

# Political mobilisation and institutional layering in urban regeneration: Transformation of land redevelopment governance in China

Jihuan Li<sup>a,\*</sup>, Gemma Burgess<sup>a,b</sup>, Franziska Sielker<sup>a,b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Cambridge, Department of Land Economy, 19 Silver Street, CB3 9EP, UK

<sup>b</sup> University of Cambridge, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, 19 Silver Street, CB3 9EP, UK

<sup>c</sup> TU Wien, Institute for Spatial Planning, Karlgasse 11, 1040 Wien, Austria

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the pattern of institutional change and its underlying logic in China's recent land development governance. China's central government has been issuing national policies since 2012 to promote urban regeneration to improve land use efficiency and sustainability. Through the lens of historical institutionalism, this paper analyses the making and implementation of Shanghai's new urban regeneration policies since 2014, which was a response to the central state's mandate. Results show that the redevelopment mode encouraged by the municipal governments is financially unattractive to district governments and market entities. Pro-growth development governance maintains strong inertia since it has been embedded in interlocking institutional arrangements. However, the top-down campaign temporarily changed the power distribution among different levels of government and cultivated incremental institutional layering. A small range of redevelopment projects were implemented through political mobilisation of the state-owned enterprises' financial resources and the local cadre's attention. This paper concludes that the transformation of China's land development governance is an inevitably arduous top-down process, characterised by constant rescaling of the distribution of power and constant adjustments to reconcile the pro-growth inertia and the state mandate toward sustainability.

## 1. Introduction

Since the Economic Reform in China started in the 1980s, Chinese cities have experienced rapid urban expansion. In recent years, the public and academia have been criticising the uncontrolled nature of the expansion dynamics for its social and environmental unsustainability (Lin, 2015). In November 2012, at the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the then President Hu Jintao listed in his speech the promotion of ecological progress as one of the most important tasks of the state. Major objectives included controlling the pace of development and promoting intensive and efficient land use (The 17th CCP Central Committee, 2012). Implementing these national guidelines, however, relies largely on the response of municipal governments, the role of which is looked at more closely in this article. Shanghai is a city that actively responded to the central government's initiatives. As one of the largest cities in China, Shanghai has limited land resources. In 2014, the municipal government proclaimed a land-use ceiling of 3200 km<sup>2</sup> for construction land. At the same time, the government instigated a new

policy to encourage the regeneration of inner-city industrial land redevelopment rather than urban expansion. The new policy introduced a new redevelopment mode, which allows the land use right owner to pay a supplementary land conveyance fee and redevelop industrial land directly, skipping the government's reacquisition of land and open-market land conveyance. This paper refers to the new redevelopment mode as "user-led redevelopment".

Against this background, this paper explores the implementation of this national initiative through Shanghai's experience in accelerating land redevelopment by answering two research questions. Firstly, what is the pattern of institutional change regarding land redevelopment governance in Shanghai? Secondly, how and why did the identified mode of institutional change happen in the distinct political context of China?

There has been abundant literature discussing land development governance in Chinese cities. In the rapid growth era, scholars, such as Zhu (1999) and He and Wu (2005), tend to emphasise the role of the pro-growth coalition formed by local entrepreneurial states and market

\* Corresponding author at: University of Cambridge, Department of Land Economy, 19 Silver Street, CB3 9EP, UK.

E-mail address: [jl2069@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jl2069@cam.ac.uk) (J. Li).

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entities to deliver growth through land and planning administration (see also Wu, 2010), a position that has since been contested (Hsing, 2010). Recently, scholars like Wu (2018) started to focus on a shift in redevelopment governance, stressing the importance of central state political initiatives. This line of research demonstrates how the market becomes a tool for realising broader social and environmental goals and thereby maintaining state power (Wu, 2018; Wu et al., 2022). Adding to this line of argument, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the recent shift toward sustainable redevelopment governance by demonstrating interactions among state and market players throughout the arduous process of pro-redevelopment policy implementation, using Shanghai as a case study. More precisely, this paper presents the case of brownfield redevelopment in Yangpu district. In order to comprehend the role of stakeholders over time and identify the pattern of institutional change, the lens of historical institutionalism is adopted (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Sorensen, 2017). The research builds on 19 qualitative interviews and desk-based analysis of 24 policy papers and project-specific documents (see section three for a detailed description of the methodology).

The paper shows that the policy issued in 2014 failed to provide sufficient financial or administrative incentives for the main actors, namely, district governments and land use right owners. Meanwhile, existing institutional arrangements even created disincentives for a major type of land use right owner, the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). While the performance of the SOEs is usually assessed on short-term profit generation, redevelopment projects only generate financial returns over the long run. Only when local governments and SOEs are politically mobilised by their upper-level authority do they gain the motivation to carry out redevelopment projects as political tasks, and the local implementation of redevelopment policies becomes possible. Therefore, while incremental institutional change occurs, it is heavily shaped by intergovernmental power relations, and such resource-consuming mobilisation can only happen selectively and temporarily.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the political context and scholarly discussions about redevelopment governance in China. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework of historical institutionalism. Section 4 introduces the redevelopment policies in Shanghai before and after 2014, as well as the implementation of the 2014 policy. Section 5 discusses the pattern of institutional change in redevelopment governance. Section 6 concludes the research and highlights the theoretical contribution.

## 2. Governing redevelopment in China

Implementation of a national initiative always falls within a specific political, legal, and governance context. Thus, in the following part, a concise overview of the political context in China is presented. Key rules for urban redevelopment in China are then reviewed. Sections 2.3 and 2.4 review the literature about redevelopment governance in China and identify a research gap in theorising a recent redevelopment governance paradigm shift.

