



# Urban redevelopment as multi-scalar planning and contestation: The case of Enning Road project in Guangzhou, China



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## ABSTRACT

Urban redevelopment has emerged as a key topic in recent research into China's urban political economy. Drawing on relevant debates at the urban community/neighbourhood level, this research presents a case study in which multi-scalar planning processes and social contestation have both played their parts in shaping an urban redevelopment project. The Enning Road Project in Guangzhou, known for its controversial plan-making process and rich heritage assets, has been chosen for this study. Based on detailed analysis of qualitative data, the multi-level planning frameworks and social reaction of various actors from and beyond the locality have been examined to reveal the scalar politics entailed by this project. To deepen the discussion, further thoughts are provided in the concluding section.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, successive rounds of urban redevelopment have spread from Western countries to other parts of the world (Carmon, 1999; Roberts, 2000; Tallon, 2013). Since the 1980s, because of rapid urbanisation, debates on urban redevelopment (*Jiucheng gaizao*) have also emerged and been evolving in China, raising theoretical and practical concerns that somewhat resemble those experienced by the West (He, 2007; Yang & Chang, 2007; Zhang & Fang, 2004).

To date, much critical attention has been paid to the political economy of urban (re)development in China (He & Wu, 2009; Hsing, 2010; Wu, 2015). Existing work mainly comes from two angles: firstly, studies on planning/policy-making processes at a strategic or spatial level, the focus of which is on the formulation of plans for cities/towns or metropolitan regions (Qian & Wong, 2012; Qian, 2011; Xu & Yeh, 2005); secondly, research with a pronounced social concern over the interests or conflicts as exemplified by specific redevelopment projects on the local scale (He & Wu, 2005; Shin, 2008; Zhai & Ng, 2013). To explore the link between a tiered planning system and social responses to urban redevelopment, this

study will draw on previous research (Gransow, 2014; Shin, 2014a) to approach redevelopment activities on the ground through a different theoretical angle. While the logic behind restless redevelopment in Chinese cities certainly fits well into a growth-oriented agenda (Wu, 2015), a rescaled urban territory in which a tiered planning system is embedded also calls for theoretical reflection. In the Chinese context, the notion of “local” could mean multiple spatial scales, from provisional and municipal, down to the district level and below. More importantly, planning and implementation of redevelopment projects normally represents a localised process whereby elites' visions (Ma, 2009; Shin, 2014b) would be contested by various forms of “scalar politics” (MacKinnon, 2011). In order to illustrate the complexity of this multi-scalar process, the present study will be focused on an urban redevelopment project in Guangzhou, a major metropolis in China. Through detailed analysis of qualitative data, it aims to demonstrate how a controversial project has been shaped by the scalar politics between a top-down planning system and social contestation from below.

Following introduction, the remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. The second section reviews continuing debate on urban redevelopment in China and identifies the research gap this study aims to address. The third section sets the study case, i.e. the Enning Road Project (hereafter the ERP) in central Guangzhou, in

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context and outlines its research value. The next section analyses the multi-level planning frameworks under which the ERP has been planned, and examines the scalar politics therein; it will also look at the reaction from local residents, as well as contending voices from various actors beyond the locality, with an aim to explain how such repercussions have made an impact on the project's planning process. Some thoughts are provided in the last section, pointing to possible avenues of future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Urban redevelopment in Chinese cities

In retrospect, discussions on redeveloping Chinese cities can be traced back to the 1990s, when inner-city problems began to capture public and scholarly attention (Tsinghua University IAUS, 1993; Yang, 1995). At present, several terms are often interchangeable (not necessarily to the exclusion of each other) when describing the process through which *inner-city neighbourhoods or deteriorated urban areas are rebuilt or revamped for stimulating development*. Among others, “urban redevelopment”, “urban regeneration”, and “urban renewal” are most frequently used (Huang & Xu, 2010; Yan, Zhou, & Yan, 2011). Whereas caution is due when trying to interpret similar phenomena in China using Western concepts, ongoing debates about this issue in different contexts are also expected to stimulate further theoretical reflection. By distinguishing the established usages in previous studies (Xu & Wang, 2011; Zheng, Shen, & Wang, 2014), for this research, it is considered that “urban redevelopment”—as a more generic concept—should be appropriate for investigating a key dimension of the transformations of Chinese cities. Despite “its general mission and less well-defined purpose” (Roberts, 2000, p. 18), a wider theoretical purchase implied by this concept would in fact better capture the diverse realities on the Chinese urban scene.

