



# The role of universities in developing China's university towns: The case of Songjiang university town in Shanghai



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## ABSTRACT

Following the radical expansion of higher education admission in China in the late 1990s, more than 60 new 'university towns', districts of several adjacent university campuses, were built in the country's urban agglomerations by 2006. Previous studies have considered university towns primarily as an example of Chinese local entrepreneurialism, namely large speculative developments initiated by local governments. The role of universities in developing them has not been discussed at all, implying an understanding that they played an insignificant role. This study emerges from a contrasting viewpoint, motivated by studies of universities' roles in property and urban development around the globe. It shows that even in the Chinese state-led context, universities can be considered as proactive, internally motivated institutions, accomplishing their developmental ends as actors negotiating with other stakeholders. The universities had some influence over where Shanghai's major university town was built and what the conditions of access for universities were. A particular university whose initiative played an important role in commencing the development gained access itself only after significant lobbying. From a theoretical perspective, the results suggest that research on China's urban development should pay more attention to the influence of auxiliary actors who are not seeking land-related profit.

## 1. Introduction

As a part of China's rapid urban expansion, more than 60 'university towns' were built in the country's urban agglomerations between 1999 and 2006 (Chen & Wang, 2013), followed by many campus extensions in suburbs since then. In the Chinese context, a university town – sometimes also referred to as a college town – means a district of several adjacent university campuses, surrounded by green areas, adjoining student housing as well as residential and commercial areas. Many occupy a large area (more than 1000 ha is not unusual) and host universities and colleges with a total population of more than 100,000 students (Li, Li & Wang, 2014, p. 423). The construction of university towns was a response to the radical expansion of higher education admission — university enrolment increased from 3.4 million in 1998 to 15.6 million in 2005 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2006). By the mid-1990s, most Chinese university campuses were located in the old central areas of the largest cities, where few had opportunities to expand their activities. Consequently, the idea arose of building new campuses in the rapidly developing suburbs.

There are few studies of China's university towns published in English. Li et al. (2014) discuss them as a case of land-centered

speculative urbanism, driven by local governments, and Ye, Chen, Chen and Guo (2014) as sites of socio-spatially separated populations and interests. Some other studies mention them as examples of local entrepreneurialism and speculative developments initiated by local governments (Chien, 2013; Chen, Wang, & Kundu, 2009; Xu, Yeh, & Wu, 2009; Wang & Vallance, 2015). Additional viewpoints covered by Chinese academic publications include the planning solutions and spatial layout (He, Yang, & Huang, 2005; Ren, 2003; Wang & Huang, 2007), the spatial distribution pattern (He et al., 2005; Wang, Lou, & Zhang, 2012), management and financing (Yan, 2007; Ge & Hu, 2005; Lin, 2005; Gao & Wang, 2007), the role of university towns in regional economic growth (Gu, 2012; Hua, Chen, & Zhang, 2005; Zhang, 2003; Liu, 2005) and the displacement of farmers (Shi, Li, & Feng, 2010; Wu, 2004). However, none of the studies tackle the role of universities in developing the university towns. This implies that universities were only 'puppets' in a game ruled by other actors, and did not have a significant role. We doubted this and took it as a focus of our analysis.

Most research on China's land-use development has been occupied by place-bound elements of capital. Many scholars have applied the regime theory, and have argued for the fundamental role of the state – including local government, central government agencies, and state-

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owned development corporations – in Chinese growth coalitions (e.g. Zhu, 1999; Zhang, 2002; Yang & Chang, 2007; Shen & Wu, 2012; Zhang, 2014). Studies have particularly emphasised the role of local governments, which are in charge of leasing publicly owned land, and which have fiscal and other incentives to promote growth. Nonetheless, the considerable lack of analysis of other actors' roles is surprising. An exception is studies on foreign planning consultants and property developers introducing new ideas, leading to the reform of development agendas and eventually radically reshaping the urban landscape (Yang & Chang, 2007; Shen & Wu, 2012; Wu, 2015, pp. 143–189).

Our study's theoretical significance is in its unusual focus on actors not seeking profit from land but motivated by other interests. However, their presence might be beneficial for growth coalitions. This point is not yet elaborated in the Chinese context, but other studies indicate that such novel actors have been emerging in heritage protection and culture-oriented regeneration (Gu, 2014; Yu, 2012, 2015; Verdini, 2015; Wang, 2009; Zheng & Chan, 2014). The roles of interest groups and institutions that could “play an auxiliary role in promoting and maintaining growth” (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 75) were also considered by the founding fathers of regime theory. The specificity of these ‘auxiliary players’ is that they “often need the favour of those who are at the heart of local growth machines” but can offer something in return (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 75). This group includes universities, whose “stimulus to growth is often made explicit by both the institution involved and the local civic boosters”, and is manifested especially when constructing or expanding university campuses (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 75). The studies of universities' roles in property and urban development around the globe (Perry & Wiewel, 2005a; Wiewel & Perry, 2008a) confirm the self-assertiveness, regarding universities as highly proactive, internally motivated institutions that accomplish their developmental ends as actors negotiating with other stakeholders (Perry & Wiewel, 2005b).

