

BOOK REVIEW**Developing China: Land, Politics and Social Conditions****By George C. S. Lin****Routledge, London, 2009. 343 pages.**

Reviewed by Max Woodworth

In *Developing China: Land, politics and social conditions*, George C. S. Lin has produced a much-needed comprehensive account of the dramatic evolution of land use in China in the post-Mao era. He begins by focusing not on “land use” *per se* but on “land development,” which he defines as the “process in which land has been brought into more productive and profitable use” (p. 14). The key point here is Lin’s attention to the ways in which land in China is being connected into the circuits of capital, leading to dramatic changes to the social meaning of its use. In the course of his analysis, he demonstrates that this is not a background issue in China’s overall transformation, but, in fact, is absolutely central to the dramatic political, economic, social, and cultural changes reshaping the country today.

Though Lin is generally dispassionate toward his topic, the implications of his findings are eye-opening: prime agricultural land is being lost at an alarming rate, a rampant black market in land has emerged, urban encroachments into the suburbs are sparking social unrest, and misreporting of land uses continues to be rife. How the Chinese state will manage these treacherous conditions is unclear.

The book is divided into three sections. Part One provides a theoretical discussion of land use and property rights; Part Two looks specifically at land development in China with a focus on the post-Mao era; and Part Three contains case studies of specific processes — city build-out, rural urbanization, and city development under globalization. The rather conventional structure, moving from the general-theoretical to the particular, provides clarity on this tangled matter without losing sight of the tremendous variety and complexity visible on the ground. In this regard, Lin’s contribution is particularly admirable: he deftly offers a national account that simultaneously points in the direction of variational tendencies and provocative new research avenues.

Lin also succeeds in bringing into focus the productive relations between the urban and rural realms, which too often are ghettoized into separate research spheres that do not necessarily inform each other. *Developing China* is a rare dialectical interweaving of town and country.

This approach helps underscore one of his most significant findings, specifically that small towns and cities are expanding at an even faster rate than the mega-cities that capture most of the world's attention. To understand the dynamics of urbanization, greater attention will need to be paid to these spaces in the years to come.

This book's impressive scale of vision was enabled by the long-awaited publication in 2000 of the PRC's first national land survey, *Zhongguo tudi ziyuan* (*China's land resources*). From this empirical base, the analysis emerges through a painstaking process of comparison with *Landsat* images and compiled local data gathered during Lin's extensive forays into the field. If, to date, we have not had access to a national-scale analysis of land use, it is surely due on the one hand to paucity of reliable data, and, on the other, to the daunting and time-consuming task of reconciling conflictual official statistics. Lin has done China researchers a tremendous service by seeing this project to fruition.

Planners and geographers will find the rich empirical detail and the analytical findings especially useful and provocative. In particular, Part Two is a wealth of statistical data heretofore available only in scattered sources.

Where the book displays unevenness is in its theoretical underpinnings. Lin's arbitration of the debate over land-use rights, for instance, comes down against the neoliberal mystifications of text-based property rights as "naturally" engendering efficiency-maximizing behaviors. Yet the gospel of economic rationality rings through at moments, as when Lin laments that "millions of Chinese peasants were deprived of both ownership and use rights of their land and denied of their chances to make a better living out of the land with individual strength and creativity" (p. 164). He further opines on the "painful detour" of Maoism and rejoices that history has "returned to its natural course" under reform (p. 165). In a later passage, shortly after highlighting state actors' leading role in land-use malfeasance, Lin says: "Ultimately, ... how quickly [the government] allows land markets to develop will determine whether or not China's construction land will be used efficiently and rationally" (p. 196).

The upshot of such statements is that land use inefficiency derives from incomplete market operations and a lack of will on the part of government to enforce market institutions. The alternative view would be that the alleged inefficiencies are simply manifestations of a fully operational hybrid land market that has internalized its local contradictions. The emergence of a secondary land market in which land-lease titles circulate as purely financial assets must be seen as a telling development in this direction. Lin seems to sense this, and flags it as a topic for further research. That will be a task made immeasurably easier thanks to his work here.