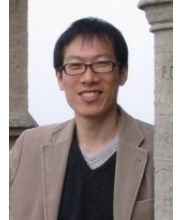


## Urban land battles in China: resistance and land politics

*As China is transformed, relations between society, the state, and the city have become central. **The Great Urban Transformation** investigates what is happening in cities, the urban edges, and the rural fringe in order to explain these relations. **Hyun Bang Shin** highly recommends this book to students of China's urbanisation, and those who would like to gain an insight into the underlying mechanisms of Chinese cities' territorial expansion and the emerging struggles around land and housing.*

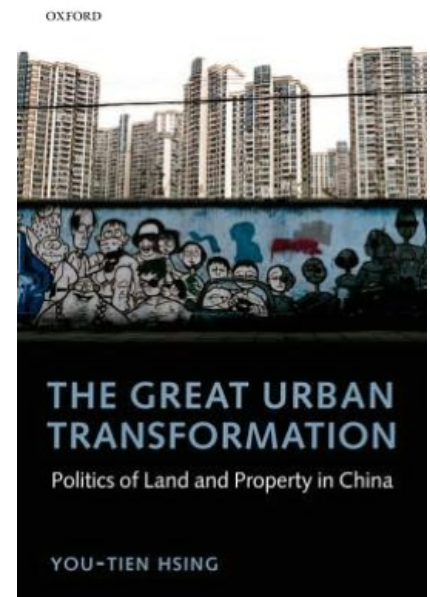


**The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China. You-tien Hsing. Oxford University Press. March 2012. Paperback Edition. 272 pages.**

### Find this book:

Even frequent visitors to China are amazed at the growth speed of Chinese cities. One of the first things a visitor to cities like Beijing or Guangzhou has to do upon arrival is to grab the latest version of the city map, as old streets and neighbourhoods disappear under the hammer and new ones emerge every few months, if not weeks. Cities also expand their administrative territory, merging rural countries and converting villages into urban neighbourhoods.

China's latest census in 2010 shows that [49.7 per cent](#) of the national population lives in urban areas. By the end of 2011, for the first time in its modern history, China has become an urban state with the urban population share exceeding 50 per cent. Not only have cities become the main loci of everyday life for the Chinese population, but they have also become the sites of wealth accumulation, experiencing profound changes that are sometimes referred to as 'the concrete revolution'. What is the major driving momentum of China's urbanisation? According to [You-tien Hsing](#), it is the land politics and the rising importance of land as assets for urban governments.



In order to help readers understand You-tien Hsing's arguments, it is perhaps useful to briefly explain China's land tenure system. In a nutshell, land in China is divided into state ownership of urban land and the rural collectives' ownership of rural farm land. One of the major milestones in China's reform initiatives was the land reform, which allowed the market transaction of 'granted land use rights' for urban land, detached from the state land ownership. In return for using the land for a fixed period of time (70 years for residential use and less for other uses), users pay land-use premium. Essentially this is a dualism of freehold and leasehold, except for the fact that the state is the only entity that can possess freehold. Urban governments are delegated by the central state with the power to administer this transaction, and the revenues collected such as land use premium go into urban government's extra-budgetary account. In the case of rural farm land, it is required by law to convert the rural land into urban construction land before the transfer of use right, the process of which is effectively to bring it under the urban government control.

You-tien Hsing argues that the state-land tenure and the dualism of land ownership and land use rights is at the centre of what she calls 'urban-centred accumulation', which becomes the key to understand why urban governments strive to expand its territory and pay attention to urban redevelopment in

existing built-up areas. As urban governments become increasingly dependent on land-generated extra-budgetary revenues to pay for urban construction, local politics increasingly revolve around land politics as urban governments seek various means to bring more land under their control.

To explain how land politics play out, You-tien Hsing produces a tripartite functional division of urban territories: (i) inner-city areas or the traditional urban centres; (ii) villages at the urban fringe where the urban intersects with the rural; (iii) rural fringe of metropolitan areas. In inner-city areas, she argues that urban land battles are fought between municipal governments and what she calls socialist land masters. The latter refers to those powerful enterprises or institutions, who believe they have *de facto* control of land they have occupied for decades during the planned economy period and who wish to benefit from the new land lease system. In urban fringe areas that become increasingly attractive for real estate projects, municipal governments strive to convert those parcels legally owned by rural collectives into urban construction land in order to bring them under the control of the municipality. Village collectives on the other hand strive to maintain a certain degree of territorial autonomy, while negotiating with much more powerful municipalities to maximise their gains for economic survival. In rural fringe areas that lie further away from the power of metropolitan governments, lower-tier township governments tend to exercise their informal power over rural land to promote various projects for township development, often involving illegal land use right transfer that leaves farmers landless.

In addition to the land politics at various geographical scales, what becomes even more enlightening in You-tien Hsing's analysis is how these politics lead to struggles and resistance launched by those people affected by the government land-grabbing. Following the tripartite division of urban territories, she pays particular attention to home-owners and (public sector) tenants in inner-city areas, who resist forced eviction and demand fair compensation and relocation in return for house demolition. In urban fringe areas, her attention moves to the struggle between land-owning village collectives and urban governments, which emerge out of the village collectives' aspiration to secure economic rights and out of their fight against urban governments' land expropriation. In rural fringe areas of metropolitan region, the township governments' illicit land expropriation strips farmers of their land for cultivation as well as their economic and social basis, occasionally resulting in "fragmented and localised" mobilisation.

You-tien Hsing's perspective on land-centred urban accumulation thus provides readers with a tool to clearly understand why urban governments in China strive to expand and why land has become so important for local governments. Her work also sheds light on the possible reasons behind the emergence of various protests launched individually by families who face eviction due to urban redevelopment projects. These projects often produce commercial flats that displaced residents can no longer afford. Her work also provides a convincing explanatory tool for analysing why township governments commit to illegal land seizures in spite of farmers' violent protests, as was the case in [Wukan, Guangzhou](#) at the end of 2011.

What is missing in her book perhaps is the story of migrant workers and their families who make up a substantial share of urban population. You-tien Hsing's emphasis on property ownership and the rising battles between legitimate property right holders leave migrants somewhere in the grey area, as they hardly have real properties to claim. Another dimension that puzzles readers would be the future of Chinese cities. How sustainable is this model in the long-term? Major cities that experience booming may be able to increase their affluence and continue to depend on urban land, but as land is finite, readers are left to wonder about how Chinese cities will cope in the coming years when cities (for various reasons) no longer find land to sell.

Nevertheless, *The Great Urban Transformation* is a highly recommended book to serious students of China's urbanisation who would like to gain an insight into the underlying mechanisms of Chinese cities' territorial expansion and the emerging struggles around land and housing.

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**Hyun Bang Shin** is Lecturer in Urban Geography in the Department of Geography and Environment at the [London School of Economics](#). His main research interests lie in critically analysing political economic dynamics of contemporary urban (re-)development and its socio-spatial implications, with special emphasis on Asian cities. Research topics include [urban entrepreneurialism](#), [mega-events](#), [urban conservation](#), [politics of redevelopment](#), [displacement](#) and [the right to the city](#). He has recently completed research on socio-spatial impacts of mega-events with a case study of the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, funded by the STICERD/LSE Annual Fund New Researcher Award (2009-2011). He is currently involved in URBACHINA, a four-year (2011-2015) international research collaboration funded by the EU Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), and is one of the key organisers of the Urban Studies Seminar Series (2011-2012), *Towards an Emerging Geography of Gentrification in the Global South*, funded by the Urban Studies Foundation and the Urban Studies journal. [Read more reviews by Hyun](#).

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