### 2.1. The political context: Decentralised authoritarianism and campaign-style enforcement

China's bureaucracy is, according to Landry (2008) and Xu (2011), politically centralised but fiscally decentralised, which Zhou (2016) contends fundamental to reform and rapid economic development. In such a decentralised authoritarian system, the principal (higher-level government) holds the power of personnel appointment, supervision, and approval, as well as the power of veto or intervention. Meanwhile, the execution of orders from the principal is delegated to the self-financing agent (lower-level government) with discretionary power (Zhou, 2016). The principal stipulates the comprehensive goals, and the agents have the authority "over how the tasks are to be carried out and resources allocated" (Zhou & Lian, 2020). The system is characterised by

upward accountability (Zhou et al., 2013).

However, Zhou (2022) identifies the tension between the authoritarian regime and the effective governance at the local level. While over-centralisation of decision-making may weaken the agents' ability to solve localised problems, over-decentralisation can result in a lack of coordination and accumulation toward macro-level crisis. The variable coupling between the higher- and lower-level governments is the governance mechanism to reconcile this tension in China (Zhou, 2022). Campaigns are the mechanism defined by Zhou (2022) that has been adopted by the higher authorities to counterbalance the risks of over-decentralisation. The critical feature of campaign-style enforcement is the political mobilisation of resources and attention of lower-level authorities to enforce directives from the higher levels, which usually breaks the regular operation pattern of the agents (Liu et al., 2015; Zhou, 2022). The campaigns demand compliance of implementors, to which the principle of upward accountability is fundamental (Zhou, 2022). When the higher-level authorities initiate campaign-style mobilisation, the coupling between higher- and lower-level governments (and SOEs) becomes tighter, and the power of decision-making is temporarily centralised.

### 2.2. Land redevelopment in urban China: Key institutional arrangements

Institutional arrangements regarding urban redevelopment in China have changed considerably since the economic reform. The 1988 Constitution separated the land use right from the socialist state's ultimate ownership of urban construction land (Lin & Ho, 2005), creating a statutory public leasehold system in urban China.

Local governments convey land for for-profit uses to land use right owners (Lin, 2014). The land conveyance contract signed between the local government and the land use right owner specifies the land use right owner's rights to the land, including planning conditions extracted from the detailed regulatory plan (National People's Congress, 2008). The conveyance of land use rights must be accomplished through transparent, competitive methods, including public bidding, auction, and quotation (Ministry of Land and Resources, 2002). Therefore, the only channel for redevelopment is "reacquire + convey". The local government pays a compensation fee, reacquires the land from the original land use right owner, and conveys the land through transparent, competitive methods with a new contract. The local state acts as the "middleman" to secure the state's ideological control over land and its ability to capture the land premium as the ultimate owner (Xu, 2019). China's land property rights regime established the state monopoly on urban land supply, which made the local governments the largest beneficiary in all land (re-)developments (Cai et al., 2021).

### 2.3. A pro-growth redevelopment governance regime that gradually loses legitimacy

As the monopolised landowner, local governments in China adopted a pro-growth (re-)development governance regime since the turn of the century, the legitimacy of which has been contested and weakened by counter voices and actions in recent years (Hsing, 2010; Shin, 2013).

This pro-growth development governance strategy was shaped not only by the land and development regime discussed in the previous section, but it was also determined by the complex political settings in the decentralised authoritarian bureaucracy. On the one hand, in such a fiscally decentralised system, the local governments rely on land value captured to cope with the responsibility of economic and social development (Fan et al., 2020; Lin, 2014). On the other hand, in this politically centralised bureaucracy, the central government takes economic performance as a critical indicator for government officials' promotion (Li & Zhou, 2005), and Chinese city leaders are therefore incentivised to expand urban land supply to boost economic growth (Wang et al., 2020).

There has been abundant research trying to theorise (re)

development governance nurtured by such distinct institutional arrangements. One branch of research adopts urban regime theory, arguing that a socialist pro-growth coalition in the land (re)development has been formed by the local government and market entities in Chinese cities (He & Wu, 2005; Shin, 2009; Zhu, 1999). Wu (2008) considers this an example of a neoliberal alliance. Although it is still controversial whether China fits ideologically into the framework of neoliberalism, the adoption of the market as a major governing mechanism demonstrates actual existing neoliberalism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2006; Lin, 2014). He and Wu (2009) and Hsing (2010) argue that the government actively adopts a neoliberal approach to gain its legitimacy and avoid social instability by delivering economic growth, which is largely land-based.

These studies delineated a state-market coalition, asymmetrically dominated by the state, capitalising on urban redevelopment at the expense of social equity and urban environment (He & Wu, 2005). Subsequently, growing literature started to look at the emerging forces that confront the pro-growth coalition. The forces include residents' property rights activism and cultural elites' historic conservation discourse (Chen et al., 2020; Shin, 2013). However, these studies also show that, although the emerging forces influenced certain redevelopment projects, they are not yet strong enough to counterbalance the pro-growth agenda. The government's rhetoric of public interest and participation to cope with the counter voices has been superficial, and the winners in the redevelopment projects are still investors and the local government (Xu & Lin, 2019). The autonomy of social actors is somewhat symbolic as it is still granted and designed by the government in this asymmetric power structure (Yao et al., 2021). While the government-led pro-growth regime is losing its legitimacy, its dominance in redevelopment governance largely continues as the fundamental institutional arrangement of decentralised responsibility has not changed, which requires the local government to increase financial revenue and boost the local economy. It is, therefore, important for this research to investigate how sustainable urban development can be substantially advanced in the Chinese context.