This is where we aim to contribute to the discussion. Our research question asks what kind of role universities had in the development of university towns. We will examine the question through a case study of Songjiang university town, constructed in 2000–2005 in a rapidly developing new town in the outskirts of Shanghai. With seven universities and colleges, and more than 75,000 students, it is one of the large new university towns in China. More specifically, we analyse what kinds of goals and interests the universities had, what influenced their decision-making, whether the universities took the initiative or lobbied for certain options, how they negotiated their localising and with whom, what they were dependent on, how different levels of government were involved in the process, and who empowered the development. The empirical research is based on interviews conducted with four key persons involved, including one former university rector, one former secretary of the party committee of a university, one high district government official, and one urban planner — all involved in settling the universities in Songjiang and later developing Songjiang university town (e.g. the former secretary of the party committee became the president of the university town committee), as well as various published materials such as reports and newspaper articles. The interview material is also often used in the account when we do not specifically cite it. When possible, information has been crosschecked from several sources. An admittedly small number of interviews could be conducted, which was due to difficulties in arranging interviews with high-ranking public officials. The empirical research was conducted in 2014–2016.

## 2. Just another local government-initiated megaproject?

Much of the literature on China's urban development in the post-Mao period focuses on the emerging system of ‘city building’, meaning measures through which an area of land is made into an urban space (Haila, 1999), and its novel spatial implications. The writings emphasise the role of the state, and especially the local state, in promoting growth; through leasing land-use rights, local officials have been

utilising the landed property to advance investments and expand the scope of capital accumulation in their territory, thus forming a land-driven growth machine (e.g. Zhang, 2014; Wu, 2015). This mode of development, termed ‘local entrepreneurialism’, has been considered to favour large speculative development projects with place promotion goals. Several studies mention university towns simply as examples of such projects (e.g. Chien, 2013).

China's urban land markets are based on a land leasehold system, in which the land remains in state ownership, but land-use rights can be leased for a limited time (e.g. 70 years for residential use and 50 years for commercial use) (Zhang, 2014). Land management is decentralised and the transfers of land-use rights are primarily decided and processed by the local states. In Shanghai municipality, this authority has been decentralised to district governments. They also possess the power in urban planning, which is essentially a planning permission system, but since the 2000s they have used non-statutory conceptual or strategic plans to initiate new development concepts, and thus have significant discretion in developing land (see, Wu, 2015, pp. 51–78). Hence, it is district governments that examine and approve detailed plans, decide the mode of land conveyance, negotiate prices for the transfer of land-use rights, and decide on the provision of infrastructure by public funding to lure investments. It has also been district governments that have carried out, if needed, the dispossession of land from previous users, with possible relocation of tenants and payment of compensation.

The interest of the local government in using the land as an asset to maximise investment and revenues has been fuelled by two factors. Firstly, local government (in Shanghai, the district government) income has been dependent on it since the 1994 tax reform (tax sharing system), which allowed local governments to keep all land-related revenues, but significantly decreased their share of other tax income, and also reduced the central government's funding of local infrastructure and social welfare (Zhang, 2002; Zhang, 2014). Secondly, local leaders' career advancement, meaning promotions into provincial or central government positions, depends on accomplishing their territory's economic development targets, as measured by gross domestic product, foreign direct investment, and fiscal revenue (Zhang, 2002; Xu & Yeh, 2005; Chien, 2013). Many have argued that the urge to generate political capital has been a major driver of starting projects, even without properly studying the demand, and while measuring the economic and other effects only short-sightedly (e.g. Zhang, 2002; Zhu, 2002; Xu & Yeh, 2005; Li et al., 2014). Moreover, the leaders are nominated and assigned by upper-level cadres, so even if a project fails, they do not face electoral accountability to the local population. Consequently, land provision has been no less than a key strategy in attracting (foreign) investment and promoting economic development (Zhang, 2002).

Nevertheless, higher-level governments hold a supervisory role, including approving any large-scale plans (Zhang, 2014, pp. 181–182; Yang & Chang, 2007). Xu et al. (2009) argue that, since the late 1990s, the transformation of China's land administration has contained processes of both deregulation to construct new bottom-up institutional capacity, and re-regulation to reassert stronger central control. Especially the cultivated land preservation policy, applied since the 1998 Land Administration Law and strengthened later, has tried to curb unrestrained sprawling. The control is also enforced through the complicated centralised administration system, in which paying attention to what the higher government leaders would like to see and showing loyalty are crucial for promotion (Zhang, 2002; Xu & Yeh, 2005). The local states thus have the authority to implement even large development projects, but because of supervision and control, the process can be somewhat experimental and involves a risk of being overruled (Chien, 2013; Li et al., 2014). In the intended up-scaling of planning, regional planning has re-emerged, not only as a result of the strengthened control of central government, but also as a tactical tool for city regions to ‘jump the scale’ for place promotion reasons, driving metropolitanisation (see, Wu, 2015, pp. 119–189). Much still depends on a

local government's ability to lobby the higher governments for favourable decisions. Nonetheless, continuous land commodification – a major source of China's economic growth – has been in the interest of all levels of government (Xu et al., 2009; He, Huang, & Wang, 2014).

