



# Strategies for risk management in urban–rural conflict: Two case studies of land acquisition in urbanising China



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## ABSTRACT

Urban and rural environments show clear differences in morphology, production mode and culture. With rapid urbanisation, these differences have become a major cause of urban–rural conflict. One of the most significant challenges arises from land acquisition, particularly in China, where cities have experienced substantial growth in the 21st century. Different types of risk are associated with land acquisition conflict in different Chinese cities. In this study, two types of cities are discussed: those with a historically low level of development but recent rapid economic growth, such as Yueqing; and cities that have maintained a relatively high level of development and experienced stable growth, such as Jiaying. Land acquisition conflict in these two representative cities is then analysed in terms of property rights, access to resources and development. Analysis is performed at the institutional level to provide more accurate insights into the dynamics of conflict. The findings of the study suggest that different risk-management strategies are used in the two kinds of city, and that conflict is more likely to occur in cities with historically weaker development, such as Yueqing. To avoid such conflict, systematic risk-management strategies should be established in these cities.

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## 1. Introduction

Urbanisation is a double-edged sword, with wide-ranging economic, social and environmental effects. Economists refer to urbanisation as a positive process that enhances economic growth and increases national wealth. However, it can also result in unemployment, violence, poverty, congestion and environmental problems. Urbanisation has been described as a process of ‘eating up’ rural land in response to increasing demand from residents and private firms (Zhang, 2010). The proportion of the population living in urban settings in the mid-20th century in Western countries was 72% in the United States, 87% in the United Kingdom, 79% in the Federal Republic of Germany, 86% in the Netherlands and 77% in Canada. By the 1960s, these figures had all exceeded 80%, with the rural population of the United States accounting for only 3–5% of the total population. Three cities in developed countries, New York, London and Tokyo, now have more than 6 million residents each. Cities in developing countries also have rapidly increasing urban

populations, for example, those of Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City now exceed 6 million (Chu, 2013).

In China, the urban population increased from 19.4% in 1980 to 29% in 1996, and the process of urbanisation has rapidly accelerated in the 21st century, with the urban population increasing from 36.22% in 2000 to 53.73% in 2013. This rapid urbanisation is critical to China's economic development (Shan & Wu, 2016). Urbanisation assists industrialisation and economic development through the recruitment of surplus rural labour, and is therefore beneficial to the government (Zhang & Liu, 2001), but an increasing urban population also brings problems such as bad housing conditions, underemployment, less land available for agriculture and urban environmental pollution, all of which adversely affect economic development (Yao, 1994; Wu, Luo, Zhang, & Skitmore, 2016).

Due to urbanisation, the consumption of land for urban use has remained high since the 1960s. The highest rates of land conversion from rural to urban are observed in counties experiencing rapid economic growth (Marlow, Ralph, & Kenneth, 1994). Pressure on urban land is increasing across the developing world, and is manifested in several ways. The problem of urban land conflict is growing (Horman & Orleans, 2015), and urbanisation has intensified urban–rural tension, as well as increasing the number of

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landless and jobless farmers. Urban–rural conflict management should therefore be further explored and clarified. Risk management is a control function designed to maintain a safe operational boundary for a particular hazardous process of production (Rasmussen, 1997). The management of conflict risk can thus play an extremely important role in urbanisation by ensuring that key aspects of the conflict remain within a relatively safe border, thereby reducing social risk.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Conflict during urbanisation

Conflict has been defined as natural and normal discord that arises where and when the purposes, objectives or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible. To achieve their own objectives, individuals/groups will inevitably block others (George & Jones, 2006). In developing countries, rapid urbanisation has significantly affected social and economic systems in both urban and rural areas (Becker & Morrison, 1996; Liu & Li, 2011). Two important changes have resulted from industrialisation and urbanisation: the introduction of new risks and the breakdown of traditional risk-sharing mechanisms (Robert & Steen, 2000). The patterns of rural natural resource use have changed with the expansion of cities, leading to further social, cultural and economic changes that have in turn caused resentment among many peri-urban residents towards urban authorities (Vishal, 2009).

China has a large population and relatively limited available land. Since the introduction of the ‘reform and opening-up’ policy in 1978, the government has relaxed its control over economic and social institutions and China has become increasingly open to the outside world. In Chinese rural areas, the contractual household-responsibility system gives farmers long-term land-use rights, but their incomes have remained low (Knight & Song, 2005; Rozelle, Park, Huang, & Jin, 1997; Xie & Jiang, 2016). Economic development has resulted in a high level of labour migration from rural to urban areas, with urban land expansion and farming land loss as the most significant land-use changes, accompanied by environmental degradation and land conflict (Chen, Zhang, Song, & Zhang, 2016). During China’s urbanisation, farmers have migrated from the agricultural sector to the non-agricultural sector and agricultural land has been put to non-agricultural uses, mainly through land acquisition by the state (Lou, 2007).

