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Mobilising the Entrepreneurial Self to Manage the Crisis: Community Group-Buying during the Shanghai Lockdown

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Abstract: The COVID pandemic disrupted traditional entrepreneurial governance arrangements. When the state's action could not effectively govern society, the "entrepreneurial self" began to emerge and manage the crisis. Using Shanghai as a case study, this research examines the dynamics of "community group-buying" during its city-wide lockdown in 2022. It shows how a small group of residents, known as group-buying entrepreneurs (*tuanzhang*), mobilise community members and organise collective food purchases to address the resource shortage during the lockdown. We find that group-buying is not merely a rediscovery of the community in times of crisis. Despite its spontaneous formation, we demonstrate that group-buying is ultimately captured, endorsed, and instrumentalised by the local state for crisis management. Through this, we present a new manifestation of the "entrepreneurial self" and its paradoxical functions—exercising community self-organisation while simultaneously extending state power in territorial forms. We also highlight the state's central role in China's entrepreneurial governance, even in the crisis mode when its capacities were under pressure.

摘要： 新冠疫情挑战了城市治理的传统方式。除国家行动外，危机下的社会治理领域出现了"个体企业家"。本文以上海为案例，探究了2022年全域静态管理期间社区团购的兴衰。研究主要关注一群被称为"团长"的居民如何动员社区并组织集体采购，以应对危机期间的物资短缺问题。我们发现，社区团购不仅仅是对社区共同体的重新发现，也对基层治理具有重要作用，即基层国家通过收编、背书等方式将社区团购这一自发行为吸纳成为治理工具，以应对危机。通过这一视角，我们展现了"个体企业家"新的表现形式与其悖论性的角色:作为有主观能动性的主体，他们出现在国家传统治理领域之外，但他们的自组织又减轻了国家危机管理的压力，最终推动了其战略目标的实现。因此我们强调，虽然危机模式挑战了城市治理，但国家仍在城市治理中具有核心作用。

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Introduction

The COVID pandemic has had an exceptional impact on urban governance. Emerging research has examined governance solutions to the pandemic, many of which focus on the role of civil society (e.g. Leap et al. 2022; Mould et al. 2022; Tuitjer et al. 2023). This academic exploration is especially relevant in the context of urban China, where, before the pandemic, traditions of civil society and community self-organisation were relatively weak. Although recent research suggests that active citizens and community organisations are gaining new political spaces, it is widely believed that they are "certainly not in control of their futures" (Logan 2018:1376) but remain under state control and supervision (Teets 2013).

However, emerging studies reveal the crucial roles played by communities in China's pandemic responses, similar to observations in the Global North. This is demonstrated by rising levels of social capital and the active involvement of grassroots organisations and community volunteers in pandemic responses (Han and Zhai 2024; Terbeck et al. 2023). The contribution of community and societal actors is mostly discussed in relation to the state, particularly its grassroots agencies (Habich-Sobiegalla and Plümmer 2023; Mittelstaedt 2022). Some studies inspect how the state constructed a process of "co-production" with community workers (Z. Liu et al. 2022; Zhao and Wu 2020). Others investigate how social actors were mobilised and co-opted by the state to fulfil its goal of pandemic mitigation (Cheng et al. 2020; Miao et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, both the "co-production" and the "co-option" arguments risk romanticising the state's role in crisis management. They tend to overestimate the governance capacities of the local state, the limitations of which have been increasingly noticed by recent studies (A. J. He et al. 2020; Song et al. 2020). They also tend to downplay the agency of social actors—who might act entrepreneurially during the crisis (W. Xu et al. 2022). Moreover, the broader context deserves more attention, which requires expanding the analysis beyond crisis management into the "conjunctural history" reflecting longer-term trends in China's socioeconomic transitions (Peck 2024). The Chinese state and its governance models exhibit many entrepreneurial characteristics, particularly in housing marketisation, service privatisation and community development (Lu et al. 2019; Y. Wang and Clarke 2021). The emergence of community groups and their engagement in neighbourhood governance during the pandemic should be examined in this context.

This research focuses on one of China's most prominent neighbourhood pandemic responses organised spontaneously by citizens—community group-buying. Our analysis draws on close observation of community group-buying activities during the lockdown in Shanghai in 2022, one of the most comprehensive public health responses during the COVID pandemic. From late March to early June

2022, 24 million residents in Shanghai underwent an order to stay at home. This led to the closure of all non-essential shops and workplaces, lockdown of all residential communities and suspension of citywide logistic systems. The lack of a working circulation and distribution system of everyday necessities triggered an enormous food shortage. Against this backdrop, a group of residents emerged as community "group-buying entrepreneurs" (*tuanzhang*), addressing the food crisis through community-based collective purchases.

In this paper, we unpack the entrepreneurial nature of this bottom-up community response under complex relationships with the local state during the pandemic crisis. We draw on data from 22 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders directly involved in community group-buying. This includes 18 interviews conducted online between April 2022 and January 2023, to observe the emergence and evolution of group-buying during and immediately after the city-wide lockdown. Two of the authors lived through the Shanghai lockdown and were able to connect to respondents "on the inside". Acknowledging the limitations of online interviews and the opportunistic nature of some observations, we conducted four follow-up in-person interviews in May 2024 to observe the ongoing impact of group-buying on neighbourhood governance. The interviews covered different types of communities, considering housing types, geographical locations, and residential profiles.[1] The interviews lasted over 40 minutes on average, discussing the origins, development, and challenges of group-buying and the changing state–entrepreneur relationship.

Through analysing the interviews and relevant policy documents, we detail the development and impact of community group-buying as self-organised entrepreneurial practices. We critically engage with entrepreneurial governance literature, particularly the concept of the "entrepreneurial self", and discuss the manifestation of entrepreneurial governance at the neighbourhood level and the state–society relations it reflects. While traditional studies of entrepreneurial governance often focus on the normative interdependence between the state and the "entrepreneurial self" as static structures, we use the lockdown as an archetypal case to highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of the state's relationship with entrepreneurs as active agencies in practice. We argue that the rise of community group-buying demonstrates agencies of social actors and their productive potential, which have been underestimated by existing research on entrepreneurial governance, particularly in China. We further contend that these initiatives are not necessarily associated with processes of individualisation and alienation. Rather, they facilitate the re-territorialisation of social networks and the development of bottom-up mobilisation, which are ultimately captured, endorsed, and instrumentalised by the local state for its strategic goals, including but not limited to crisis management.