To overcome control and to speed up investments, Chinese local states have adopted a development mode conceptualised as 'local entrepreneurialism', which means using large projects to cast forward "new and dynamic city images" and "initiate physical change and to create 'resources' to make cities more attractive to investors" (Xu & Yeh, 2005, p. 301). Local entrepreneurialism has particularly favoured new-town-style developments, converting rural land into urban use (Xu & Yeh, 2005; Chien, 2013; Li et al. 2014). Chien (2013) argues that China has experienced a "land development fervour" resulting in applying isomorphism, including development zones, university towns, and most recently eco cities, in inventive narratives and strategies, portraying the projects as a timely response to development challenges, whereas they are used simply to gain the stipulated upper-level acceptance to legitimise the large land conversions. The developments have been facilitated by various kinds of urban development corporations, fully sponsored and supervised by local governments (Chien, 2013, p. 185; Chen et al., 2009, p. 454; Zhang, 2014, p. 182). Xu and Yeh (2005) argue that, for this reason, the degree of 'entrepreneurialism' is limited, and the speculative developments are rather carried out with "soft budget constraints".

Many papers mention university towns as an example of a high-profile development project initiated by local states (Chen et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2009). Li et al. (2014, p. 430) acknowledge the need to rectify the universities' facility shortages, but – echoing Chien (2013) – approach university towns mainly as local states' 'speculation' to increase investments and stimulate land-profits. Thus, according to this explanation, the local governments' willingness to provide land to university campuses has been motivated by their instrumental use in raising the land value. Li et al.'s (2014) empirical analyses of Guangzhou university town describe it as an essentially state-led project in which "local governments liaise and fraternize with various agencies to ensure and sustain high-speed land-centered growth" (Li et al., 2014, p. 430), especially in areas surrounding the campuses. In another study published in English, Ye et al. (2014) provide information on socio-spatial development and first-hand experiences of the apparently fairly separated and unsuccessful Xianlin university town in Nanjing City. The study reports vague discourses by some of the local leaders, but does not include any information on how the universities perceived the development. Surprisingly, none of the studies published in Chinese (see the Introduction section) explore the role of universities in developing university towns in any detail.

International research on universities' land development practices (Perry & Wiewel, 2005a; Wiewel & Perry, 2008a) offers a quite different starting point, emphasising the university's role as an active institution and playing an important role in a city's growth and development (Perry & Wiewel, 2005b). The question has been topical during recent decades, as campuses have grown worldwide, following urbanisation, population growth, and the greater share of the population attending universities (Wiewel & Perry, 2008b, p. 305). The development and location of universities are a major point of interest, due to the expected correlation between higher education attainment and economic prosperity, both in terms of promoting business innovation and in place-based civic and social development (Fernández-Esquinas & Pinto, 2014). The U.S. literature, in particular, emphasises the strengthened role of universities as planners and developers initiating regeneration in wider areas surrounding the campuses, relating to place-promotion in competition for students and grants (Cisneros, 1995; Bunnell & Lawson, 2006; Rodin, 2007). Location- and time-wise, most universities nonetheless engage in real-estate development when they need additional space for their core activities, namely research and teaching. Nevertheless, universities' development practices integrate them with urban and community development. Within this context, the critical analysis,

especially in the U.S., has been concerned with university-steered commercial and residential gentrification pushing out the former, often poor residents (e.g. Baldwin, 2015). Everywhere in the world, universities' funding concerns have favoured a shift towards different kinds of mixed uses (Perry & Wiewel, 2005b, p. 8), which have blurred the line between non-commercial and commercial development. Thus the question has not been whether universities act as developers, but rather as what kind of developer they act (Pendas & Dierwechter, 2012).

When universities act, they are considered "highly proactive, internally motivated institutions that have, over time, joined with a broad range of partners and intermediaries and used a full and sophisticated array of financial planning and development practices to accomplish their developmental ends" (Perry & Wiewel, 2005b, pp. 19–20). They depend on negotiations, because universities usually need to mobilise political support and public funds for university real-estate development, which makes it a political process (Perry & Wiewel, 2005b, p. 139). However, in most cases, universities act "relatively autonomously and independently, albeit within a range of often complex institutional and legal arrangements" (Wiewel & Perry, 2008b, p. 309). Exploiting broader spatial development goals is part of the game; based on several international case studies, Wiewel and Perry (2008b, p. 307) conclude that "site selection primarily reflects the priorities of university leadership, but that the leadership often positions these priorities in the context of local and national need". Cost constraints also play a role: worldwide, new suburban locations have prevailed for their affordability, but also because "they can be exploited in regional economic and industrial development plans" (Wiewel & Perry, 2008b, pp. 304–305).