2.4. A shift toward sustainable redevelopment governance?

In recent years, a state-led paradigm shift toward less growth-orientated redevelopment governance has been observed by scholars. The central state promotes the protection of farmland, environmental sustainability, and social harmony (Zhang & Wu, 2022; Wu et al., 2022). The market is still utilised as an instrument, but for realising wider goals other than economic growth and maintaining central state's power (Wu, 2018). Guided by national initiatives like "micro" regeneration, historic heritage conservation, and brownfield redevelopment, redevelopment projects have been implemented for objectives other than capital accumulation (Wang et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2021). These redevelopments are tasks that must be carried out even if they are fiscally unprofitable.

Shanghai's pro-redevelopment practice examined in this research can also be regarded as a part of this paradigm shift. However, there are still questions to ask. Has this nationally initiated transformation been enforced as smoothly as many academic works delineate? If not, what are the constraints? There are scholarly works that offer clues for this research.

Firstly, scholars have been arguing that there are conflicts within the state-market coalition. The local states and land use right owners or developers contend for the land value increase in redevelopments (Guo et al., 2017; Zhu, 2017). As environmental sustainability is being increasingly emphasised, the total distributable gain has decreased with stricter planning control. This state-market contention may exaggerate and hinder the transformation toward sustainable redevelopment.

Secondly, the SOEs, as quasi-market entities bounded by soft budget constraints, deserve more attention (Hu, 2015). The state control of decision-making in SOEs makes SOEs an effective means of state

intervention (Naughton, 2011). However, each SOE in China has its affiliation and bureaucratic ranking in the political hierarchy (Wang, 2014), complicating the power relations in each redevelopment case. While scholars have been looking into redevelopments where the SOEs were involved (Chen & Wang, 2022; Gao & Chen, 2020), a further examination regarding SOEs' role in national initiatives enforcement is necessary.

To summarise, the features of the multi-level decentralised authoritarian state are essential to the analysis of redevelopment governance (Yu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2016). The institutional change regarding redevelopment governance must be situated in the political context delineated above to be fully comprehended.

3. Theoretical lens: Historical institutionalism

"Institutions are humanly devised constraints that define and limit the set of choice of individuals and thus serve as the framework for human interaction" (North, 1990). New institutional economics (NIE) and transaction cost theory have offered a practical conceptual framework for planning and land property research worldwide (Alexander, 2001; Buitelaar, 2004). This theoretical tool has also been used to academically explain land redevelopment in China (Lai & Tang, 2016). However, the neoinstitutional framework has its disadvantages. This approach assumes that rational individuals intentionally design institutions to pursue minimal transaction costs, and each actor has roughly equal power, which is rarely the case in practice (Lai, 2005; Moulaert, 2005). Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) historical institutionalist theory of incremental change and Ho's (2018) theorem of dynamic disequilibrium both oppose NIE's view of institutions as static and intentionally designed and enforced. This research chooses historical institutionalism as the theoretical lens as it offers a clearer framework to incorporate power into the analysis of institutional change. Another advantage of historical institutionalism lies in its emphasis on the institutional environment. In the case of China, the land governance and other political-economic institutions have been considered as deeply entangled and mutually reinforcing (Rithmire, 2017).

Historical institutionalism adopts bounded rationality and assumes that actors strategically seek to realise complex and changing goals with incomplete perceptions of an issue (Hay & Wincott, 1998). It suggests that institutional changes may happen through a gradual process, which can be transformative over time (Sorensen, 2017; Thelen, 2003). The endogenous changes are usually the consequence of tensions within the institution and shifts in the power relations that impact resource allocation (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Sorensen, 2015).

In order to identify the pattern of redevelopment governance transformation in China, this research makes use of the four modes of incremental institutional change (Table 1): 1) Displacement: removal of existing rules and introduction of new rules; 2) Layering: introducing new rules alongside existing rules; 3) Drift: changed impact of existing rules as the exogenous environment changes; 4) Conversion: existing rules being strategically redeployed by changing the enactment (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

Two variables that are decisive to the type of endogenous change

Table 1  
Combinations of contextual and institutional variables.

		The characteristics of the targeted institution	
		Low level of discretion	High level of discretion
The characteristics of political context	Strong veto possibilities	Layering	Drift
	Weak veto possibilities	Displacement	Conversion

Source: adapted from Mahoney and Thelen (2010)

have been identified (Table 1): 1) The characteristics of political context: the possibility offered by the institutional environment for the defenders of existing institutions to veto changes; 2) The characteristic of the targeted institution: the opportunities to exercise discretion in implementation or enforcement (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). These two variables manifest the distribution of power within the wider political system, which determines the actors' ability to mobilise resources. Thus, this framework can appropriately accommodate the analysis of campaign-style political mobilisation, which is characterised by a shifting power distribution.

Scholars have been advocating for more adoption of historical institutionalism in planning research (Sorensen, 2017; Taylor, 2013). This school of thought has been utilised in planning studies, for example, in the context of informal settlements in Sub-Saharan Africa and gated communities in China, focusing on path dependence (Jia et al., 2023; Morrison, 2017) or in view of endogenous incremental change (Sorensen, 2011). This research adopts historical institutionalism as the theoretical framework to analyse the pattern of institutional change of China's redevelopment governance. The distinctive features of decentralised development responsibility and the authoritarian political regime may also enrich the comprehension of incremental institutional change, especially layering, the pattern that has been observed by this research in Shanghai.