This paper contributes to radical geographical thinking by revealing a paradox within entrepreneurial governance, particularly in relation to the "entrepreneurial self". On the one hand, we emphasise the relative autonomy of group-buying entrepreneurs as the "entrepreneurial self" to navigate the spatial constraints and improve their lives during the lockdown. On the other hand, we show their paradoxical role in extending state power in territorial forms. Although these

entrepreneurs emerged outside the traditional realm of the state, their successful self-organisation in economic and social life effectively shifted the burden of crisis management from the state onto social actors, ultimately advancing state's strategic goals of pandemic mitigation. This dialectical relationship highlights the importance to contextualise the analysis of the "entrepreneurial self" and its agency in relation to existing power relations and political institutions.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the critical understanding of urban governance in China by challenging the romanticised view of the state's absolute control. Our analysis of community group-buying during the pandemic unravels how the rise of the "entrepreneurial self"—initially revealing the local state's limitations in crisis management—eventually expanded the state's governing capacity by mobilising responsible citizens and fostering neighbourhood social capital. Through this, we show how the state embraces the "entrepreneurial self" as a contingent strategy for crisis management. On the one hand, it incorporates community self-organised networks into its governance apparatus to enhance its own capacity; on the other hand, it controls potentially contentious development of buying groups to ensure these activities align with the state.

In the rest of the paper, we first review the literature on the role of the "entrepreneurial self" in urban governance and its evolvement in China. Using the case of group-buying in Shanghai, we then analyse changing relationships between the group-buying entrepreneurs, fellow members of the community, and grassroots state agencies, revealing how the "entrepreneurial self" contributed to an actionable community and a *de facto* shunting of crisis-management by the state to social actors. Discussions and concluding remarks are presented in the final section.

Literature Review

The Entrepreneurial Turn in Urban Governance: From the State to Individuals

The entrepreneurial turn in urban governance has been a long-debated topic in urban and regional research. While early scholars have paid much attention to the "roll-back" of the welfare state, later observations show that entrepreneurial governance arrangements have been recalibrated during consequential crises. Austerity measures and state-imposed emergency management reinvented the role of the market-state, with a more statist model of development, an expansion of state–capital hybrids and a further retrenchment of social-state functions (Alami et al. 2021; Peck 2017).

The scaling-back of the social-state is accompanied by a greater contractualisation of society and a wider spread of entrepreneurial subjectivities that normalise the entrepreneurial logic in everyday life. The "entrepreneurial self", or "enterprising self", has been promoted to restructure society and discipline citizens through cultivating self-responsible individuals who act as entrepreneurs of their own lives with capacities "to make autonomous decisions, to take initiative and risk, and otherwise to act on his or her own behalf to achieve optimal outcomes" (Ong and Zhang 2008:3). The key to activating and operating the "entrepreneurial

self" are interweaving processes of atomisation (of society) and responsibilisation (of individuals) (Rose 1998).

Firstly, existing research widely acknowledges that the "entrepreneurial self" is underpinned by an individualising logic (e.g. McNay 2009; Rose 1998). The formation of the "entrepreneurial self" relies on remodelling one's relation to the "self" around notions of economic interests and aspirations for personal improvement. One's efforts to organise everyday life and pursue social well-being have transformed into self-organised "enterprising" activities, aiming to maximise individual power by promoting projects based on personal calculations of costs and benefits. Many scholars have scrutinised such processes and pointed out the destructive effects an economised form of "the self" brings to its surroundings, such as atomising interpersonal relationships, fragmenting collective social bonds, weakening shared values, eroding mutual care, and deepening socio-economic inequalities (e.g. Hilbrandt 2017; Macleod 2002).

Secondly, the "entrepreneurial self" is also viewed as a "responsible subject" who "seeks to equip the self with a set of tools for the management of its affairs such that it can take control of its undertakings, define its goals, and plan to achieve its needs through its own powers" (Rose 1998:159). The "responsibilisation" of the self is often accompanied by a process that recasts structural contradictions as manageable problems with technical solutions, shifting the primary responsibility for resolving these issues from the state to the individual. This process is seen as instilling the "self" "a seemingly paradoxical 'compulsion to responsibility'" (McNay 2009:65) where individuals are compelled to assume responsibility and take charge of situations they do not necessarily cause. The "entrepreneurial self" is thus interpreted by critical theorists as a governing technology through which the state fulfils its social responsibilities by shaping individuals into responsible self-entrepreneurs and embedding it in entrepreneurial governance arrangements. In other words, the "entrepreneurial self" enables the state to exert discipline "from a distance" (Ong and Zhang 2008).

The relationship between the "self" and the state is further consolidated by their mutual dependence on the "competitive logic of market" (Madra and Adaman 2014), which intensifies the process of depoliticisation. In this process, the frontier of the institutional architecture of the political field is rolled back (Jessop 2014), leading to a transformation of social identities. The "social" are increasingly recast as entrepreneurial subjectivities that prioritise economic incentives rather than ethical consideration or political participation. Issues traditionally considered political are now often presented as technical or managerial problems, moving away from being the focus of open democratic debates. This shift can limit the scope of democratic decision-making, close-off genuine political space between the state and the people, and weaken the civic capacities of social organisations to challenge established socio-political orders (Macleod 2011; Swyngedouw 2009).

While acknowledging the extensive debates and discussions surrounding the "entrepreneurial self", we should not simply critique this term by, for example, claiming that the "entrepreneurial self" is a natural extension of the capitalist mode of production. These critiques often focus on the nominal emphasis of the

"entrepreneurial self" on self-interest and individualisation. However, economists have highlighted the performativity of the "entrepreneurial self", arguing that it does not directly model social reality but instead offers a blueprint to engineer it (Madra and Adaman 2014). In practice, optimal outcomes are often unattainable, and rational actions frequently fail due to issues such as opportunism or asymmetric information, which render the "entrepreneurial self" less effective.