### 3. Development of Songjiang university town

Songjiang is a suburban district of Shanghai, located about 45 km southwest of the city centre (Fig. 1). It is an older settlement (est. 751 CE) than the core city, and is hence known as "the cultural root" of Shanghai. Its position as one of the major nodes in agglomeration was recognised already in Shanghai's 1958 master plan, where it was named as an industrial satellite city. Nonetheless, major urbanisation and industrialisation began only after the socialist era. The former Shanghai county was administratively transformed into the city's urban district in 1998, following Shanghai's intention to grow as a multi-nucleated urban region. The Shanghai master plan of 1999–2020 (1999) proposed consolidating suburban satellite towns into larger new towns. The plan was specified in 2001 with the scheme 'one city, nine towns' — one city referring to the service-oriented central city, and nine towns, including Songjiang, to the diversified suburban 'key towns' with administrative centres (Den Hartog, 2013, p. 20).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in 2001, Shanghai municipality financially supported Songjiang district government in commissioning a planning scheme for new town development (Chen, 2003). The scheme, drawn up by a British planning consultancy, included three flagship projects: the town centre, the transport hub, and an English-style residential area (Wu, 2015, p. 150). The university town, planned on the north side of the town centre, was not part of the scheme, but was initiated in another process analysed in this section. In the analysis, we concentrate on what kind of role universities and other actors had, first in initiating (1998–1999) and then in developing (1999–2005) the university town. The analysis is separated between those two stages, in which the roles of actors were emphasised differently.

<sup>1</sup> The "one city, nine towns" scheme is best known for its place-promotion idea of including in each town a residential area following architectonic and design features of a certain foreign country, in order to attract new global companies (see Chen et al., 2009; She and Wu, 2012). For instance, Songjiang has a residential area named Thames Town, providing a Tudor-style city district (100 ha) with a church, a minor commercial centre, town houses, and single-family houses, all constructed in 2002–2006.

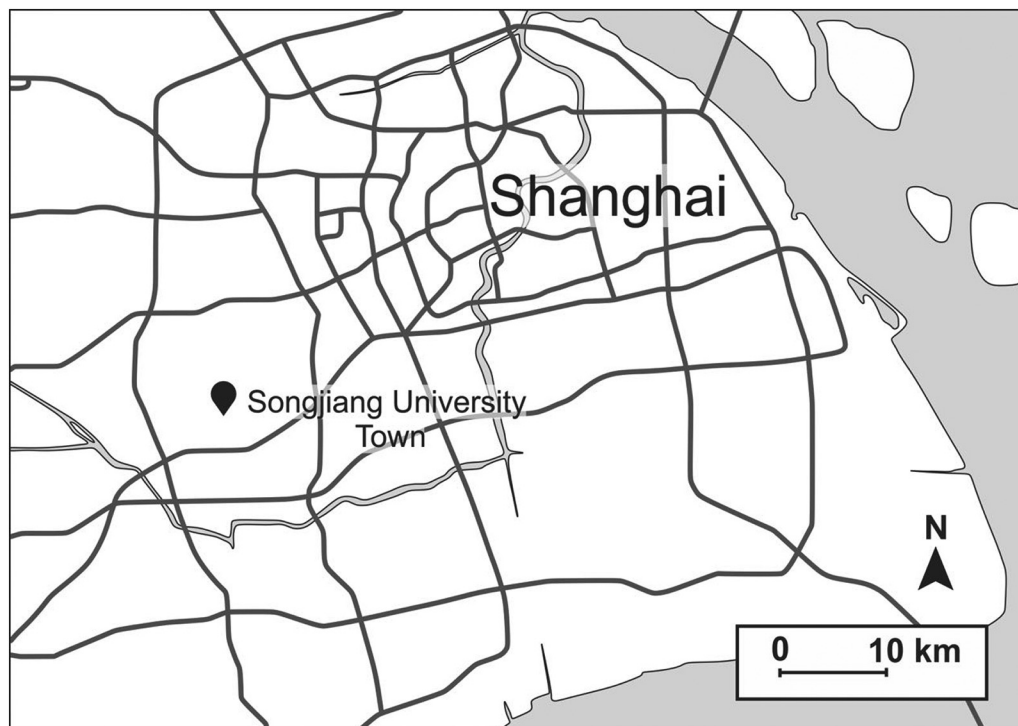


Fig. 1. Location of Songjiang university town in Shanghai metropolitan area.