#### 4. Pro-redevelopment policy for industrial land and its implementation in Shanghai

This research adopts a case study approach, which is appropriate to answer how and why questions about a set of events over which the researcher has little control and has no clear boundary with its highly pertinent context (Yin, 2014). Process tracing, which uses "histories, archival documents, interview transcripts, and other sources to see whether a causal process is evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in a case" (George & Bennett, 2005), is the within-case method.

Regarding case selection, as a global megacity that actively seeks to restructure land use for sustainability, Shanghai offers an opportunity to reveal the essence of planning control in urban China. In addition, Shanghai is a city where state-owned economies play an essential role, which may offer knowledge that effectively complements China's development governance landscape. B-Link (*hulian baodi*) in Yangpu district was chosen as the local redevelopment case study. The negotiation for redevelopment lasted for more than 10 years, and the redevelopment strategy underwent several major changes. This case reveals the motivations and behaviour patterns of two major actors in land redevelopment, the district government and the SOE, as the land use right owner and developer respectively.

The data analysis builds on 24 documents, including laws, regulations, policy papers and project-specific official documents from different levels of government, as well as 19 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021. Interviewees include central state, municipal, and district government officials, scholars, and planning institute planners. Interviews focused on three areas: 1) policymaking (context and motivation of the issuance of the 2014 policy, strategies and its underlying rationale); 2) implementation of the 2014 policy (effectiveness and reasons for success or failure, influence of interlocking institutional arrangements); 3) the chronology of the redevelopment project of B-Link.

In this section, the pro-redevelopment policies for industrial land in Shanghai will be presented first. The second part will elaborate on the case of B-Link to show how challenging it was for the 2014 policy to be successfully implemented in a specific redevelopment project.

#### 4.1. Redevelopment policies for industrial land in Shanghai

##### 4.1.1. 2008–2011: "Informal" redevelopments as expediency

Before the national-level promotion of ecological progress, there were two channels for the redevelopment of industrial land in Shanghai. The first one, the "reacquire + convey" method, has been delineated in Section 1. The second is referred to as "three non-changes" method, introduced by a municipal policy issued in 2008.

In 2008, the State Council issued a policy paper to promote the restructuring of the economy. Local governments should support the renewal of industrial land for service-sector use without changing the registered land use (State Council, 2008). As a response, the municipal government issued the "three non-changes" policy, allowing industrial land to be reused commercially without changing its registered land use, as long as the ownership and building structure (floor area) stayed unchanged (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2008). To control the quality of such "informal" redevelopment, all projects must be approved by the district government, and the construction work and business activities upon the land could be legally permitted and supervised.

Over time, the district governments gradually withdrew their support toward "three non-changes" redevelopment.

From the perspective of legitimacy, the land use right owner makes profits beyond its development right regulated by the land conveyance contract. Such projects encroached on the public interest and caused financial losses for local governments. From the perspective of public services, these projects lowered the chance for the planned public facilities to be realised.

(Interviewee from Yangpu district government)

##### 4.1.2. 2012–2013: The introduction of a land-use ceiling

In 2012, Shanghai municipal government started the preparation of a new strategic comprehensive plan. At that time, Shanghai's construction land had exceeded 3000 km<sup>2</sup>, approaching the quota of 3226 km<sup>2</sup> approved by the central government. Against the background of "promoting ecological progress", in November 2013, the municipal leaders and relevant departments reached an internal consensus that Shanghai would set a land-use ceiling of 3200 km<sup>2</sup> for construction land, which was announced publicly in 2014. According to a municipal level interviewee, the Minister of Land Resources attended this internal meeting and recognised Shanghai's resolution to respond to the central government's initiatives.

##### 4.1.3. 2014–2021: Promoting formal redevelopments of industrial land

In March 2014, Shanghai Municipal Planning and Land Resources Administration (SMPLRA) enacted a trial policy to guide the formal redevelopment of industrial land (SMPLRA, 2014), which was formalised in 2016. This policy aims to "adapt to the new normal of urban development with tight resource and environmental constraints" and to encourage the redevelopment of stock industrial land to contain urban sprawl.

The new policy adopted three strategies. Firstly, it allows land use right owners of industrial land to carry out redevelopment directly. Once a supplementary conveyance fee is paid, the owner can change the formally registered land use and increase development density according to the approved detailed regulatory plan. The complex procedure of "reacquire + convey" is no longer necessary. Secondly, the owner must contribute at least 10 % of the land or 15 % of the floor area to the government for public uses. Thirdly, to guarantee development and maintenance quality, the policy requires the owner to hold at least 60 % of the floor area.

The municipal government's underlying rationale was to change the profit-sharing mechanism and financially encourage the land use right owners and the district governments to advance redevelopments. The



essential obstacle for “reacquire + convey” redevelopments is usually the negotiation about land reacquisition. Land use right owners attempt to get compensated for possible land premiums brought by redevelopment, while district governments aim to pay for only the value of the land for industrial use (Lin, 2015).

The new policy was meant to guarantee that the land use right owners could maintain the ownership and share the value appreciation after redevelopment. Furthermore, without any competitive pricing procedure, premiums brought by competition could be avoided.

(Interviewee from SMPLRA)

The district governments, in the meantime, get to increase tax revenue upon the land without the need to finance the reacquiring of the land. The developer’s contribution can also relieve the district governments’ pressure on providing public open space and service facilities.