Therefore, it is important to examine how the ideal of the "entrepreneurial self" manifested in everyday life and within specific territorial socio-political contexts. Here, a geographical perspective, largely missing from existing discussions about the "entrepreneurial self", will be helpful to demonstrate how this relatively loosely defined concept materialises into actually existing enterprising practices. These practices reflect the complex and ambivalent relations between human subjects and political power, which are scale, distance, and context sensitive. As we will show later, a geographical perspective contributes to the normative claims surrounding the "entrepreneurial self" by highlighting the spatiality of everyday life. Here, individual actors are not simply rational economic agents but are embedded in spatiotemporal networks which can both facilitate and constrain the formation of self-entrepreneurialism. This dynamic is particularly evident during the lockdown, which we use as an archetypical case (Brenner 2003) to illustrate how individuals navigate spatial constraints and seek mastery over challenging conditions within such constraints. Emerging from such negotiations are potentials to rethink existing arrangements of entrepreneurial governance. This is especially the case at the neighbourhood scale, where proximate relations are gaining new importance as the "strategic entry-point for counter-hegemonic struggle" (Roth et al. 2023:2009). Another way to enrich the understanding of the "entrepreneurial self" through a geographical perspective is by focusing on the context of subject formation and power dynamics, to which we now turn.

The Entangled Relationship between the State and Individuals in China's Entrepreneurial Governance

The market-oriented governance restructuring in China underlines not only entrepreneurial characteristics (G. C. S. Lin and Zhang 2015; Zhou et al. 2019) but also the role of the state in shaping state–market–society relationships (Wu and Zhang 2022). The state has not retreated but refashioned itself into an entrepreneurial agency, known as "state entrepreneurialism" (Wu 2023), actively engaging with the market. In other words, market actors are instrumentalised by the state as tools to realise its strategic goals, which include, but are not limited to, economic growth and development. Although state entrepreneurialism provides a powerful theoretical scaffolding to understand China's entrepreneurial turn in urban governance, its current interpretations are mostly preoccupied with "concrete" state or market actors in urban development (Shen et al. 2020). Communities, a crucial space where socio-political relationships are nurtured, experienced and reproduced, are overlooked in the current debates over China's state entrepreneurialism. The entanglement between the "entrepreneurial self" and entrepreneurial state and their unsettled interface requires further scrutinisation.

The entrepreneurialisation of society at the grassroots level is a nonlinear process. Communities, serving as the bottom end through which the state channelled its command, used to experience a paternalistic style of governance in the socialist era. Residents' everyday lives, especially those in *danwei*, were closely supervised by respective state-owned enterprises and streamlined towards the state's goal of industrialisation (Lü and Perry 2015). During this time, the spirit of "entrepreneurial self" was trivial and insignificant. For instance, in the event of a public health crisis, the mass society was organised into state-sponsored and campaign-styled activities that prioritised collective patriotism over individual interests, emphasising the immunisation of body not as a personal benefit but as an expression of patriotic ideals (Perry 2021). The "entrepreneurial self" did not become conspicuous in the state until China transitioned from a socialist economy to a market-oriented economy in the late 1970s (Y. Liu and Yau 2020). However, such a transition does not mean these self-entrepreneurs become responsible subjects in their communities. Scales and degrees of entrepreneurialisation remain ultimately dependent on the state's governance rather than market mechanisms.

Essentially, the "entrepreneurial self" was planned and practised by the state to extend its governance of economy. For instance, some early self-entrepreneurs, mostly of rural labour and migrants, emerged outside the centrally planned economic system, with their entrepreneurial practices derived from the marketisation of rural production and the privatisation of the regional economy. The collective power of existing rural communities was enhanced socially and economically by these entrepreneurial practices, as demonstrated in the case of village-owned enterprises (Fei et al. 1992). This, however, did not overrule the fact that self-entrepreneurs were functioning under the state's entrepreneurial governance. Illustrated by the policy of "letting the peasants leave the land without leaving their villages" (*litu bu lixiang*), the "entrepreneurial self" was a political (re)settlement of the population in rural areas rather than a liberation of social mobility. Whereas in urban areas, migrated self-entrepreneurs, mainly from nonlocal rural areas, became a new force of the "entrepreneurial self" to fill the "gap" in social reproduction. As being excluded by the urban *hukou* welfare system and denied from full urban citizenship (Solinger 1999), these self-entrepreneurs emphasised developing local social networks and conducting managerial work just like the city government for their communities (Ma and Xiang 1998). Yet, the local government considered migrants' communities as transcending the boundaries of state's control in economic, social, and institutional aspects. It feared that the self-care, self-help, self-management, and self-realisation of migrants "could in the long term also lead to structural change in the relationship between state and society" (Xiang 2004:xii). Entrepreneurial space of migrants was marginalised and demolished through urban regeneration regimes.

It must be noted that attempts at "entrepreneurial self" did not perish under the state's control. In certain conjunctures, they were reinvented, upscaled, and reshaped for meeting the needs of entrepreneurial governance. This is particularly seen in neighbourhood governance since the housing privatisation towards the end of the 1990s. The "entrepreneurial self" was cultivated as part of the state's

reformed governing tactics to retreat from welfare provision (Bray 2006; Ong and Zhang 2008). Meanwhile, the individual's role at neighbourhoods was reshaped through the discursive construction of "*suzhi*"—a micro-technology that transformed the population into "high quality", governable subjects (Anagnost 2004). The side effect of entrepreneurial governance was the rising property rights awareness of homeowners, who later grew out of the state's plan by adopting embryonic self-governing strategies to defend their rights collectively (Fu and Lin 2014; S. He 2015). They acted in ways similar to the "entrepreneurial self" by employing the rhetoric of consumer rights and following the economic logic of value maximisation in managing their communities against natural degradation and developer intervention (Tomba 2014). By establishing the right-representing homeowners association (HOA) and outsourcing service provision to professional management companies, the development of entrepreneurialism was seemingly leading to increasing possibilities for self-realisation in modern communities (Y. Cai and Sheng 2013; Fu 2015).

Lately, the "entrepreneurial self", particularly its potential to form actionable communities, has been increasingly monitored by the state. Scholars found the state not only returned to govern the everyday lives of residential communities but also extended its infrastructure power by establishing its proxies or co-opting social organisations that were supposed to be self-organising (R. Cai and He 2022; Tang 2020; Wu 2018; Zeng et al. 2023). In resettlement communities, state-led community building was organised to reshape and reterritorialise community social relations that followed the leadership of the residents' committee (Z. Wang 2022). In middle-class communities, the state innovated a grid governance scheme to co-opt HOAs and strengthen grassroots party branches in order to weaken self-governance and maintain control (Tang 2020). Therefore, China's "entrepreneurial self" is eventually closely associated with state's control. Without authorised power to make political decisions, the "entrepreneurial self" and their communities were phantom agencies of the state rather than embryo forms of the marketised civil society (Huang 2006; Lu et al. 2019).