Thus far, research on urban redevelopment in China has covered a wide range of topics. Since the early 1990s, when major Chinese metropolises began to face aggravating inner-city deterioration and congestion, some large-scale policy programmes were implemented by the municipal governments of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou to facilitate the physical renewal of run-down areas on the one hand, and address the pressing housing needs on the other (He, 2012; Lu, 1997; Wu, 2004). While equitable achievements in reducing housing shortage in a limited number of urban neighbourhoods have been reported in Beijing and Shanghai (Tian & Wong, 2007; Zhang & Fang, 2003), more researchers have turned attention to a shift in the policy emphasis of urban redevelopment under market transition (Fang & Zhang, 2003; Li & Huang, 2006; Wu & He, 2005). Largely as a result of deepening market reform and political decentralisation, a view seems to be emerging more recently that “property-led redevelopment” has become a prominent feature in revalorising city centres in China (He & Wu, 2005, 2009; Shin, 2009). By delving into the spatial outcomes, institutional underpinnings, and socio-economic consequences of urban redevelopment, later studies continue to diversify in terms of research foci.

Lately, there have been attempts to draw theoretical parallels between urban redevelopment in China and the West—notably, by employing concepts such as “regeneration” or “gentrification” (He, 2007, 2012; Yang & Chang, 2007; Ye, 2011). Meanwhile, although the socio-spatial impacts of redevelopment projects on a number of urban neighbourhoods have been reported by some researchers (Li & Song, 2009; Zhai & Ng, 2013), a bottom-up perspective is still needed to complement current research angles from above. As observed by Shin (2008, 2009) and Gransow (2014), demands for community/neighbourhood participation have been voiced from

below in attempts to confront the usually skewed urban agendas dominated by local states in China. While public involvement has been found to play a positive role in shifting local planning practice in some major cities, institutional barriers to enabling further change, especially given the current Chinese planning system, are still a problem that confronts policy makers and researchers (Sun, 2015; Verdini, 2015). From a broader perspective, it is argued that more attention needs to be paid to the possibility of “institutionalising” planning at the neighbourhood or community level, as have long been the case in some Western countries. This said, research on urban redevelopment in China also must not lose sight of a rescaled urban context, in which local states have assumed a crucial role in the territorialisation of growth.

### 2.2. Urban redevelopment, local state and scalar politics

Since the late 1970s, China's transition from a socialist planned economy to a globalising country has brought along an unprecedented urban process. While urban expansion and redevelopment are integral to this process, the rescaling of China's urban territory represents a significant backdrop that calls for theoretical reflection in the first place. Seen from afar, the marketisation process, and later, the penetration of global forces into China appear to be rather like a crescendo of economic neoliberalisation (Harvey, 2005). Upon a closer look, however, the characteristics intrinsic to the Chinese political economy still determine the configuration of its urban territory. As documented by many researchers, legalised transfer of land-use rights, commodification of housing provision, and reform of China's banking system are found to be underpinning local aspirations for economic and urban growth (Lin, 2007; Zhu, 2004); meanwhile, central-local fiscal reshuffle (Qian, 2006; Wang, 2011) and political incentives inherent in its hierarchical state structure (Li & Zhou, 2005; Zhou, 2010) are also among the crucial factors of a rescaled China. Differing from Western experiences and evolving in its own way, state decentralisation and power devolution in China still dominate the paces and areas of economic deregulation, thereby largely affecting how its territorial governance is being re-scaled.

Against this background, a process of land-driven territorialisation led by the local state has been central to the understanding of urban redevelopment in Chinese cities (Hsing, 2006, 2010). It is important to note that: in a rescaled urban China, the term “local state” is a collective concept with multiple references, meaning governments at “the provincial, city, county, town and township levels” (Ma, 2005, p. 478). Essentially, the crux of land-driven territorialisation lies in the monopoly of urban land ownership rights exercised by local governments as entrusted territorial units. To date, a considerable volume of literature has detailed the significant role played by the conveyance fees paid to local governments for the use rights of urban land in the process of (re)developing Chinese cities (Lin, 2009; Tao & Wang, 2010). Often occupying good locations targeted by local planning authorities and developers, urban redevelopment projects are a significant component of this land-driven territorialisation—especially in those major cities where the forces of marketisation, globalisation and favourable policies converge.

Despite contextual specificities, one useful device to bear in mind when analysing a rescaled urban China is the conceptual correspondence between “level” (or administrative rank) and “scale”. As Ma (2005, p. 481) has insightfully pointed out: “... in the Chinese context at least, a place's administrative rank or level significantly affects its political and economic relations with other places”. Here, it is suggested that this idea of “scale as level” should as well be used to understand urban policy-making and planning politics *within* the Chinese city, so that “the complex relations of

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