4.2. Implementation of the 2014 policy: Case of B-Link, former Shanghai no. 2 steel plant

While the policy’s underlying rationale seemed convincing, its outcome failed to reach policymakers’ expectations. The 2014 policy set strict requirements for redevelopment projects. The original land use right owner must be the principal developer, and the developer must be financially capable of paying a sizeable supplementary conveyance fee at the initial stage and of holding the majority of the property to manage it in the long run. Most manufacturing enterprises, as land use right owners, have no such financial capacity and would retreat from such projects. For those land use right owners that are financially capable, to carry out redevelopment following the 2014 policy was still challenging. A redevelopment project will now be detailed to show the underlying reasons.

4.2.1. 2006–2014: A stalemate

Shanghai No.2 Steel Plant (*Shanghai Ergang*) was a state-owned steel manufacturer in Shanghai. It was located in Yangpu district, an inner-city district in the northeast of Shanghai (Fig. 1a). The property was owned by Baosteel Group Co., Ltd., a major central state-owned enterprise supervised by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) of the State Council. Its principal executive officers have the administrative ranking of vice-ministerial level, the same as vice mayors of Shanghai. Before redevelopment, the land area within *Ergang*’s property boundary was 20.96 ha.

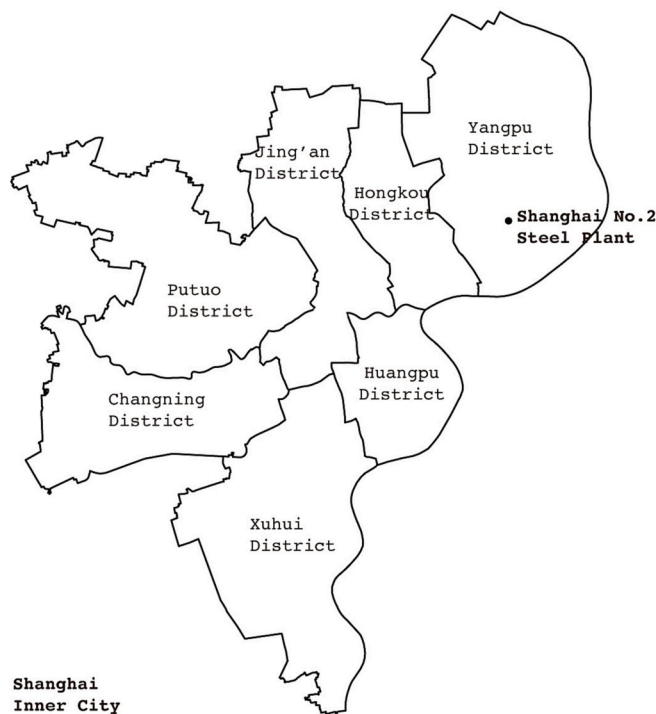
In 2006, steel manufacturing in *Ergang* was halted for environmental protection reasons. Baosteel and Yangpu district government began the negotiation on the disposition of the land. At that time, the only available redevelopment channel was “reacquire + convey”. Baosteel had two choices: 1) take the compensation fee and give up the land; or 2) take the compensation fee, return the land, and participate in the open bidding to redevelop the land.

For Baosteel, choice 1) was undesirable. The district government insisted on a relatively low compensation fee for freely allocated industrial land, which could not cover the severance fee for the laid-off workers, and Baosteel wouldn’t be able to share the premium generated in the future redevelopment. Choice 2) was undesirable as well. Although making an informal agreement with the district government and obtaining the land from the land market was possible, the deal could not eliminate the risk of losing the competition.

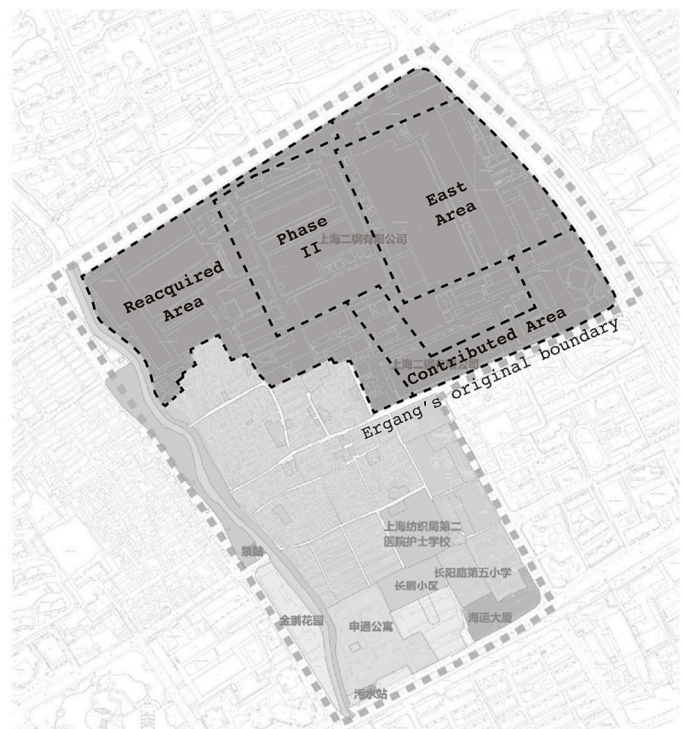
Therefore, no progress was made regarding the disposition of the land. A small segment was used as a temporary parking lot, and the remainder lay idle.