#### 4. Initiated by universities and the district

Higher education reform and the consequent increase in student enrolment obliged university leaders to consider their strategy. For many, it was a promising development opportunity, whereas for some, especially smaller institutions, it was necessary to act if they were to escape from being merged into a larger university. A common challenge was where and how to obtain space to fulfil their development targets. All the universities that later relocated to Songjiang university town had their former campuses in the Shanghai downtown area. The emergent land market had already raised the prices of central plots, making it too expensive for universities to expand in the vicinity. Hence, since the mid-1990s, the idea of expansion through relocation to suburbs had gained interest, and the universities were actively searching for new locations with good access to downtown and pleasant environmental conditions. For instance, in our interview, the former secretary of the party committee of Shanghai University of International Business and Economics said that they had been actively looking since 1996, visiting several districts, including many that would have gladly welcomed them. The lack of financial resources was a common problem, but the universities' increased autonomy stimulated inventive thinking on how to fund relocation. For instance, the same interviewee told us that their university had followed with interest a case in Qingdao, where a real-estate developer had aimed to exchange the lands a university occupied in downtown for a newly developed larger premises in the suburbs, and had negotiated the manoeuvre with Qingdao municipal government.

The leaders of Donghua University were the first to contact the Songjiang district party committee's leadership in 1998 to explore the possibility to build a campus in Songjiang. They were followed by many others, including East China University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai Lixin College of Commerce, Shanghai University, and Fudan University — all on the prowl for a new campus site. From the universities' perspective, the key question was which district could offer the best conditions, including location, access, the size of the allocated land, and last but not least, how to fund it. The Songjiang district government, in turn, was concerned whether the universities would relocate completely or only partly, to maximise the impact on

Songjiang's attractiveness for further investments. With the universities entering into negotiations, the focus was on the cost of the land. The budget was a major issue, as the schools did not consider it realistic to apply for full funding solely from their superior authority, either the Ministry of Education or the Shanghai municipal educational committee, depending on the university.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they considered alternative ways to raise funds to demonstrate initiative — an effort that could be recognised and possibly topped up. Considering the options, the universities ended up applying for Songjiang district government to bear all land-related costs (Jin, 2013).

Donghua University, a state university offering recognised majors in engineering, made the first concrete proposal, followed by East China University of Political Science and Law, and later Shanghai Lixin College of Commerce, according to the interviewed Songjiang district government official. Although the district was especially interested in locating the well-recognised state university, the costliness raised concerns.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there was no precedent to help the cost-benefit evaluation, since this was, at the time, a pioneering cooperation between a district and a university. After negotiations, the district leaders decided to seize the opportunity, and the contract was signed on June 1999 (Songjiang Yearbook 1999, 2000). The district government agreed to provide 2000 mu (133.3 ha) of land with all infrastructure (*qitongyiping*), at zero cost, for Donghua University's new campus, which equalled more than RMB 200 million in investment. The land preparation, resettlement of land-losing farmers, and all other related costs were the district's responsibility. In turn, Donghua University agreed to relocate all its undergraduate programmes, meaning most of its staff and students, to Songjiang. Only the university's small graduate school was to remain at its old downtown address (Jin, 2013). However, to take effect, the cooperation agreement required authorisation from the

<sup>2</sup> In China, the higher educational institutions are governed either by the central state or by the province — the municipality of Shanghai having the latter status in the governing hierarchy. The province undertakes the governing of state universities within their territory.

<sup>3</sup> The cost for providing land, including relocation compensation paid to farmers, as well as construction costs for the infrastructure, was about 100,000 yuan per 1 mu, which was plenty of money in 1999 (Songjiang local history, 2013, 85).

Shanghai municipal government. Bringing the idea and agreement to their attention started the second stage of the development.

### 5. Developed under coordination of municipal government

The concept of a university town had emerged in China during the late 1990s. The Shanghai municipal education committee had considered the option and consulted universities' rectors on the issue for the first time in 1996. In addition, a newspaper article entitled 'Shanghai should build university town' (Pi, 1996) was published to examine the reactions and feedback. Initially the idea was not favoured, due to worries that a combination of distant location and higher tuition fees – considered to be an inevitable consequence of the campus construction costs – would negatively affect the number of admissions. However, by 1999, the idea of building a university town had gained more interest in Shanghai. Moreover, China's first new university town was also built 1999 in Hebei province, near Beijing (Chen, 2010).

Nonetheless, the strategic ideas on how to fund the construction of a university town and still keep it attractive were at play when the Shanghai municipal government reviewed the agreement between Donghua University and Songjiang district, and decided not to grant the authorisation. Most importantly, the engineering majors were not considered lucrative enough to draw students to the outskirts, especially with higher tuition fees. Moreover, Donghua University was not considered to have outstanding spatial problems, given their occupancy of a fairly large (27 ha) campus in Shanghai downtown. The relocation would also have been unusually costly, requiring the construction of new laboratories. Altogether, the municipal government considered the relocation of this particular university to be a false move.