The COVID pandemic brought new opportunities and challenges to existing arrangements of entrepreneurial governance, especially at the grassroots level. The following sections present how the new type of "entrepreneurial self" emerged from the lockdown, managing the crisis and (re-)negotiating power relations with the state.

The Rise of Community Group-Buying during the Shanghai Lockdown: Tackling the Food Crisis Beyond Reliance on the State

To tame a new round of COVID-19 outbreaks, the Shanghai Municipal Government tightened its grip and introduced the "area-separated and batch-separated control" (*fenqu fenpi fangkong*) policy on 28 March 2022. Circulation of people and materials was strictly prohibited, with individuals staying at home and markets shutting down. The sudden and severe lockdown saw a quick surface of a food crisis across the city. Yet, governmental interventions to cope with the food

crisis, such as organising handouts (Cheng et al. 2020), appeared insufficient here. This food crisis generated wide criticism for the slow or non-action of grassroots state agencies (i.e. residents' committees), indicating that existing neighbourhood governance arrangements had limited capacities to meet the essential needs of local residents. The food crisis was considered a governance crisis, calling for alternative attempts from society.

Community group-buying was one of the most influential social responses to the governance crisis. A group of active residents, who later became group-buying entrepreneurs, spontaneously explored new avenues to access food. They aggregated the food demands of the entire community and formed buying groups, which amplified bargaining power and reduced transportation costs. Figure 1 shows the complete process of a typical community group-buying, including group formation, supplier selection, payment collection, within-community delivery, and after-sale services. These self-organised entrepreneurial activities illustrate how the "entrepreneurial self" can emerge and work out on the ground, forming a solution to the crisis beyond reliance on the state or mainstream entrepreneurial policies. This section focuses on the role of entrepreneurs in community group-buying (as shown in the upper part of Figure 1), unfolding its entrepreneurial logic and social mechanism. We contend that it represents a new manifestation of the "entrepreneurial self" in China's neighbourhood governance.

The Entrepreneurial Logic of Community Group-Buying

The underlying logic of community group-buying was essentially entrepreneurial. Organisers of buying groups offered bottom-up solutions to the food crisis through market approaches. This was primarily reflected in the entrepreneurial tactics group-buying organisers employed to access food and organise collective ordering. They began by proactively seeking suppliers, either through personal

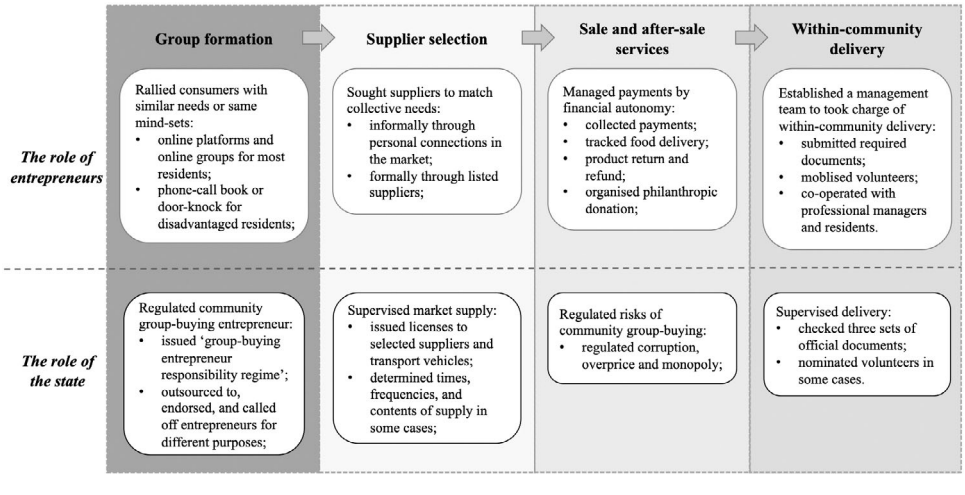

Figure 1: Process of a typical community group-buying during the Shanghai lockdown

connections or recommended by fellow residents. Once the suppliers were confirmed, they used online platforms, such as *WeChat* and *Kuaituantuan*, to advertise their products, rally resident customers, and organise bulk orders. Many group-buying entrepreneurs established their own online groups to promote products and communicate with customers residing within the delivery area. They established management teams, usually composed of volunteers, customer residents, and in rare cases, paid staff. To ensure their buying groups reached as many residents as possible, some group-buying entrepreneurs also turned to phone-call booking or door-knocking to incorporate elderly individuals or those who find online shopping inconvenient. This was often in cooperation with their residents' committees, who saw group-buying as an entrepreneurial way to ensure the basic needs of disadvantaged groups were met. Based on our observations, the above process was similar across different types of neighbourhoods.

Entrepreneurialism was also demonstrated in the entrepreneurial spirit of active community members who took responsibility for their own health and well-being. Our observation illustrated that the motivations to initiate group-buying were self-interest, self-protection, and self-fulfilment. Organisers started community buying groups for their own needs of food and a COVID-free neighbourhood (Interview, 2 May 2022, No. 2). Besides, many preceding features, such as experiences of relevant markets, knowledge of food resources, and habits of food consumption, were crucial for these preliminary attempts and laid the foundation for group-buying entrepreneurs to become the "entrepreneurial self". As one leader suggested, "you know, some of us had better market resources, some even worked in the business of e-commerce, so we were able to lead the earliest action of group-buying" (Interview, 15 May 2022, No. 9).

Notably, it was the entrepreneurs' intentions of self-protection and self-fulfilment, rather than ethical reasoning, mutual obligations or spontaneous expressions of solidarity, that germinated community group-buying in the first place. The group-buying entrepreneurs developed the community group-buying business model to achieve their ability to "calculate about itself and act upon itself in order to better itself" (Rose 1998:154). This model has effectively, albeit temporarily, connected personal entrepreneurial capacities with collective consumption, thereby binding individual existence and community resilience together.