4.2.2. 2015–2017: “Three non-changes” informal redevelopment

In 2014, Chen Derong was appointed to serve as the CEO of Baosteel. He attached great importance to the re-utilising of Baosteel’s idle industrial properties. This change of personnel triggered the redevelopment of *Ergang*. In 2015, Baosteel and Yangpu district government



a. Location of Shanghai No.2 Steel Plant



b. Spatial Distribution of Redeveloped Areas

Fig. 1. An overview of Shanghai no. 2 steel plant. Source: Remade based on figures provided by Yangpu district government

restarted the negotiation and signed a strategic cooperation agreement in November. Instead of the 2014 policy, Baosteel chose to follow the 2008 policy and carry out “three non-changes” redevelopment in the east area of *Ergang* (5.67 ha) (Fig. 1b). The project was named “B-Link”. The plan was to renovate the factory and turn it into offices and retail space for lease. Baosteel promised to take advantage of its business resources to attract companies in the Internet industry to settle on the site. The construction work of B-Link East Area started in August 2016 and was accomplished in early 2018.

The reasons for Baosteel to launch the redevelopment of *Ergang* were threefold. Firstly, after Chen took office, B-Link was chosen as a pilot project to show Baosteel’s determination in property revitalisation and to set up a transferrable redevelopment model for other state-owned industrial property. Secondly, during a site visit in May 2014, President Xi Jinping set a new goal for Shanghai to develop into a technology and innovation hub with global influence. Developing a high-tech business park could demonstrate Baosteel’s willingness to coordinate with the local government in fulfilling Xi’s demand. Thirdly, the construction and management of the new business park could offer jobs for Baosteel’s workers and administrative staff, and mass layoffs could be avoided.

Meanwhile, the reasons for Baosteel to choose “three non-changes” redevelopment and accept a limited developable floor area were twofold. Firstly, informal redevelopment helped Baosteel to avoid the supplementary land conveyance fee. Baosteel Group, like many other SOEs, assesses the performance of each subdivision or subsidiary company according to a yearly business plan (including profit target) approved by the group company, which determines the income and career advancement of the executive officers. A formal redevelopment with large initial investment and a long payback period is not a favourable choice. Secondly, to effectively manifest Baosteel’s political determination, the project must be accomplished relatively quickly. Informal redevelopment is timesaving compared to formal redevelopment.

Yangpu district government accepted Baosteel’s informal redevelopment scheme for two reasons. First, persuading an SOE affiliated with a higher-level government to make a large amount of investment in the formal redevelopment was a difficult task. Second, the informally developed new business park would also realise an upgrade in industry and provide considerable tax revenue in the long run.

#### 4.2.3. 2018–2021: Formal redevelopment

In September 2018, Baosteel and Yangpu district government reached a new agreement on *Ergang*’s phase II redevelopment. Baosteel decided to comprehensively redevelop the land under the guidance of the 2014 policy. Among 20.96 ha of *Ergang*’s freely allocated industrial land, 14.76 ha would be redeveloped by Baosteel (including 5.67 ha of refurbished East Area), and the remaining 6.20 ha of land would be reacquired by the district government for future conveyance in the open market (Fig. 1b).

While the redevelopment scheme’s land area and floor area followed existing statutory plan’s specification, a minor modification was inevitable. In November 2018, the district government officially initiated the plan modification procedure.

In August 2019, a renewed land conveyance contract was signed between Baosteel and Yangpu district government. The specified developer contribution included 16 % of the redeveloped land as public green space, a public road across the B-link west area, a 1500 m<sup>2</sup> food market, and a power substation. Baosteel paid a supplementary land conveyance fee of 4.071 billion CNY for redeveloped land and received 1.621 billion CNY from Yangpu district government as the compensation fee for the reacquired land. In October, the construction work of B-Link phase two started and was accomplished by 2021.

Baosteel accepted formal redevelopment for the following reasons. First, although informal redevelopment was allowed, Baosteel could not obtain a Certificate of Title for its office and retail property without a

formal conveyance contract, which might cause risks in governmental audit and threaten executive officers’ political careers. Second, a formal redevelopment project with all obligations fulfilled would be a political manifestation of Baosteel’s willingness as a central SOE to realise its environmental responsibility. Thirdly, to fully realise the development right allocated by the detailed regulatory plan and maximise the profitability in the second phase, construction work to increase the floor area must be carried out.

#### 4.2.4. Summary

The implementation of the 2014 policy was constrained for three reasons. Firstly, the policy requires extremely high financial capacity of a land use right owner to invest in formal redevelopment, which excluded most of the land use right owners. Secondly, the 2008 policy could help the land use right owners to avoid a land conveyance fee, and further reduced the profitability of formal redevelopment. Thirdly, most of the industrial land in Shanghai belongs to SOEs, and the performance evaluation mechanism of SOEs emphasises short-term profit, which