The municipal government was, nevertheless, impressed by the district's initiative in negotiating with the universities. Recognising the efforts, it instead introduced the idea and offered the Songjiang district the possibility to build the city's first university town, but under the municipal government's coordination, meaning that the educational committee would choose the relocating universities. The district leaders agreed, acknowledging the gain in growth and importance, and eventually the increasing demand for commercially developable land. Another important precondition was that Gong Xueping, one of the main leaders of the Shanghai municipal government, convinced Deputy Prime Minister Li Lanqing of the advantages of a multi-disciplinary university town as an alternative to merging some small universities.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the universities to be involved were obliged to develop shared resources and increase inter-disciplinary studies, including enabling students to take minors at other universities and obtain double-degrees, which was then a rather unusual practice in China. Hence, the approval of the central government was also obtained to commence development. Gong Xueping, who served as the Deputy Mayor of Shanghai (1993–1997), the Deputy Secretary of the municipal party committee of Shanghai (1997–2002), and the Director of the Shanghai municipal people's congress (NPC) (2003–2008), is generally considered "the father of Songjiang university town" due to his leadership in the issue.

The Songjiang university town was developed in partnership between the municipal government, the district government, and the universities, coordinated by the municipal government. Following the principles agreed earlier between the district and Donghua University, Songjiang district agreed to provide 4000 mu (267 ha) of land with infrastructure, free of charge, to the university town. The land development was carried out by a state-owned company called Songjiang University Town Development Corporation, controlled and funded mainly by the Songjiang district government, as confirmed by the Songjiang planner in the interview. The land-use rights of the whole area were first transferred to the municipal education committee, which

further transferred them to each university regarding their campus, but kept for itself the land-use rights for shared university facilities, as well as for a small-scale commercial street in the area.<sup>5</sup> The education committee chose to offer the sites to Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, and Shanghai Lixin College of Commerce, which all accepted what was considered to be a very good offer. The universities were obliged to move most study programmes to Songjiang, as well as to fund and manage the construction of the campuses themselves. Of these three universities, only Shanghai Lixin College of Commerce had initially negotiated relocation with Songjiang district. Strictly, their influence on Songjiang university town's development was, however, restricted to bargaining with the municipal government on the university's site and area, planning their own campus, and developing the shared facilities together with the other universities. The construction began in 2000.

Shanghai's leadership in selecting the universities was based on strategic thinking concerning which universities offered enough popular majors with good employment prospects to persuade students to the new university town, even with higher tuition fees, following Gong Xueping's suggestion to support universities in covering construction costs by commodification of education. Consequently, the yearly tuition fees charged were, on average, RMB 10,000 in Songjiang, compared to RMB 5000 in Shanghai downtown. Another pragmatic problem also persisted, since commercial banks were not willing to assign long enough bank loans for universities. This matter was solved by Gong Xueping, by introducing the Shanghai Education Development Corporation – a state-owned company responsible for the infrastructure construction of educational institutions in Shanghai, and an administrative subordinate of the municipal education committee – to act as an intermediary in borrowing the funds from the banks and issuing the loans to the universities.<sup>6</sup> The idea of raising the tuition fees was partly based on expectations of their general rise in the following years, which however proved to be wrong. Instead, after inspecting many complaints on over-charging in Songjiang, the Ministry of Education considered the high fees unlawful in 2004. Luckily for the universities, the same year, a new policy defined campus buildings as social public welfare, for which construction costs should be covered by the state. Consequently, the universities were exempted from their obligations regarding the as-yet unpaid loans.

Although excluded from the initial selection, Donghua University "didn't lose heart", as expressed by its former rector in our interview, in their aim to relocate to Songjiang. The university had been offered land in Nanhui district, about 70 km south of Shanghai. However, the university preferred Songjiang due to the shorter distance, better access, and the fact that there were already other universities there. Connections with central Shanghai were to improve considerably with the construction of new metro line 9, agreed in August 2001 (and completed in 2007). Consequently, the university continued to plead for political support for their original initiative. It was supported by the Songjiang district government, which was not entirely satisfied with receiving only universities with arts majors, and was keen on having engineering schools, perceived as important for the district's industrial

<sup>5</sup> The shared facilities are managed by Songjiang university town management committee, a subordinate to Shanghai municipal education committee. The management of the commercial street was transferred to Songjiang district government in 2003.

<sup>6</sup> The universities themselves also used some other means to raise funds or save investment costs. Shanghai International Studies University initially leased its new campus building, but following a great number of complaints on inadequate management and maintenance, the university bought it in 2004. Donghua University sold some of its old central campus land-use rights to the local Changning district government, which later leased the land to developers. The development of dormitory buildings (735,000 m<sup>2</sup> altogether) was also originally outsourced to a real-estate developer, with lease contracts with schools allocating the flats for students. However, after plenty of complaints on the company's disinterest in developing the students' living conditions and on insufficient maintenance, the universities bought the dormitories.

