a specific form of negotiation.

The waterfront project, as a political goal, has a significant impact on communities near the river. First, the for-people project may increase inequalities among different communities because of special financial subsidies. The local government used public finance to persuade homeowners in affected communities to open the land for public use. For example, one district allocated 170.33 million yuan to communities to facilitate the waterfront project in 2020.[6] The compensation funds were directly transferred to the public account of community maintenance. Affected communities can use the funds to replace old elevators and rejuvenate public spaces within their estates. With better community facilities, housing prices increased after opening their waterfront space to the public. Unlike other communities in the area, these affected communities financially benefit from the waterfront project. However, the compensation funds are derived from the local revenue of the district government, which could be used for social services provision and public facilities enhancement for all communities in the district. Implementing the waterfront regeneration project as a political mission rearranges the use of public money, potentially exaggerating differentiation among communities in the entire district.

Second, the waterfront project has raised residents' concerns about security. While residents acknowledge the environmental enhancement of the waterfront area, they are unhappy about opening their collectively owned space. For example, the local government built shallow fences and gates along the riverside path to separate the public riverbank from the gated community to enhance security. However, the gates are usually unlocked. One can easily access these gates from the public waterfront area to the community. The gates seem to be more symbolic than physical obstacles. Residents complained that these connecting gates caused security concerns.

Third, the usage of the waterfront pathway is limited. Although the waterfront area is publicly accessible, it is mainly used by people living in nearby communities. Gated communities occupy this area with few commercial or recreational facilities. Tourists and residents from other parts of Shanghai have little interest in walking around here. Moreover, the waterfront project, especially along Suzhou Creek, has resulted in only a linear river pathway without facilities or large public spaces. This is not attractive for residents living elsewhere. Therefore, certain parts of the waterfront area tend to be underutilized.

Discussion

This section discusses the nature of the waterfront regeneration project. First, the project proposal and its implementation demonstrate the territorialization of multi-scalar state politics in large-scale urban projects (Robinson et al., 2022). By emphasizing Shanghai's waterfront project as a political mission, we do not suggest a straightforward process where the national government sets the target, and the local government implements it. Instead, we unravel the "political formations" and "transcalar politics" of large-scale urban projects (Robinson et al., 2022, 2024). The central government proposed the vision of People's City without specifying any waterfront construction project. The Shanghai Municipal government regards building a publicly accessible riverfront pathway as a reification of building the People's City in Shanghai. The tenet of the One River One Creek project, "reserving the best resources for the people," highlights its alignment with the central mandate (Shanghai Municipal Management Committee of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2021). The Shanghai government selected the waterfront project for demonstration due to its continuous efforts and existing plans for waterfront regeneration. Meanwhile, the central initiative changed the municipal waterfront regeneration agenda. To comply with the people-oriented approach, the Shanghai government emphasized the connectivity, continuity, and accessibility of the riverfront pathway. This goal was challenging to achieve because of land disputes. Under the new mandate, building a continuous path and reconnecting breakpoints (land occupied by various entities), became a top priority for the

municipal government. Lower-level governments, including district governments and street offices, faced significant political pressure from the municipal government to fulfill the target by the end of 2020. In Shanghai's case, a central mandate reshapes the local governance agenda through complex intra-state reconfigurations.

Second, the waterfront regeneration project was not derived from residents' campaigns but from a top-down initiative. In waterfront regeneration projects elsewhere, local governments have to create public spaces because they need to accommodate residents' needs for leisure and recreation (Cheung & Tang, 2015). However, Shanghai's waterfront regeneration project has not gained traction because of the rising awareness of residents. There is no publicly expressed demand for building a publicly accessible pathway along the river. People are not involved in decision-making (Y. Li & Zhong, 2021). The One River One Creek is a project envisioned by the municipal government and implemented by various government-related actors. The mentality of building a for-people waterfront area is state-centric.

Third, Shanghai's waterfront regeneration project demonstrates the urban imagination of political elites, shifting from a pro-market neoliberal image to a perceived people-oriented image. Swyngedouw et al. (2002) argue that megaprojects are "elite playing fields" because these projects reflect "power struggles and position-taking of key economic, political, social, or cultural elites." (p. 563) In a neoliberal context, these elites pursue capital accumulation and economic ventures by "redirecting resources towards themselves" (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023, p. 657). In Shanghai, political elites are the most influential stakeholders, but their considerations are beyond "elite capture" in an economic sense (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023). During Han Zheng's tenure, his vision for Shanghai's waterfront area embodied a global city image, which aligned with the neoliberal logic of urban competition and attracting global investment. Later, the One River One Creek project creates an urban image to showcase the state's commitment to enhancing "people's gains." Therefore, the trajectory of Shanghai's waterfront redevelopment project shows how megaprojects evolve because of the changing visions of political elites.

Fourth, the project demonstrates the determination and commitment of the state to alter its approach to urban development, but it is not replicable. The initiative of People's City aims to shift the focus of urban development from economic growth to prioritizing people's benefits. However, its implementation in Shanghai's waterfront project has two limits. First, the implementation is path-dependent, i.e., through a top-down bureaucratic system, which emphasizes politically symbolic value over practical functions. For example, the government's priority is to achieve connectivity of all the waterfront areas, showing the state's achievement. At the same time, residents are more concerned about the management and use of public spaces. The politicization of the waterfront project overshadows community needs, creating tensions about the area's landscape and security. Second, the project requires massive funding but generates little income. The government prioritizes political goals over other considerations. Consequently, the project in Shanghai is not feasible and would be difficult to replicate in other cities.

