



## Land use policy in China: Introduction



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### ABSTRACT

This themed issue of *Land Use Policy* builds mainly on papers presented at an international conference on 'Land Use Issues and Policy in China under Rapid Rural and Urban Transformation', convened by the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing, China, in October 2012. The conference set out to share and promote new scientific findings from a range of disciplines that advance research on land use policy in China. The contributions to this themed issue provide conceptual–theoretical and empirical takes on the topic, around four main areas of interest to both researchers and policymakers: nation-wide land use issues, the Sloping Land Conversion Program, land engineering and land use, and land use transitions. Various land use issues have been associated with rapid urban–rural transformations in China, giving rise to formulation of new policies directly affecting land use. However, these have contributed to new land use problems due to the nature of the policies and the difficulties in policy implementation constrained by the special 'dual-track' structure of urban–rural development in China. In view of this, this themed edition makes a compelling call for more systematic research into the making and implementation of China's land use policy. It also emphasizes the challenges for further research on land use policy in China.

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### Introduction

China is a nation with strong rural roots. Despite rampant urbanization so that China's urban population exceeded that of rural dwellers for the first time in the country's history at the end of 2011, with 51.27% of the population – 690.79 million people live in cities (NBSC, 2012), just under half of its population still lives in rural areas, and the national economy has been built on agricultural foundations since ancient times. However, China has transformed rapidly since the economic reforms and an open-door policy were initiated in 1978. The traditional centralized economy changed to a market-based economy, and the country, which was once primarily agricultural, has become increasingly urban and industrial. Tremendous land-use change has occurred since 1978, which has also transformed development in both rural and urban areas. Accompanying this rapid urban–rural transformation, various land use issues have occurred, giving rise to formulation of new policies directly affecting land use. To some extent, these have contributed to new land use problems due to the nature of the policies and the difficulties in policy implementation constrained by the special 'dual-track' structure of urban–rural development in China. Since 1978, land use in China has been affected by a series of land use policies and corresponding managerial counter measures, which include the contracted responsibility system (Liu and Yang, 1990), the land leasehold system – land-use rights, land taxation and use fees (Zhang, 1997; Tang, 1989; Ding, 2003), land administration (Cai, 1990), farm-

land protection (Lichtenberg and Ding, 2008; Liu et al., 2014a), regulations on land markets (Tang, 1989; Liu and Yang, 1990; Ding, 2003), land acquisition (Ding, 2007), land consolidation (Long et al., 2010; Long, 2014), and recent economic and intensive land use and increasing versus decreasing balance of urban–rural construction land (Long et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2014a), as well as some national development strategies such as the Grain-for-Green Program or Sloping Land Conversion Program (Feng et al., 2005; Long et al., 2006), Building New Countryside (Long et al., 2010), and Western Development Program (Goodman, 2004; Li et al., 2013).

There are obvious regional discrepancies in the development gap between rural and urban areas as well as in the dimensions of geographical and bio-geo-physical conditions in China (Long et al., 2010). Rural and urban transformation development underlying these regional discrepancies has led to a series of land-use problems, such as land degradation (including desertification and salinization) due to improper use, land pollution due to industrialization, farmers' livelihood issues due to land acquisition or land conversion, food security problems due to farmland loss and extensive use, and ecological issues caused by land-use change, land-use engineering and technological problems. The feasible solutions to these problems will rely on new land use policies aimed at addressing specific land use issues.

This themed issue assembles a set of papers that probes current land use issues in China, the implementation and impacts of China's Sloping Land Conversion Program, and land use transitions

driven by urban–rural transformation development in China. They are intended to contribute to sharing and promoting new scientific findings from a range of disciplines that advance research on land use policy in China.

Sixteen thought-provoking papers closely related to China's land use policy are included in this themed issue, each with a distinct identity. Two of the papers focus on uncovering nation-wide land use issues to derive implications for policy making: Liu et al. (2014a) discuss the key issues of land use in China and their implications for policy making, whereas Ho (2014) uses a nation-wide rural survey to demonstrate that insecure tenure is not equal to non-credible (or socially contested) tenure, and argues that we should not focus on institutional form, but rather on function. Four papers focus on the Sloping Land Conversion Program: one examines the changes of livelihood due to land use shifts (Zhen et al., 2014), and three discuss the household-level effects of implementing the Program (Komarek et al., 2014; Lin and Yao, 2014; Yin et al., 2014). Three papers focus on land engineering and land use: one discusses the relationship between land policy and land engineering (Han and Zhang, 2014), another establishes a comprehensive framework on land–water resources development including engineering treatment measures, appropriate irrigation management and farming measures based on a series of experiments designed for sandy land treated with arsenic sandstone (Wang et al., 2014), and the other develops a parametric approach to assess the resource–environment effects of implementing land consolidation projects (Zhang et al., 2014).