The Social Mobilisation of Community Group-Buying: Beyond Individualisation

Group-buying was achieved through effectively mobilising the wider community, which strengthened the neighbourhood as a key social infrastructure that "allow people to gather" and "support community life" (Latham and Layton 2022:659). This was not necessarily associated with the process of individualisation or alienation. During the procedure of sourcing bulk orders, group-buying entrepreneurs (re)connected individuals who would otherwise "mind their own business" (Interview, 3 May 2022, No. 5). They formed neighbourhood groups composed of like-minded residents, who were either attracted or self-mobilised to address the food crisis collectively. Our interviews commonly suggest that one of the key

benefits of organising group-buying is linking the organisers to "more neighbours, especially those who are willing to spend time discussing how to help with group-buying and live through the lockdown better" (Interview, 1 October 2022, No. 13).

Community group-buying also created a special scenario for the growth of neighbourly ties and mutual help. It is worth noting that neighbourly interactions emerged alongside group-buying activities rather than being the main driving force behind them. Many respondents, not only group-buying entrepreneurs but also ordinary residents, especially the young, voluntarily assisted with the delivery of collectively ordered goods within their community boundaries. The voluntary labour was trusted and cherished by group-buying recipients, who provided reciprocal services in return, such as leaving a thank-you gift at the front door. In most cases, residents reported the experience of helping their neighbours and received help reciprocally, through, for instance, sharing food or exchanging necessities obtained through group-buying. They developed a higher frequency of interactions through digital platforms as they approportionated the workload of community group-buying and lived through the challenging time collectively.

As such, community group-buying shared some similarities with the alternative market approach coordinated outside the traditional market or state by a social mechanism (Gibson-Graham 2006). This social mechanism and its productive potentials have been under-estimated by existing research on entrepreneurial governance, which often focuses on structural forces and views agencies of social actors either as a force of assimilation or as a source of resistance. Existing research on the entrepreneurial self is no exception.

However, the social mechanism of coordinated group-buying had its limitations. Without proper supervision and regulation, some group-buying entrepreneurs shifted toward profit-driven motives, moving away from the social-driven ideals underpinning these initiatives. They actively competed to expand customer bases and introduced cost-benefit calculations to supposedly self- and mutual-help activities. For instance, some group-buying entrepreneurs made a leap by selling stocked food without authorisation, some sought enlarged profit by buying low and selling high, and some stuffed low-quality food to communities by taking advantage of the "no return policy" during the lockdown. The conflicting nature of community group-buying for simultaneously being entrepreneurial activities and social infrastructure created new tensions in neighbourhood governance, where the state sought to re-embed itself.

(Re)negotiating State–Entrepreneur Relationships in Community Group-Buying

The proliferation of community group-buying quickly drew attention from the local state. While the Municipal Government found group-buying as a feasible way out of the food crisis and introduced a series of supporting policies at the city level, the views of grassroots state agencies varied throughout the lockdown period. They determined the life and death of community group-buying. This section focuses on the role of the local state and its grassroots agencies in

community group-buying, as illustrated in the bottom part of Figure 1. We present two main approaches to group-buying governance, unpacking changing state–entrepreneur relationships during the pandemic.

Outsourcing through Endorsement and Authorisation

At the early stage, most residents' committees prioritised political tasks associated with pandemic mitigation in the governance of community group-buying. Their interactions with group-buying entrepreneurs were straightforward; some adopted a purely *laissez-faire* approach and admitted the limited capacities of grassroots state agencies; others took a top-down approach to strictly control or even prohibit all group-buying activities. However, these approaches faced challenges as new trends emerged within community group-buying. The *laissez-faire* approach was challenged when competitions between group-buying entrepreneurs led to a chaotic community market. The top-down directives failed to regulate this market but instead provoked strong opposition from residents. These market and government failures prompted the local state to reconsider the role of community group-buying.

In response to the chaotic situation, most of Shanghai's residential communities were introduced to a new governance approach, namely the "group-buying entrepreneur responsibility regime". The regime specified the responsibility of group-buying entrepreneurs and clarified the authorisation requirements for community group-buying. Legally, group-buying entrepreneurs must submit three sets of documents to respective residents' committee for the authorisation of every group-buying,[2] while taking charge of organising group-buying and all possible and practical consequences. The regime officially recognised group-buying entrepreneurs as a force in managing the food crisis, substituting residents' committees for their limited personnel and capability.

The degree to which residents' committees outsourced their social management power to group-buying entrepreneurs varied. In neighbourhoods with low virus contamination risks, residents' committees continued the *laissez-faire* approach for the authorisation of community group-buying, leaving group-buying entrepreneurs plenty of space to operate the market as long as they provided required documents and well addressed residents' demands. Under such circumstances, residents chose preferred group-buying entrepreneurs by "voting with their feet", i.e. concentrating their purchases on their most trusted groups, whether for the best value, the best service, or the most reputable organisers. Consequently, a few entrepreneurs garnered stronger power than others in the informal market of community group-buying. By outsourcing to these successful entrepreneurs, residents' committees could avoid direct involvement in group-buying. This was either because they were preoccupied with other tasks in crisis management or because they sought to minimise responsibilities in potentially controversial issues (Interview, 1 October 2022, No. 13). It is through such an approach that the "entrepreneurial self", although not initiated by the local state, has been strategically instrumentalised by the local state as a governance tool for

effective crisis management, which we interpret as an extended form of state entrepreneurialism (Wu 2023).

Contrarily, in scenarios of high contamination risks, residents' committees directly nominated proxies to supervise community group-buying. This was clearly evidenced by the endorsement of "official" group-buying entrepreneurs. Residents' committees co-opted selected entrepreneurs for effective economic and social management, and in return, these endorsed entrepreneurs acted like "meta-governors" in group-buying governance. They established local group-buying rules, (dis)qualified other group-buying entrepreneurs, and even determined the times, frequencies, and contents of community group-buying. In these cases, the state–entrepreneur relationship was shaped by a governance logic to control supply rather than a market logic to fulfil demand.

The variegated interplays between group-buying as informal market practices and residents' committees as formal state institutions demonstrate the flexible approaches of the state to (re-)negotiate the informality–state nexus when facing the governance crisis. We contend that informality was not only tolerated and regulated but, in many cases, guided, and instrumentalised by the state to achieve its strategic objectives.