Conclusions

Based on the waterfront regeneration project in Shanghai, we have shown how such a changing state mandate (People's City) shapes the rationale of a megaproject and how the project is implemented on the ground. This case rebuts neoliberal waterfront regeneration featuring growth coalition and property development (Desfor & Jørgensen, 2004; Koelemaij, 2021; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). It echoes that large-scale urban projects should not be understood only as an outcome of the land market but as "diverse territorializations of urban politics" (Robinson et al., 2022, p. 1717). Shanghai's waterfront regeneration project is a political mission proposed and conducted by the state through mobilizing various actors. For implementation, this case reflects statecraft

in that versatile and multiple governance techniques are deployed to achieve goals beyond economic growth (Lauermann, 2018; Wu & Zhang, 2024; Wu et al., 2024, 2025).

Shanghai's One River One Creek project resonates with an urban (re)development agenda that considers local needs rather than merely economic profits (Avni & Fischler, 2020; Cheung & Tang, 2015; Lauermann, 2018; Z. Li, 2022). While neoliberal waterfront redevelopments are complex in terms of providing publicly accessible places alongside land speculation, they often struggle to reconcile public and private interests during implementation (cf. Avni & Fischler, 2020). Shanghai's new waterfront project presents a different model. It is reconceptualized through a top-down state discourse and implemented without concessions to private developers.

First, megaprojects in a neoliberal context are emblematic in terms of showing urban imagination (Swyngedouw et al., 2002). What's different here is that Shanghai's waterfront project is used to show a politically symbolic value. It resonates with changing urban politics toward a slow but high-quality development agenda (Z. Li, 2022; Wu et al., 2022). The primary goal is not about growth but about public accessibility. The waterfront redevelopment project reflects the strong state intention rather than the capital stance of the state (Wu & Zhang, 2022, 2024). Moreover, it differs from radical movements initiated by citizens in other places (Roth et al., 2023; Russell, 2019). The state decided on Shanghai's waterfront project with minimal public involvement or visible social movements. Despite the ultimate goal of serving the people, communities are not fully engaged in the project's vision (Y. Li & Zhong, 2021). They participate primarily during negotiations when the project needs to address land use issues (Robinson et al., 2024). Homeowners in affected communities participated and received compensation as the government respected their property rights (cf. Z. Wang, 2024). The state instrumentalizes social participation to achieve its goal. Unlike waterfront projects deriving from residents (Cheung & Tang, 2015), the project is not a public initiative but a political project by the state for its perceived public interests.

Second, the implementation process was led by multi-level state actors, with limited participation from other social groups. This project is achieved through governance flexibility and innovation to unify various state actors, development corporations, and communities (Guo et al., 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2024; Wu, 2020). Previous waterfront redevelopments have reflected a hybrid of state and market interests, requiring the state to negotiate and compromise with developers to achieve public interests (Desfor & Jørgensen, 2004; Koelemaij, 2021; Robinson & Attuyer, 2021). However, implementing the One River One Creek project demonstrates governance techniques within the state and the compliance of development corporations with state objectives (Feng et al., 2023). The local government does not compromise with private market actors because for-profit developers are excluded from the project. The local government even used public finance to purchase land use rights from homeowners to open the land to the public. This approach differs from the neoliberal norm of waterfront redevelopments, where economic gains and land values are always considered in public-private partnerships (cf. Desfor & Jørgensen, 2004; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). In Shanghai's waterfront project, the state-centric political rationale prevails without compromises with private developers. However, the implementation process requires significant public funding, making it less feasible for other cities or in the wake of the pandemic's impact on the real estate market.

Third, Shanghai's waterfront regeneration project shows that the changing central state mandate leads to the production of new urban spaces without changing the power dynamics of urban politics in China (Wu & Zhang, 2024). In response to the significant mandate shift, the local government filters its (re)development project proposals, selects those that align with the central initiative, and actively pursues these chosen goals. This governance model reflects state entrepreneurialism in that the state "maintains state strategic and extra-economic intention through deploying and mobilizing market and society—to create its own agents and to co-opt those that are already existent or emerging" (Wu et al., 2024, p. 797). It also reflects the recent turn from entrepreneurial to managerial statecraft (Wu et al., 2025). State entrepreneurialism operates in a more centralized environment of state politics, requiring the local government to comply with central mandates and adjust local priorities (Kostka & Nahm, 2017; Wu et al., 2022). This project shows the continued dominance of the state in creating and implementing urban imagination, as decision-making power remains centralized rather than being

redistributed to local people. State entrepreneurialism persists in an era of people-oriented development with increasing intervention from the central government.

Notes

1. Han Zheng's presence at the meeting to advance the project for the connectivity of a 45-km public space along the Huangpu River. Retrieved from CPC News at http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1125/c64094-28896842.html on 13/05/2024.
2. Translated from Xi Jinping's speech. *Speech at the 30th anniversary celebration of the development and opening up of Pudong*. https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-11/12/content_5560928.htm (Retrieved on 15/05/2024)
3. According to the land tenure in China, the state owns all the urban land. Meanwhile, individuals, enterprises, institutions, and other entities can purchase land use rights from the state. These land use rights are protected by the Property Law. In this paper, *landowners* refer to people/enterprises/institutions that legally hold land-use rights.
4. Retrieved from the website of Putuo district on 5/28/2024. https://shpt.gov.cn/shpt/2020nj-ldscdy/20210105/541103.html
5. Please see, Zuo, 2020.
6. Available at https://www.shpt.gov.cn/shpt/gkczzf-juesuan/index_6.html.

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