The myth of China’s rapid economic acceleration has received a great deal of attention from scholars and commentators and has been explored extensively. While land remains an essential means of subsistence and capital accumulation in industrializing China, systematic investigation into the role of land use and its transformation in sustaining China’s economic growth is relatively scant due largely to a lack of comprehensive land-use data. Developing China provides a timely as well as systematic examination of land-use dynamics in rapidly urbanizing China.

Developing China is divided into three parts. Part 1 of the book presents an insightful discussion of the theoretical and conceptual issues upon which the dynamics of China’s land development under privatization and globalization can be understood. After the introduction, George Lin takes on a debate over China’s ambiguous land property rights in chapter 2. Lin demonstrates effectively the problem of the neo-classic logic on the casual relationship of clear definition of property rights with economic development by showing the empirical realities that China achieved in its remarkable economic miracle without a full-blown privatization at all. The limited and ambiguous property rights in China are manifested in social relations and gradually achieved initially from below by breaking regulations and later constantly negotiated and contested through various local institutional innovations. The flexibility that comes along with property rights ambiguity provides an efficient cost-saving means to adapt to local conditions and development needs. To search for new theoretical constructs that can help us explain the rapid pace of land development, Lin makes an attempt in chapter 3 to identify alternative theories in the literature on social and political origins of land development. From the classic political economy of capital accumulation to the growth machine model and urban regime theory, Lin argues convincingly that neither offers a satisfactory explanation of the underlining forces driving the land development processes in China because neither of these theoretical approaches incorporates the interplay among various actors and agencies across different spatial and temporal scales and the role of such interactions in determining the trajectory of land development. The distinct history and strong political control of the Chinese government also limit the utility of the Third World political ecology approach in which nature and society relations are understood as a product of the coalition of state agencies, local elites and global capitalism. By unpacking and situating China’s land development, Lin concludes that the ideological conviction favouring public land ownership, overarching concerns with food security and political stability, and the locally driven land capitalization process combine to determine the processes of
land development.

In part 2 of the book, Lin provides a systemic documentation and explanation of land use and its processes of change in contemporary China. In chapter 4, after an introduction to the evolving land management system from redistributive state socialism to a dual track post-reform regime, Lin provides an excellent clarification of how land is transacted for development in four segmented land markets. He claims that the dual track system of land management is “one of the root causes of the black markets, corruptions, and social discontents” (104), while elsewhere such dual track systems were celebrated as the centrepiece of successful economic reforms in China. In the following three chapters, by using data from the first national land survey, Lin first evaluates the structural and spatial change of land use in China in the past two decades and argues that the shift in ideology and transformation of the socialist economy have enabled the rediscovery of the economic value of land and engineered a dramatic conversion of agricultural land to industrial and urban uses in a government-led capital accumulation process across different localities.

Part 3 of the book highlights the regional characteristics of land development processes and explains how varying social, economic and political conditions have shaped regional trajectories of agricultural land conversion. Due to these varying conditions, forces of marketization and globalization have created diverse forms of land development necessitated under a new central-local fiscal relation. Chapter 8 compares two cases, Guangzhou and Hefei, and demonstrates the pattern of city-centre urbanization and land development. Chapter 9, on the other hand, identifies a more dispersed process of urbanization due to rural industrialization and expansion of rural settlements which is the most common form of land development in the Yangtze River Delta region. Chapter 10 uses Guangdong as a case study to demonstrate how reformation of central-local political and fiscal relations, intensified place competition, and the penetration of the global forces of accumulation have together fostered the intertwined phenomenon of land development and urban annexation and expansion. Using detailed land use data derived from Landsat images coupled with other information, Lin presents rich empirical evidence of the land development process in these localities and helps to debunk the myth of land use and land development situated in changing social and political contexts and conditions.

*Developing China* represents an important step towards a deeper and systematic understanding of the root causes of land use and land development in China. It critically engages with theoretical as well as empirical debates on land use pattern and land development process, and provides a valuable addition to the literature on China studies in general and the geography of China in particular.

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