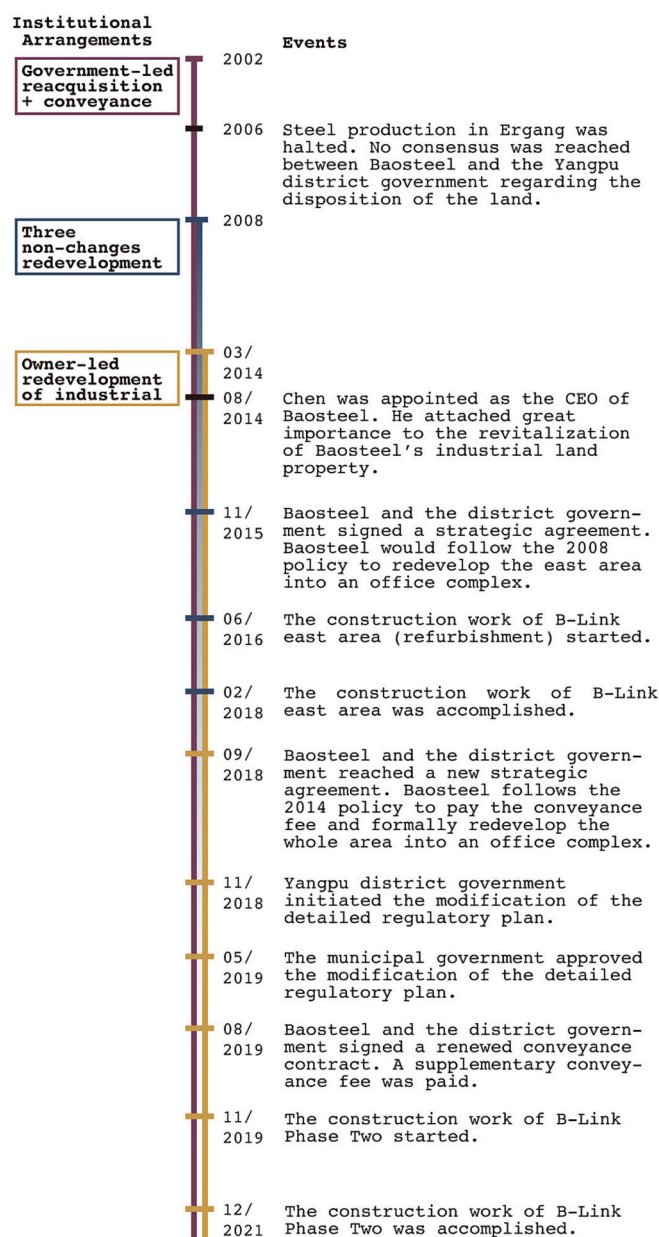


Fig. 2. Timeline of B-link Redevelopment.

discouraged formal redevelopments.

By tracing the timeline of B-Link (Fig. 2), the research observes that the 2014 policy created necessary institutional conditions but failed to advance the redevelopment of B-Link. Although the new policy had been enacted in 2014, Baosteel chose to carry out “three non-changes” redevelopment instead. Meanwhile, the political consideration of Baosteel was the driving force that facilitated the redevelopment in both phases of the redevelopment.

## 5. Discussion: Institutional layering through political mobilisation

### 5.1. Sustainable urban development: Localising a campaign-style national initiative

The national campaign of “promoting ecological progress” can be regarded as a method adopted to counterbalance the negative effect of fiscal decentralisation, namely, uncontrolled urban expansion. This task was subcontracted to the local level. Shanghai municipal government responded and paid considerable attention to promoting intensive land use. From the perspective of power distribution, this campaign was moderate since the decentralised power was largely maintained at the local level. The 3200 km<sup>2</sup> land-use ceiling was the principal goal for the central government to supervise. Detailed strategies of enforcement were left for the municipal government to decide.

The 2014 industrial land revitalisation policy was a localised policy issued to encourage redevelopment instead of urban expansion and thereby enforce the growth containing commitment. The major strategy was to provide a user-led redevelopment channel, change the profit-sharing mechanism, and fiscally incentivise the land use right owners to carry out redevelopment.

### 5.2. Pattern of institutional change: Layering caused by political mobilisation

This research observes an institutional layering regarding rules of industrial land redevelopment in Shanghai after 2014. The old redevelopment modes of “reacquire + convey” or “three non-changes” were not removed or changed. A new user-led redevelopment channel was introduced by the 2014 policy, though only implemented in a small range of projects. According to Mahoney and Thelen (2010), two decisive features of the institutional environment are necessary for institutional layering to happen.

Firstly, the defenders of the existing institution have strong power, interlocking institutions offer a high possibility of vetoing institutional change, and institutional challengers lack the capacity to change existing rules. This was precisely the situation in Shanghai after 2014. The “reacquire + convey” redevelopment mode had been a key institutional arrangement behind land finance in China’s local governments. Shanghai municipal government did not intend to remove or change it, but to introduce a new channel alongside it to make up for its deficiency. As for the “three non-changes” mode, the land use right owners, especially the SOEs, whose performance was evaluated by short-term profit, were highly motivated to defend its legitimacy. Thus, it was hard to thoroughly prohibit the continuation of informal redevelopments, even though the district governments have been increasingly reluctant to support such projects.

Secondly, the implementors have a low level of discretion in interpreting or implementing the targeted institution. Unlike the relationship between the central government and the municipal government, where the subordinate maintains a high level of discretion in formulating localised enforcement strategies, the relationship between the municipal government and the district government in this case was simpler. All user-led redevelopment projects must be governed strictly according to the policy paper, which offers little ambiguity to exploit.

However, the situation in Shanghai was not a typical setting that

could foster institutional layering. The supporter of the new rules, namely the municipal government, was not the implementor of the policies. The district government as the implementor, together with the land use right owners, had the power to choose among the three redevelopment channels. The 2014 policy did not offer sufficient financial incentives to encourage formal user-led redevelopment. The municipal government also did not set any administrative target for the district government to meet (for example, set quotas to be accomplished). Thus, the veto players not only had the power to defend old rules, but also had the power to block the substantive introduction of new rules. In this circumstance, the result was likely to be the continuation of old rules without the implementation of new rules.

