

RECONSIDERATION OF THE URBANIZATION RESEARCH IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT: By restudying some ideas existing in the current urbanization research field in China, this article truly puts forward the inquisitive opinion with respect to the urbanization progress, urban scale, spatial transfer of urbanization and suburbanization in China, etc. It indicates that the urbanization shall abide by the economic laws, but government should bring the appropriate adjustment and control into play as well; the urbanization shall not be limited to the western pattern and simple phenomenal analysis, but to pursue the virtually healthy, orderly and sustainable development of cities is the main aim for urbanization. The main views of this article are as follows: 1) As far as Chinese urbanization is concerned, it is in a different age compared with the west, and it has one special domestic background, so its speed and mode are different from the west and the speed can't be too fast. 2) External extending economic development will still last for a period. And the urbanization development has big spatial requirements. Therefore, intensive development mode of space should be explored. 3) The suburbanization in China has special forming mechanism and relevant social problems, which should be treated seriously.

KEY WORDS: urbanization; suburbanization; urban scale

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The appearance of modern urban community is an outcome of industrialization and social development. The city itself indicates the concentration of population, tool of production, capital, enjoyment and demand. As a special intensive living space, city may, in the course of modernization, gather and agglomerate various resources to its own, and reflect and spread its functions to peripheral areas as well, which is the process of urbanization. No matter as a term or a phenomenon, since it was first used in the works "Fundamental Theory of Urbanization" by the Spanish engineer A. SERDO in 1860, the concept of urbanization has been very popular all over the world in the 20th century.

According to the statistics, after experiencing the twists and turns for nearly 30 years, the level of urbanization in China has rapidly been increased in the

past 20 years, which was 12.2% in 1977, 18.4% in 1980, 26.2% in 1990, and in 1994, the actual level of urbanization reached 32% ("Strategy Research of China Trans-century Urban Development" Theme Group, 1997). Obviously, as the absolute resources and spatial reorganization process of industrial structure transformation, and absolutely associated course of social civilization progress, urbanization is one of the signs for levels of the whole social and economic development and the unavoidable trend as well. In view of the above, until the western urbanization generally stepped into the stable period, we again re-realized the urbanization and its all-direction impact on the rural and urban society, and furthermore, the extensive study was made in various subject fields, such as society, economy, urban planning and geography. But since the

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1990s, with the gradual establishment of the market economic system in China, a series of changes have taken place in the course, mechanism, pattern and prospects of urbanization. So it's necessary to make a new review of urbanization.

1 URBANIZATION SHOULDN'T BE SPOILED BY EXCESSIVE ENTHUSIASM

The healthy urbanization is in conformity with the economic development, and in narrow sense, it synchronizes with industrialization, just as the American sociologist YEN Robinson pointed out: "Modern metropolis must be established based on industry. Its existence relies on the high production of mechanized agriculture, advanced communication networks, means of transport, storage facilities and various non-agricultural special work provided by big industry". To be sure, the most direct and powerful consumer market for industrialized products is still cities. Before 1978, the administrative means of high strength were adopted in China, which attempted to take the road of high industrialization and low urbanization, and the negative and one-sided attitude was taken to deal with the non-material production in cities. Therefore, it not only caused the inferiority of urban material environment, but also was greatly impacted by the liberation of rural labor force with the reform and opening to the outside world. On the one hand, the economic development undoubtedly requests the raising of level of urbanization, which has become a common sense. On the other hand, we again give way to impatience and rash advance and understand the absolute gap of levels of urbanization between China and western countries in narrow sense, thinking only a simple conformity relationship exists between level of urbanization and that of economy. Thus, a series of overtaking strategies are worked out. In some regions and cities, even considering from the viewpoint of selfish departmentalism, the regional balance as a whole, law of population increase and its workability are ignored; the high-set index for level of urbanization and quick increasing speed still more lack the basis.