The remaining seven papers focus on land use transitions. Two papers address urban land use transitions: one examines urban spatial patterns of the gradients of housing and land prices and land development intensity, and then tests the relationship between the land price gradient and housing price gradient (Ding and Zhao, 2014), and another reveals the change of urban land-use intensity affected by rapid industrialization and urbanization and its implications for the City Master Plan (Gong et al., 2014). Five papers focus on rural land use transitions: Chen et al. (2014) explore the impacts of rural outmigration on land use transition; Liu et al. (2014b) discuss how land-use change takes place in response to inhibitive institutional forces in light of an outmoded land ownership system and unreasonable land use rights administration; Xi et al. (2014) analyze the process and driving mechanism of land use evolution in a tourist village during the rapid rural urbanization; Pan et al. (2014) simulate changes in cropping patterns under two alternative policy scenarios – subsidy scenario and technique scenario; and Zuo et al. (2014) develop grain production policy in terms of multiple cropping systems.

All sixteen papers underline the importance of land use policy in managing the land resource. The sixteen papers included in this themed issue are organized around four main areas of interest to both researchers and policymakers: (a) nation-wide land use issues; (b) Sloping Land Conversion Program; (c) land engineering and land use; and (d) land use transitions. The following sections outline the main arguments that each paper contributes to this fourfold focus.

### Nation-wide land use issues

The first paper on “Key issues of land use in China and implications for policy making” (Liu et al., 2014a) provides a comprehensive analysis of the key issues of current land use in China. The paper identifies in detail the major land-use problems due to rapid urbanization – including aggravated land conversion for non-agricultural use, built land vacancy and inefficient use, landless peasants due to land requisition, and the rural ‘hollowing’ problem. These problems have brought about significant changes

of urban–rural land-use patterns and human–land relationships in China. To cope with this, the Chinese government has recently introduced a series of land use policies and institutions including “requisition–compensation balance of arable land”, “increasing versus decreasing balance of urban–rural built land”, “reserved land system in land requisition”, “rural land consolidation”, and “economic and intensive land use”, the implementations of which are critically assessed in this paper. This paper argues that there is a challenge that current land use policies are all targeting different problems and the policies are implemented in parallel, but there is still a lack of an overall land use policy framework in China to focus these policies on the nation-wide land use system. In this sense, this paper proposes that a strategic land use policy system should consist of a strategic layer, policy layer and protection layer to guide sustainable land use in the future.

Ho (2014) elaborates the debate about property rights in development, which is frequently divided into camps of formal versus informal, public versus private, secure versus insecure property rights, and charts a way out of the debate impasse by arguing that we should not focus on institutional form, but on function. The paper uses the concept of credibility, drawing attention to institutional function over time and space rather than to a desired form postulated by theory or political conviction. This paper develops the methodology and empirical study on credibility and institutional functionalism by taking China as a case-study, with particular reference to its rural land-lease system, which is perceived to be highly insecure due to forced evictions and government intervention. The results from a nation-wide rural survey in China are analyzed to demonstrate that insecure tenure is not equal to non-credible (or socially contested) tenure. The study finds significant social support for the rural land-lease system and a low level of conflict, which might indicate that the form of the Chinese rural lease system (insecure tenure) is the outcome of its present function (provision of social welfare).

### Sloping Land Conversion Program

The four papers under this topic (Komarek et al., 2014; Lin and Yao, 2014; Yin et al., 2014; Zhen et al., 2014) aim to provide an understanding of the household-level effects of China's Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP), also known as the Grain-for-Green Program (GGP). The research results presented in these papers supported by multiple data sources demonstrate that changes both in land use and local livelihoods were triggered by policy changes. While the SLCP/GGP has brought about considerable environmental benefits, integrated research on environmental–social systems is still needed to improve current land use policy and shape a more efficient one.

Zhen et al. (2014) use satellite imagery to map land-use changes in Yanchang County, a typical ecologically fragile area in the Chinese loess plateau following the implementation of the GGP, as well as household surveys and government documentation to quantify the changes in rural people's incomes and in the population structure due to land-use changes. The paper finds that with the implementation of GGP and land use shifts, an increasing number of local people sought employment in towns and cities, which shifted the local income structure with the increase of non-farm income. The paper discusses how the GGP accelerated changes in the participants' lifestyles and what might be done to sustain the long-term effects of the GGP. It suggests further study of the “policy–land–use–social development” chain aiming at providing references for new policy making.

Komarek et al. (2014) examine how agricultural households involved in SLCP could respond to expected changes in environmental and livestock policies and changing commodity

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