Nevertheless, institutional layering on a small scale did happen. It can be observed that the driving force behind the implementation of projects like B-Link was highly political. The top executive officers of Baosteel responded to the initiatives of the central and municipal governments and thereby changed the priority of the enterprise. Baosteel mobilised its cadre and financial resources to avoid political risks and manifest political compliance.

When campaign-style mobilisation is initiated, the power distribution among different levels of government changes temporarily, which is reflected in the variables that determine the pattern of institutional change. The state-owned land use right owners and the district governments lost veto power to refuse user-led redevelopments. Although the land use right owners and district government kept the power to defend many old rules, they lost the power to refuse the introduction of new rules. The contextual elements were altered by the political mobilisation of governmental and quasi-governmental agencies, and the layering of institutions became possible.

### 5.3. Difficult political mobilisation in a decentralised authoritarian system

The logic behind the limited implementation of the 2014 policy must be embedded in the political context to be fully understood. Campaign-style enforcement is a strong tool for implementing new policies that contradict with regular operation logic of the lower-level entities (Liu et al., 2015). The case of B-Link was such an example. The attention and resources of Baosteel were politically mobilised, the regular operation of this quasi-market entity based on the SOE performance mechanism was suspended. However, the new policy was only implemented in such a manner through a small range of projects, and the displacement of “three non-changes” redevelopment by formal user-led redevelopment was not possible. The reason was twofold.

Firstly, in a decentralised authoritarian hierarchy, campaign-style governance can only be adopted to enforce mandates in a top-down manner. An entity affiliated with the central government cannot be effectively mobilised by a lower-level authority. That was why, instead of the issuance of the 2014 policy, the redevelopment was triggered by the appointment of Baosteel’s new CEO. The new CEO decided to respond to the national initiative. Success was thus framed nationally in political terms (political compliance and safety) rather than measured by financial metrics. The resources of Baosteel were then mobilised to cooperate with the municipal and district governments. Since state-owned land use right owners’ businesses seldom have a direct link with the national initiative of intensive land use, political mobilisation like Baosteel can be a rare case.

Secondly, since campaign-style enforcement is adopted when the order of the principal is not compatible with the routine operation of the lower-level entities, it is usually highly resource-consuming. Therefore, campaign-style enforcement is usually carried out selectively and temporarily (Kennedy & Chen, 2018; Zhou, 2022), and the power of veto players can only be partially weakened.

## 6. Conclusion

In 2014, Shanghai municipal government issued a policy to



encourage the redevelopment of industrial land to replace the land development mode of urban expansion, which was a response to a national campaign that promoted ecological progress and intensive urban land use. The policy aims to promote redevelopment by providing a simplified channel for user-led redevelopment that circumvents the district government's land reacquisition and open-market land conveyance. By systematically investigating the implementation of this policy, this paper answers the research questions about the transformation of redevelopment governance in Chinese cities.

Results show that land redevelopment governance changed in the pattern of institutional layering, with new policies introduced alongside old rules. The financial incentives provided by the 2014 policy were insufficient, and players actively defended existing redevelopment modes. There was thus a high possibility of failure in introducing the new redevelopment mode. Despite this, incremental institutional layering happened because political mobilisation of state-owned quasi-market land use right owners changed the distribution of power and advanced the new policy's implementation. In an authoritarian political hierarchy, campaign-style enforcement was an effective tool to suspend the regular operation pattern of the lower-level agencies and to politically mobilise resources on accomplishing political tasks from the upper-level authorities (Zhou, 2022). However, in a multi-level authoritarian hierarchy, redevelopments can involve higher-level entities that cannot be directly mobilised by the policy implementors, namely the local governments. In addition, since existing rules and interlocking institutional arrangements generate strong inertia, political mobilised implementation of a new redevelopment mode can only happen selectively and temporarily.

Using in-depth first-hand empirical data regarding land redevelopment practice, this research contributes to the emerging literature about development governance transformation in urban China. The reformation of land development governance toward sustainability identified in recent articles is indeed happening, with exemplar projects implemented across the nation (Wu et al., 2022). However, as revealed in this research, the exemplar was realised through arduous political mobilisation that contradicts existing rules. As sustainable redevelopment modes are usually less financially attractive, the contention identified by Guo et al. (2017) and Zhu (2017) between local governments and land use right owners intensified. The substantial transformation of redevelopment governance was a harder task than perceived in the existing literature. The Shanghai case demonstrates that urban governance in China is guided by multiple inconsistent goals. The local governments constantly adjust their behaviours in each project to reconcile the regular operation pattern, which remains largely pro-growth, and the top-down mandate promoting ecological and social progress. Historical institutionalism offers a framework to place the power dynamics within the decentralised authoritarian bureaucracy at the centre of the analysis. Through the historical institutionalist lens, this research reveals the basic bureaucratic logic behind the recent paradigm shift toward sustainability. Driven by the constantly rescaling power distribution within the bureaucracy, land development governance in urban China is characterised by inevitable incremental and fluctuating changes. This research also contributes to global urban governance research. Although the knowledge from China's distinctive political and bureaucratic settings is hardly transferrable, this research provides situated and grounded knowledge and calls for a refocus on power analysis in governance research.

In addition, the governance mechanism of political mobilisation may contribute to enhancing the historical institutionalist framework. This research suggests that campaign-style mobilisation can alter the political contextual variable that determines the pattern of institutional change. In this way, the pattern of change (or non-change) shifts temporarily as the campaigns are initiated. This Chinese case study thereby adds a dimension to the historical institutionalism analysis of incremental institutional change, which considers the contextual variable as dynamic rather than static.

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## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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