Notably, even as a "responsible subject" to whom the local state delegated decision-making powers and welfare responsibilities, not all group-buying entrepreneurs aligned with grassroots state agencies. Rather than full-throated embrace of the residents' committee and its endorsement, most interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with how their committees worked through the pandemic, criticising the committee's slow responses, limited capacities, and one-size-fits-all management approach to regulating group-buying. Even for "official" group-buying entrepreneurs, tensions with grassroots state agencies who endorsed them were not uncommon. For example, one "official" group-buying entrepreneur described her hesitation to start the "official buying group". She was approached by the residents' committee, who wanted to "accomplish something for their political achievements" without "directly involving financial matters" (Interview, 15 May 2022, No. 11). While the official title earned her a large customer base, it also made her a *de facto* agent of the residents' committee, a role she was reluctant to take on. This reluctance was not due to the extra work but because grassroots state agencies, as perceived by residents, should be welfare oriented. Any deviation from these principles, such as questions about product prices and delivery fees, would easily become accusations against her. We interpret such deviation as a reflection of the fundamental tensions inherent to state entrepreneurialism, i.e. tensions between the entrepreneurial nature of group-buying activities and the political goals of grassroots state agencies. The tensions further suggest that group-buying entrepreneurs were neither merely pawns of the local state nor completely independent from it. They had their own leaders, recruited their own management teams, and maintained financial autonomy while also being captured, endorsed, and instrumentalised by the local state for its strategic goals. When these tensions grew larger, the legitimacy of community group-buying came into question, leading to the decline or termination of "official" groups in the later stages of the lockdown.

The Dismantling of Community Group-Buying

As the lockdown entered its second month (May 2022), Shanghai's infection rates gradually reduced. In addition to maintaining a low infection rate, rebooting the economy became a main purpose of urban governance. This led to the gradual relaxation of lockdown rules and the recovery of city-wide circulation networks. The former significantly reduced free labour once mobilised for community group-buying, as they returned to workplaces. The latter overtly expanded the workforce of traditional markets and online delivery at the supply side, enabling residents to bypass community group-buying entrepreneurs and place orders directly.

Apart from changes on the supply and demand sides, residents' attitudes shifted noticeably from a pro-entrepreneur stance to a more sceptical view. Concerns arose about the legitimacy and accountability of group-buying entrepreneurs. Criticism was particularly directed at official group-buying entrepreneurs endorsed by residents' committees. Our interviews suggest that residents' general levels of trust in official group-buying entrepreneurs began to wane in the second month of the lockdown, with emerging critiques revolving around issues of corruption (Interview, 6 May 2022, No. 2), monopoly (Interview, 3 May 2022, No. 8), excessive use of volunteer services and violation of alleged non-profit principles (Interview, 15 May 2022, No. 9). These critiques easily spread across neighbourhoods and gained significant traction to form a strong force against official group-buying entrepreneurs. Such a transformation of residents' attitudes was attributed to a structural dilemma of official group-buying entrepreneurs. As self-managed entrepreneurs, the (often unregulated) concentration of power in official group-buying entrepreneurs generated problems of monopoly and corruption. Consequently, competition evolved into conflicts, developing faction politics and undermining community solidarity. These corrupt practices and abusive use of power eroded the reputation of group-buying entrepreneurs.

More importantly, residents' attitudes significantly shaped the view of residents' committees and affected their relationship with group-buying entrepreneurs. In response to changes in collective demands and social tensions, a more visible role of the local state became prevalent in the later stages of the lockdown. This was especially true as grassroots state agencies gained more experience in crisis management and benefited from the recovery of the city-level supply network. They no longer needed to govern urban neighbourhoods indirectly through the "group-buying entrepreneur responsibility regime". Instead, their direct influence on community group-buying manifested in several ways. Some residents' committees withdrew endorsement and (re-)asserted their role as the only leading authority assuming overall responsibilities of crisis management (Interview, 2 May 2022, No. 1). Others deliberately distanced themselves from self-organised buying groups, mostly in responses to criticism and controversy associated with specific group-buying entrepreneurs. In one case, group-buying was immediately called off by the corresponding residents' committee when a blog criticising its leader went viral (Interview, 15 May 2022, No. 9).

The local state's variegated approaches to dealing with the "entrepreneurial self" reflect its flexible strategies in crisis management, shaped by dynamic

assessment of each "entrepreneurial self's" capabilities and risks at different stages. This adaptability was particularly evident when the local state's strategic goals shifted to the "bouncing economy" in the later stage of the lockdown. In this stage, when collective demands for these entrepreneurs were low and potential social risks were high, the local state adopted more interventionist measures to regulate group-buying activities, restoring state-centred neighbourhood governance. In other words, whether it was the surge of community group-buying during the pandemic control phase or its decline during the economic recovery phase, we believe these changes reflected shifts in the local state's strategic goals.

Implications for Post-Pandemic Neighbourhood Governance

Even though community group-buying declined after the lockdown, the ways group-buying entrepreneurs engaged with residents and organised collective ordering exerted long-term influences on everyday life post-pandemic. These influences move beyond meeting individuals' immediate needs for food and into areas where new possibilities of neighbourhood governance are emerging.

The most salient change in neighbourhood governance is "a more visible role" of the state (Interview, 1 October 2022, No. 13). This arose from intensified involvement of residents' committees in most neighbourhood issues during the pandemic. The introduction of the "group-buying entrepreneur responsibility regime" illustrates how residents' committees transferred social responsibilities to group-buying entrepreneurs while retaining soft control through endorsement. Through such an approach, residents' committees enriched human resources and strengthened governing capacities by incorporating self-entrepreneurs into its governance networks. The Chinese way of delegating issues from grassroots state agencies to (semi-)independent bodies is different from neoliberal means of outsourcing. Instead of devolving power and pulling back control, the local state maintained a determinant role in the regime, which enabled it to take back control in the later stages of the lockdown. As stressed by the leader of a residents' committee, "while we encourage participation of volunteers and group-buying entrepreneurs, we shall ensure that key decisions are finalised by us [the committee] and we can call off group-buying whenever necessary" (Interview, 11 January 2023, No. 16).

However, interpreting such changes as merely perpetuating an authoritarian state characterised by absolute control would be an oversimplification. Our follow-up observations of post-pandemic communities unpack some longer-term impacts of group-buying on everyday neighbourhood life, resulting in complex and even seemingly conflicting effects.