<sup>4</sup> In China, many universities offer majors only in certain academic fields, and thus resemble faculties in Western universities.

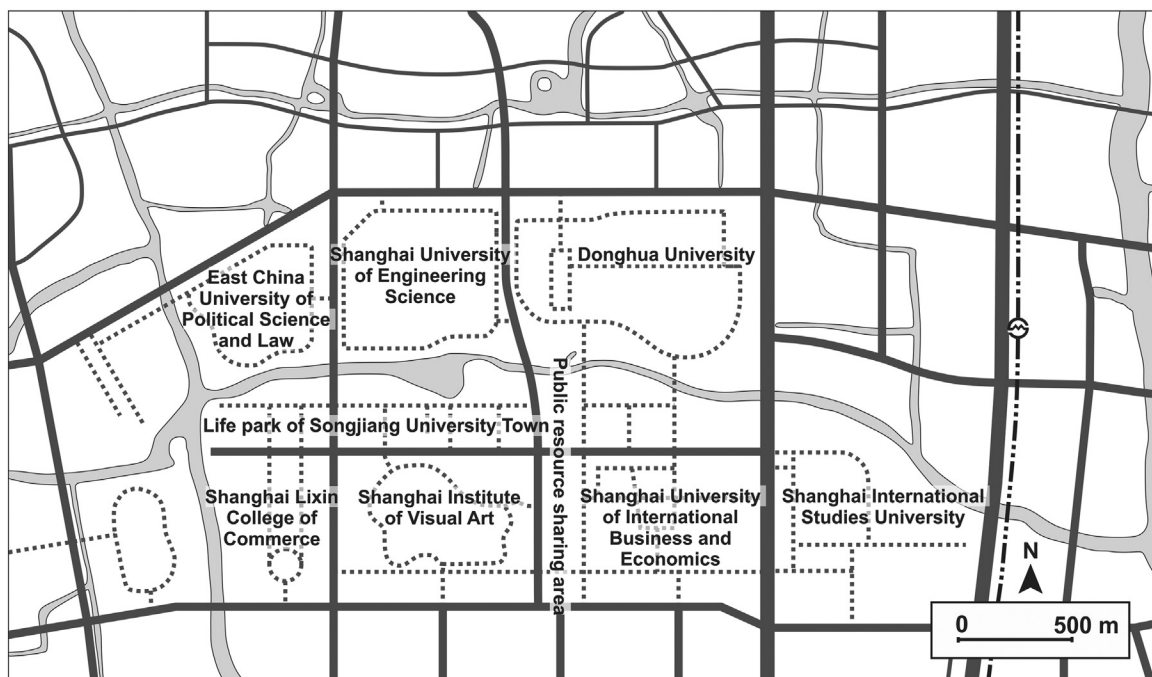


Fig. 2. Songjiang university town comprises seven universities.

development. As a state university, governed by the Ministry of Education, Donghua University even appealed to the Minister of Education Chen Zhili herself, who had made a career in Shanghai municipal government before her promotion. In April 2001, Minister Chen Zhili visited Songjiang and proposed that the university town could expand with three additional universities to its northern side (Songjiang Local History 2013, p. 93), which remained undeveloped, implying Donghua should be one of them. With such central government support, the municipal government agreed. Hence, in the second stage, agreed between the Songjiang district government and the Shanghai municipal education committee in February 2002, the district provided another 4000 mu (267 ha) of land on the same terms as in the first round (Jin, 2013). The additional areas were allocated to Donghua University, East China University of Political Science and Law (which had also been in contact with Songjiang district already in 1999), and Shanghai University of Engineering Science, thus satisfying the district's interest in diversity of disciplines. Later, a new university, called Shanghai Institute of Visual Art, was also established in the area. Hence, the final form of Songjiang university town involves seven universities (Fig. 2), with 75,000 students in total.

## 6. Conclusions and discussion

The large, new university towns and campuses built in China's urban agglomerations have so far received scarce international academic attention. Previous studies have considered them primarily as one type of speculative new town development initiated by local governments (Chien, 2013; Li et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2009; Wu, 2015). While this rent gap logic, meaning using large campus developments to raise interest and thus land prices, speeding land-conversions, and drawing investments into a broader area around campuses, is generally easy to agree on, it nevertheless simplifies the story, not taking into account other actors and their interests. Most interestingly, the role of *universities* in developing the university towns has not been discussed before at all, which implies an understanding of an insignificant role. This is in stark contrast with studies of universities' roles in property and urban development around the globe (Perry & Wiewel, 2005a; Wiewel & Perry, 2008a; Fernández-Esquinas & Pinto, 2014), acknowledging universities' proactive and even recently strengthened role

as partners in development activities. This paper has examined the issue – what kind of role universities had in developing China's university towns – in the country's state-led urban development context (Zhang, 2002; Xu & Yeh, 2005; Xu et al., 2009; Wu, 2015), using Songjiang university town in Shanghai metropolitan area as a case study.