With urbanisation and the movement of the rural population to cities, different types of social conflict – caused by overpopulation, a lack of resources and other environmental and societal problems – become entangled, increasing social risk. Therefore, preventing or at least reducing various forms of conflict through risk management is of great importance to urban–rural development (Yu, Wu, Zheng, Zhang, & Shen, 2014). Urban and rural labour resources, urban land expansion and rural farmland protection are the three main factors that can result in property conflict. Resource conflict can be triggered by environmental damage, competition for natural resources, urban industrial transfer, rural environmental protection, the diffusion of pollution from urban to rural areas and/or the effects of agricultural pollution on municipal water supplies. Development conflict may arise from infrastructure construction, the distribution of educational resources, differences in environmental management between urban and rural areas, rural development and/or the return of farmland to forest (Yu et al., 2015). This study investigates the nature of urban–rural conflict and the influence of urbanisation with reference to three key types of conflict: property conflict, resource conflict and development conflict. A framework of cultural, political and system-level analysis is used to provide recommendations for devising land-use policies to

mitigate urban–rural conflict (Wu & Luo, 2015). The three kinds of conflict are interrelated (Fig. 1), and are the main types of urban–rural conflict in China (Yu, Wu & Zheng, 2014).

Public conflict can be managed through either conflict control or conflict resolution. The two approaches differ significantly in their content, tools and targets. The aim of conflict control is to mitigate and ultimately end conflict. It is efficient and highly effective, but does not take into account the demands and interests of the parties involved, and thus fails to fundamentally resolve conflict. The goal of conflict resolution is to eliminate the root causes of incompatibility. The equality of others and their need for participation are considered, which can eliminate deep dissatisfaction and help to build long-term relationships. However, as conflict control often incurs lower costs, is more effective and avoids the ‘volunteer’s dilemma’, it is difficult to argue for conflict-resolution methods (Zhang, 2014).

China’s highways and other infrastructural networks expanded with the increase in car use after the 1950s. The construction of new buildings for housing, industry and business resulted in large-scale migration to the outskirts of cities, significantly dispersing the population and jobs. New problems emerged in relation to land resources, ecological and environmental protection, class conflict, social culture and particularly urban–rural conflict. The most significant threat posed by urbanisation is that construction swallows up land previously used for agriculture, forestry and mining, so the rural population loses its main economic resources (Zhu & Yue, 2006). In China, the historical gap between the urban and the rural has widened further, leading to urban–rural conflict. This conflict is manifested in two ways: first, between urban and rural levels of government, on issues such as human-resources training, the possession of public resources and the distribution of educational resources; and second, between urban and rural residents, whose economic, political and cultural interests are at odds (Huang, 2010). Disagreement and outright conflict also occur in areas such as the environment, development opportunities, resource acquisition, public-goods supply, management and the cultural fusion of the urban and the rural. In terms of ecological conflict, the environmental pollution caused by urban expansion exacerbates the erosion and destruction of agricultural and ecological environments by urbanisation, in addition to the exploitation of ecological environmental resources. In terms of development conflict, household registration limitations have created significant discrepancies in the types of employment and degree of remuneration available to migrant workers and urban residents. Unstable employment and wage arrears create a strong sense of insecurity among migrant workers. Conflict over the supply of public goods may arise from the urban–rural division underscored by the household registration system, which divides infrastructure and public services into the two entirely separate categories of urban and rural provision. Urbanisation has exacerbated the exploitation of rural land, water, labour and other resources, creating conflict over resource acquisition. This urban–rural inequality in resource allocation has continued to increase under the combined influence of political and market changes (Liu & Li, 2011).

Changes in land use due to urbanisation are primary sources of social and political conflict (Plotkin, 1987), and may adversely affect environmental quality (Ellis & Ramankutty, 2008; Sala et al., 2000; Bernardino & Francesco, 2014). Stakeholders pursue their own interests in competing for limited land resources, leading to conflict. Tan (2008) has shown that land acquisition has proceeded smoothly and that serious land conflicts have been avoided in other developed countries such as the US, the UK, Austria and Germany, indicating that there is no necessary link between land acquisition and land conflict. The reasons for the frequent clashes over land acquisition in China are extremely complex. Land acquisition does

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