First, the way group-buying entrepreneurs and fellow residents worked collectively to address the food crisis invigorated the agency of residents, leading to a more proactive community with a rising sense of responsibility. The group-buying process required significant coordination, communication, and collaboration among community members. During this process, discussions of specific issues, such as disinfection and pricing, often extended to broader topics, such as public

health and local policies. This increased engagement shifted the focus from individual or family-centric concerns to a more community-oriented perspective. "The crisis brought our attention back to the community", as commented by one volunteer. "Many of us now pay more attention to local environments, think about what needs to be improved, and report issues to the residents' committee when necessary" (Interview, 15 October 2022, No. 14).

Here, community group-buying serves as a tangible example of how bottom-up mobilisation, entirely organised by residents, is possible. It brings performative effects to residents by demonstrating that they have both the willingness and the ability to drive community changes. This is further facilitated by the expansion of groups that bring residents together and facilitate community participation. Most groups were established during the lockdown and covered almost all households in the community. Through these groups, residents would raise questions, express concerns, communicate with neighbours, and reach relevant staff from the residents' committee. These citizen platforms act as informal civic infrastructure that enhances connectivity both among community members and between the community and the local state, augmenting more participatory ways of governance.

Second, our follow-up observations further validate the impacts of group-buying that extend beyond individual participation. We find that group-buying initiatives have identified capable and responsible individuals, many of whom have subsequently served as members or representatives of formal neighbourhood governance institutions, such as the HOA. These personnel changes, combined with the community social capital and mobilisation capacities developed during the pandemic, contribute to stronger community leadership and better-performing HOAs, ultimately leading to more effective neighbourhood governance.

This is demonstrated by our longitudinal observation of governance changes in Neighbourhood X. Its residents suffered from theft and vandalism for a long time pre-pandemic, mostly due to the dysfunctional security cameras which failed to be repaired by the ill-functioning HOA. Under mounting pressure from the residents, previous members of the HOA resigned and were replaced by group-buying entrepreneurs and volunteers who actively stepped up. As new leaders of the HOA, they managed to mobilise the wider community, organised a vote, and gathered enough residents' signatures to make replacing the security cameras a legally approved decision. The reputation of group-buying entrepreneurs and their close relations with residents established during the pandemic laid the foundation for the entire process. This ensured efficient collective decision-making, thereby enhancing the governance capacity of the HOA. As one resident comments, "[the vote] was almost impossible to complete pre-COVID due to low turnout rates, thanks to the passion for community issues born out of the lockdown" (Interview, 15 October 2022, No. 14).

The observation suggests that, while group-buying aimed to reduce the management of the food crisis from a political event to an economic one, the active citizens it mobilised and the social networks it cultivated contributed to wider forms of participation in community collective decision-making. As one resident proudly described, "This is a real step forward in neighbourhood governance"

that enables collective decision-making to begin "where you live" (Interview, 15 October 2022, No. 14). Issues previously deemed unsolvable are now subject to community deliberation and collective decision-making.

In contrast to the research emphasising the state's absolute control, the emergence of group-buying entrepreneurs and its long-term impact may appear counterintuitive. The embrace of the "entrepreneurial self" has contributed to social mobilisation and community participation—objectives the state has struggled to achieve on its own (Heberer and Göbel 2011; Wan 2016). Moreover, the entrepreneurialisation of group-buying also diverges from the process of individualisation and depoliticisation commonly observed in Western research. Instead, the evolvement of group-buying in Shanghai reflects a different trajectory, where social capital was nurtured, and community participation was invigorated. This has fostered alternative approaches to mobilise the community and enhance effective decision-making through the HOAs. Notably, despite being nominally self-governing organisations, HOAs are found to operate under the supervision of the state and extend state's infrastructure power (R. Cai and He 2022). As we observed in Neighbourhood X, the HOA, primarily composed of group-buying entrepreneurs and volunteers, has become heavily involved in state-delegated community management tasks, such as planning and managing community charging stations. Their strong community ties and mobilisation capacities facilitate the communication between the state and residents, helping to fulfil the state's objective of community management and public safety. Therefore, group-buying entrepreneurs, as part of new community organisations, offer alternative pathways for mobilising communities, which ultimately advances state objectives.

Conclusion and Discussion

The COVID pandemic is a crisis that questions the fundamental ways through which urban life is lived and governed. Drawing on observations of the Shanghai lockdown in 2022, we present how community group-buying emerged as an alternative approach to tackle the food crisis. Driven by community collective demands on the one hand and constrained by bulk order rules on the other, group-buying entrepreneurs employed entrepreneurial tactics to establish community sales networks and organise community collective consumption. Through organising group-buying, they achieved self-betterment by acting upon themselves and navigating social relations around them. These self-organised, citizen-led groups turned out to be Shanghai's most prominent societal response to the pandemic crisis, particularly when the capacities of the local state were under pressure. Tracing the rise and fall of community group-buying offers us an opportunity to critically engage with entrepreneurial governance literature, particularly from a bottom-up perspective and in the context of China.

Our main contribution to radical geographical thinking is uncovering a paradox in entrepreneurial governance, especially regarding the "entrepreneurial self". Using community "group-buying entrepreneurs" as an archetypical case, we detail the tensions between the increased social agency of entrepreneurs and their simultaneous role in advancing state objectives and consolidating state control.

On the one hand, we find that the rise of the "entrepreneurial self" during the pandemic appears to promote greater social agency, as seen in self-initiated entrepreneurial activities like community group-buying. These activities exemplify a form of bottom-up mobilisation, where individuals take responsibility for their own health and well-being. Such responsibility originates neither from the obligation between individuals and communities nor from abstract commitment to the state, but from a "sense of the self" that has been growing since China's market reforms (Fu 2015; Logan 2018). During the crisis, this "sense of the self" was further strengthened, enabling the state to shift aspects of crisis management to social actors. These actors managed their own teams, finances, and outcomes, operating in areas outside the traditional realm of the state. In other words, the "entrepreneurial self" and their communities are no longer phantom agencies (Huang 2006; Lu et al. 2019), pawns of the state (Bröckling 2015), or civic engagement "under authoritarianism" (Teets 2013). They directly impact community participation and collective action, which differs from observations of previous crises in China (Thornton 2009; B. Xu 2017).

