

# Social impact assessment and public participation in China: A case study of land requisition in Guangzhou

Bo-sin Tang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Siu-wai Wong<sup>b</sup>, Milton Chi-hong Lau<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Building and Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China

<sup>b</sup> Division of Social Sciences, Urban Studies and Education, HKU School of Professional and Continuing Education, Hong Kong

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## Abstract

This study examines the current prospects for and obstacles facing the implementation of social impact assessment (SIA) and participatory planning in the People's Republic of China. During the past two decades, rapid urbanisation and the conversion of rural land for urban development have led to numerous social conflicts and tensions between the Chinese government and its people. SIA and public participation in development decisions have received increasing attention from the Chinese authorities as possible ways to tackle the problem. Based on a Guangzhou case study, this paper argues that the assessment and mitigation of adverse impacts on the community from urban development have been carried out with different objectives, core values and principles when compared with those in Western societies. It concludes that the poor prospects of SIA and collaborative planning in China lie not only in the weak framework for environmental legislation, but also in all institutions concerning state–society relations, the socialist governing ideology and traditional Chinese culture.

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## 1. Introduction

Comprising about a quarter of the world's population, the People's Republic of China has entered into the fast lane of urban growth and development. Since the end of the 1990s, its urbanisation rate has increased at approximately 2% per annum. The Chinese government has predicted that the overall level of urbanisation will exceed 50% by the year of 2020 ([The People's Daily Online](#), 6th December 2002). This unprecedented rate

has generated numerous opportunities, but also challenges to the sustainability of urban development. It has brought about significant economic improvement and wealth accumulation, but the unbridled conversion of rural land for industry, housing, infrastructure and urban use rapidly reduced agricultural land resources in China. Between 1996 and 2003, for instance, the total area of arable land in the country decreased dramatically from 130.1 million ha to 123.5 million ha ([Financial Times Information](#), 2004). This inexorable trend of shrinking agricultural land has caused high-level political worries about environmental degradation, national food security and, ultimately, social stability.

Much of the impetus of urbanisation has been engineered and promoted by lower-level governments,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +852 27665816; fax: +852 27645131.

E-mail addresses: [bsbstang@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:bsbstang@polyu.edu.hk) (B. Tang),  
[ivyswwong@yahoo.com.hk](mailto:ivyswwong@yahoo.com.hk) (S. Wong), [bsmilton@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:bsmilton@polyu.edu.hk)  
(M.C. Lau).

which are competing vehemently for talents, resources and external capital. With greater administrative power and financial autonomy, many local governments have sought to expand their built-up areas by developing “image-building projects” such as extravagant public squares, large city statues and excessive infrastructure (Cao, 2004). As land sale can generate revenue, local governments seek to collaborate with property developers and investors in acquiring and resuming agricultural land for development (Tan and Lu, 2005). During this process, the peasantry has often been one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. Lacking legal knowledge and political wherewithal, peasants have inadequate means of defending their interests against land requisition by the Chinese authorities (Cai and Huo, 2002; Cao, 2004). As a result, many have been forced to give up the arable land they have relied on for subsistence, and in return have gained few benefits from urban living. Their traditional lifestyles, customs and culture have been completely destroyed by urban development. Land requisition has become the most common source of tension between the Chinese local authorities and the people. Many disputes have escalated into public opposition, open protest, and even violent conflict, which threatens effective urban governance in China.

The sustainability of urban development in China requires the use of effective planning instruments to cope with the undesirable social impacts of urbanisation. In developed countries, social impact assessment (SIA) is often conceived of as an appropriate tool to tackle such problems. According to Vanclay (2002), SIA helps to address social changes that are invoked by planned interventions to achieve a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment. The experience in many countries has revealed that by involving the public systematically in the process of development decision making, SIA is capable of effectively improving social equity, enhancing social inclusion and mitigating detrimental social outcomes. Seeing this opportunity, many mainland Chinese academics are also advocating the use of SIA in assisting development decisions (Chen, 1995; Jiang et al., 1995; Deng et al., 1996; Dong and Zhao, 1998).

This paper examines the opportunities and limitations of, and obstacles to, the application of SIA in China. It argues that any attempt to expand the formal role and implementation of SIA in China cannot afford to ignore not only the complexity of its social problems, but also the unique historical, structural, cultural and practical barriers to participatory planning in the country. Following this introduction, the paper is

divided into five sections. Section 2 briefly examines the assumptions underlying SIA and summarises its implementation in an international context. Section 3 reviews the progress of assessing environmental and social impacts in China, and evaluates the role of public participation in China’s environmental management. Section 4 presents a case study of development planning in a rapidly urbanizing district in southern China, the Guangzhou Development District, with a particular focus on a recent land requisition project. With reference to the case study experience, Section 5 reflects on the prospect of implementing SIA and public participation in development projects, and evaluates its opportunities and constraints. Section 6 compares the differences between China and the Western societies in engaging stakeholders and assessing social impacts, and finally concludes the paper.

## 2. International experience

### 2.1. Origin and emergence of SIA

The origin of the SIA concept can be traced to the 17th century, when scientific analysis was extended to demographic and health impact assessments in the Western societies (Becker, 1997). The enactment of the United States National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969 is widely considered as a landmark, after which SIA emerged as a separate statutory field of applied environmental assessment around the world (Burdge, 1990, 2003; Ip, 1990; Rickson et al., 1990a; Momtaz, 2005). In many developed countries, SIA has been fully integrated into the planning process at an appropriate level of jurisdiction to ensure that its findings can unambiguously and effectively feed into decision making, policy evaluation and development programming. This reflects a solid belief that failure to integrate SIA into the planning process diminishes the significance of rational planning and weakens the quality of its ultimate decisions (Rickson et al., 1990b).

Having developed in the West, SIA is underpinned by an interrelated set of modern values and progressive principles such as the formal application of logic, experiential dependency, rationality, individuality and liberal democracy. Based on the definition in the International Principles for Social Impact Assessment, SIA recognises the contributions of a precautionary approach in resolving social problems that can be generated by planned interventions and in improving policy design and implementation (Vanclay, 2003a). SIA also emphasises social equity. It pursues the objective of Pareto optimality, under which no one

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