We have shown that the process leading to the development of Songjiang university town was divided into two stages, the initiation and the actual development, different in character and with different leading actors.

The initiation stage comprised two separate processes, a pragmatic and a conceptual one. The pragmatic process was driven by universities searching for potential locations to expand their premises, weighing the pros and cons of different locations, and entering into negotiations with the district governments who were in charge of land allocation. In Songjiang, located in Shanghai's outskirts, Donghua University was the first to sign a contract, in which the district government agreed to provide the land with urban infrastructure for the new campus, free of charge. Although the district's leaders were motivated by the idea of the significance of the campuses in supporting growth, apparently the initial decision was not easy to make, given the initiative's pioneering character. Nonetheless, the topic was not yet a university town, but the relocation of single campuses. Meanwhile, the conceptual process, shaping the idea of a university town, took place in government circles, including the Shanghai municipal government, responsible for developing higher educational institutions and aware of their spatial defects.

Developing Songjiang university town was essentially a partnership between the Shanghai municipal government, which managed the process, Songjiang district government, which provided the land with infrastructure, and the universities invited to develop the campuses there. After rejecting permission for Donghua University to relocate, Shanghai municipal government proposed to Songjiang district government that they could develop a university town, under similar land provision conditions to the rejected case, but with the municipal education committee choosing the universities. The decision was based on strategic thinking, in which universities were attractive enough for students to accept the school's relocation to a slightly remote location, as well as higher tuition fees introduced to support funding of the campus buildings. The leadership also involved bureaucratic innovations to secure bank loans, for instance. However, initial central

government approval was needed, too, to commence university town development, instead of merging some small universities that were to relocate. In fact, all the decisions made by municipal and central government were formally about educational policy, but they also had a major influence on spatial development.

In developing Songjiang university town, the interests allied. The universities needed favourable land deals, the district was eager to accommodate them to improve its attractiveness, and the municipality could facilitate the development of higher education institutions. Moreover, developing the university town in Songjiang also supported Shanghai's metropolitan growth strategy. Among the suburban 'towns' intended to become Shanghai's additional growth poles, Songjiang in fact developed most rapidly during the first decade of the 2000s (He, 2012), with the university town playing a part in this success. Accordingly, the land speculation around the campus can also be judged as successful in terms of property price development. In cities where university towns played a role in implementing reasonable metropolitan growth plans, another good example being Guangzhou (Wu, 2015, pp. 103–106), the developments were more likely to be successful. However, not all university towns in China followed this pattern, with failing concepts and location choices. For instance, the first university town infamously later turned into a "ghost town" (Chen, 2010).

Our research has shown that in the Chinese state-led context, universities can also be considered as proactive, internally motivated institutions, which have some power and influence in accomplishing their developmental ends as actors negotiating with other stakeholders. Their influence was more prevalent in the initiation stage, when the conditions and the potential location remained as yet unspecified. Through taking the initiative, universities had influence over these matters. Without the initial agreement between the district government and Donghua University, and additional negotiations between the district and other universities, Songjiang university town may never have been constructed. In our case, the universities' influence was presumably strengthened by the fact that the university town was a new concept, still with no development model to follow. The actual development stage, on the other hand, was strictly government led, and the universities' role was limited to negotiating and developing their own campuses. Nonetheless, with an example of one university, we could show how, with significant lobbying and mobilisation of especially central government support, that university could also gradually gain the required acceptance from the municipal government, thus securing its intended plot.

From a theoretical perspective, the results suggest that research on urban development in China should pay more attention to the influence of auxiliary actors, especially in initiating new development concepts and models, and consequently demanding their recognition and new governing innovations. In addition to the universities discussed in this paper, other research has identified similar actors emerging, introducing new ideas, and having an influence on, for example, heritage protection and culture-oriented regeneration (Gu, 2014; Yu, 2012, 2015; Verdini, 2015; Wang, 2009; Zheng & Chan, 2014). Nonetheless, in China, the actual development processes tend to be 'state led', or at least the development principles require acceptance by higher-level government leaders. Even so, auxiliary actors, who are not seeking a land-related profit themselves, can have an important role in gradual modifications of those principles and eventually policy.

Although the 'university town' lost support as a development model in China after 2006, numerous single Chinese universities have continued to develop fairly similar large campus extensions in the suburbs, with support from local governments leaning on their drawing power for further investment. As the international research points out, to make the most of the development, a broad range of stakeholders should be involved, including not only the local authorities and the universities, but also old and new residential and business communities in the surrounding areas.

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