However, this self-organisation paradoxically reinforces state power by aligning with and contributing to the state's strategic goals. This is evident in the local state's flexible approaches toward active social actors in the case of Shanghai. When the state-centred mechanisms failed to manage the crisis in its initial stages, self-organised entrepreneurs stepped in to fill the gap. This became a contingent strategy of the local state, particularly when group-buying entrepreneurs were incorporated into its governance networks via the "group-buying entrepreneur responsibility regime". This strategy was tacitly employed during the most critical moments of the crisis, where the local state encouraged individuals to focus on economic issues and self-improvement, thereby alleviating the pressures faced by its grassroots agencies, ensuring the supply of resources, and maintaining social stability. The termination of the regime in the later stages of the lockdown suggests that agencies of social actors are ultimately conditioned by the local state's strategical goals, whether related to crisis management, social stability, or economic recovery.

Notably, the way that the "entrepreneurial self" contributes to China's state-centred mode of governance differs from interpretations by critical theorists in the West. They often see the "entrepreneurial self" as a means of exercising state control through individualisation and depoliticisation (McNay 2009; Rose 1998). However, rather than stagnating political participation and closing-off political space between the state and residents, the development of community group-buying in Shanghai was associated with increasing community social capital, greater community participation, enhanced collective action capacities, and improved communication channels between the local state and the community. This was not limited to collective purchasing during the lockdown but extended into other areas of neighbourhood governance post-pandemic, ultimately strengthening the socio-political order of urban communities advocated by the local state. Thus, group-buying entrepreneurs represent a new manifestation of the "entrepreneurial self" in the Chinese context. This not only underscores the need for the "dynamic and real-time analyses of the uneven development of

entrepreneurial discourses, policies, and practices" (S. He 2020:324), but also highlights the importance of closer scrutiny of the evolving implications and diverse outcomes of entrepreneurialisation on the society at large.

Second, we offer a critical reflection on urban governance in China by moving beyond a romanticised view of the role of the state and its absolute control. Instead, we highlight the agencies of social actors, and their productive potential in group-buying activities, which initially reveals limitations of the local state but eventually feeds back into state-centred governance arrangements. This has been underestimated by existing research on entrepreneurial governance in China that focuses primarily on structural forces, either of the market (urban entrepreneurialism) or the state (state entrepreneurialism) (e.g. S. Lin et al. 2023; Wu 2023).

Specially, we present how community group-buying plays out, not only highlighting the ability of group-buying entrepreneurs to devise innovative solutions to crises independently of the local state, but also showcasing how such solutions emerge from, and contribute to, neighbourly ties and social mobilisation —social dynamics the local state struggles to achieve on its own. These social dynamics hold significant implications not only during the crisis but also in post-reform China in general. Scholars have shown that China's market reforms have dismantled traditional kinship-based social networks without establishing new communities based on micro-moral relations (Wu 2022). Through the case of community group-buying, we find that the entrepreneurialisation of social relations presupposes the existence of such social relations. The significance of the group-buying entrepreneurs thus lies in their ability to generate neighbourly social relations, thereby (re)invigorating the community as a key social infrastructure (Latham and Layton 2022). The ability to mobilise responsible citizens and cultivate social capital is something the Chinese state has struggled to achieve on its own in the post-reform era (Heberer and Göbel 2011; Wan 2016).

Therefore, we argue that community group-buying, as a case of self-organised entrepreneurial governance, reveals both the challenges and potential solutions for China's state-centred governance. While the initial phase of the crisis fully exposed the limitations of absolute state control—evidenced by the failure to effectively manage the food crisis through administrative means—the later phase shows that the very mechanism that highlighted the state's inability to control everything—self-entrepreneurialism—ultimately strengthened the state's governing capacity by mobilising the community, encouraging civic engagement and fostering collective decision-making via state-mediated neighbourhood governance organisations, such as the HOA.

As such, we conclude that governance changes associated with community group-buying are progressive rather than revolutionary. Active community members, such as group-buying entrepreneurs and volunteers who emerged from the lockdown, have not become a radical force that fundamentally challenges the hegemonic position of the state (cf. Mould et al. 2022). Rather, their active involvement in existing governance arrangements improves governance effectiveness, and ultimately feeds back into China's state-mediated governance arrangements. This finding aligns with observations in other contexts which suggest that civil society responses were primarily organised for pragmatic solutions to the

crisis rather than seeking to challenge the structural root of the crisis (Leap et al. 2022). Nonetheless, they offer significant insights into the development of alternative governance mechanisms through self-organisation. This shift in governance dynamics within China reflects broader trends globally, where urban governance is increasingly being reconfigured to incorporate community-based solutions (Roth et al. 2023).

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Data Availability Statement

Participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so the data that support the findings of this study are not available.

Endnotes

[1] Please see the Appendix for more details of the sampled neighbourhoods.

[2] The required documents include the food supplier's certification approved by Shanghai Municipal Commission of Commerce, the delivery's certification of transportation approved by the district government, and the driver's 24-hour nucleic acid testing results.

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Appendix

Case no.	District	Housing type	Location	Household amount	Year of development	Housing price*	Floor area ratio
1	Yangpu	Commodity	Middle ring	870	1995	74,829	1.5
2	Changning	Commodity	Inner ring	330	2004	96,552	4.5
3	Changning	Commodity	Inner ring	436	1996	79,757	3.8
4	Baoshan	Work unit	Outer ring	na	na	na	na
5	Xuhui	Work unit	Inner ring	840	1985	123,359	1.6
6	Minhang	Commodity	Suburban	681	2004	78,656	2.3
7	Qingpu	Commodity	Suburban	706	2022	89,338	2
8	Pudong	Commodity	Middle ring	620	2020	142,500	4.5
9	Yangpu	Commodity	Outer ring	2,113	2012	118,196	0.8
10	Changning	Work unit	Middle ring	1,458	1987	72,087	1.8
11	Changning	Work unit	Middle ring	1,366	1983	78,050	2.5
12	Putuo	Commodity	Middle ring	2,537	2006	87,133	2.2
13	Minhang	Commodity	Outer ring	1,169	2013	88,772	2.5
14	Pudong	Commodity	Outer ring	846	1998	75,105	1.45
15	Qingpu	Commodity	Suburban	349	2015	48,938	2.5

Description of sampled neighbourhoods in Shanghai (source: authors; *yuan/m^2)