In the last decade China witnesses a sea change of landscape in its rapid urbanization. The study examines the reshaped balance between central and local government in the arena of urbanization, specifically the structural changes in bureaucracy introduced by central government’s “governance through document”, and the broader social influences of this systematic governance. Based on institutional ethnography in a county level land bureau and archival research, the study identifies the dual roles of China’s central government: the reaper of interests from land speculation and the protector of peasants, and the conflicting tasks of local government: abide by the land law and achieve economic efficiency in land market. Further research includes tracking the production, transformation and implementation of various documents: maps, statistics, lists and account books, and examining the strategies of central and local government in fulfilling their conflicting goals and the new balance emerged from this process.

As same as in other developing countries, the local government in China forms a tight coalition with real estate developers in land speculation by encroaching farmland and peasants’ interests, specifically by exploiting the difference between market price of land and low compensational fee paid to the peasants.

However, the ambiguous role of central government is unique: it is the reaper and the protector at the same time. The authoritarian state benefits from rapid growth of local land market, which increases its fiscal income and supports its annual growth of GDP, thus the state awards local cadres’ performances in land market by political opportunities. However, with the decreasing farmland and surging peasant unrest, China’s food security and social stability are at stake, thus the state also punishes local cadres for their transgression of land law. Over time, this dual task increasingly introduces unpredictability into the bureaucratic system and reshapes balance between central and local government.

Despite the unpredictability of reward and punishment, there is a steady move towards systematic management of land use and governance through documents from the part of central government. Over the last decade, local government experiences expanded surveillance of land use by satellite images, and of money use by annual auditing. The Ministry also requires all plan maps and soil maps on the village level and above incorporate into its digital database with all the different map axes standardized, and all the data traced back to the same reference point. Whenever decisions are made to allocate quotas to local government’s new construction project, the Ministry runs the project in its database, any overlap between new and old project, or encroachment of the farmland red line would result in a denial. At the same time, monopolizing the right of designation of local officials, the central government now adds another prerequisite to upward mobility of local officials: strictly abiding by the rules while achieving economic efficiency. These criterion explain the supremacy of maps and account books in China’s bureaucratic system: beyond its traditional function of information transmission in the reporting line between central and local government, nowadays a clean and clear file is a prerequisite for land quotas as well as political opportunity.

Based on these observations in bureaucratic system in the process of urbanization, I consider the following questions worth asking:

1. Could the local government abide by the land law AND achieve economic efficiency in land market at the same time, when a large portion of interests originates exactly from land speculation and transgression of land law?

2. Could the central government launch its systematic governance through documents? What are the resistances from the local government and what are the compromises made by the central government?

3. What are the consequences of this governance through documents? How does it influence the relationships between central government, local government and the peasants?