In fact, as for the western countries, even in its initial high-speed economic development period, the increasing rate of level of urbanization is lower than that in China (Table 1). The average increasing rate for level of urbanization in the U. S. A. every 20 years is about 10%; whereas in China, since 1977, the rate has reached over 20%. Objectively seeing, since 1977, the

level of urbanization in China has been raised rapidly. Considerable part of the reason is the potential transferring population bombing, and also the concrete statistics problem (e. g. non-rural population statistics of organizational system changing from county to city). Therefore, it's worth doubting whether in the future, such a high-speed increase for level of urbanization can be sustained or not. Some scholars believe that in the future the urbanization in China will be increased at least by 1 percent annually, and in 2020, it will reach about 60% (GU *et al.*, 1997). Data show that the elastic coefficient of increasing rate between urban population and the total (U/T) has decreased to the present 2.3% from 3.98 in the early 1980s. The decreasing trend has appeared for increasing rate of urbanization. ZHOU Yi-xing, a famous scholar in China, based on the data over the years in many countries, made the summary that a logarithmic relationship presents between levels of urbanization and GNP per capita (ZHOU, 1995), i. e., the numeral relationship in different phases between the increase of level of urbanization and that of economy indicates the stage characteristics for the course of urbanization: in the initial period of industrialization, the proper increase of GNP could give an impetus to the big improvement of level of urbanization, but as the industrialization further developed, the impetus became smaller and smaller, and finally inclined to stability, which well explained the related developing phenomenon between urbanization and industrialization for the initial 20 years in China.

However, with the control of over-high speed of economic development by the state, and the structural filling of employment posts in cities, the level of urbanization in China can not continuously be maintained at high increasing rate in the long run (even for the initial 20 years, the rate was 1% per year). At present, a series of protective policies have been formulated to dismiss the labor force without registered urban permanent residence, so as to guarantee the opportunities for laid-off workers to be employed again, which shows the urbanization that exceeds the economic development has resulted in "over-urbanization" with phase characteristics. China doesn't lack the source of population needed for urbanization. From now on and in a considerable long period in the future, the tendency to the potential urbanization is tremendous. But the stable economic increase at fixed speed can't bear the high-speed process of urbanization. Even though the registered permanent residence system has its unrea-

Table 1 Level of urbanization in the U. S. A during the industrialization (%)

Year	1840	1860	1880	1890	1920
Level of urbanization	10.7	19.7	28.1	39.7	51.1

sonable side in society, in fact, owing to the limited bearing space of cities in China, it undoubtedly produces a cushioning effect. It's also why no serious "urban illness" similar to the west happened in the process of high-speed urbanization in the initial 20 years in China. From this sense, it still takes time to cancel the permanent residence and also the concrete operational means need further studies. But no matter what aspect is considered, it's obviously harmful and no good if the level of urbanization continues to be raised by 1% or more that is also impractical. Therefore, it can't be the basis if such a S-type curve process for urbanization by RAY M. Northam is simply and mechanically applied in China, which shows the level of urbanization will enter into high-speed increasing period after reaching 30%.

It still needs explanation that during the present increasing globalized economy and society, no doubt China has the independent complete system of its own, but it's impossible not to participate the division of labors in international regions. In the world scope, just like the disequilibrium for level of economy, the disequilibrium for level of urbanization absolutely exists. Finally, China can't reach the same level of urbanization as the western countries (80% or 90%). Moreover, the necessity is also worthy of further demonstration. As far as the Chinese conditions are concerned, comprehensively considering the regional disparities, bearing capacity between urban and rural space and the inter-stability, resource development limits and the abundant social employment, the final suitable level of urbanization should be controlled at about 60% - 65%. Obviously, it will not reach this equilibrium by 2020, which also doesn't synchronize with general development strategy of social and economic prospects worked out by the state.

2 URBANIZATION WILL CERTAINLY REQUIRE SPACE

The general trend for the urban development strategy in China is to control the urban scale, especially the scale of large, medium-sized cities. From "To control the scale of large cities and reasonably develop medi-

um-sized and small cities" formulated in "Urban Planning Law" to "To control the urban developing scale" currently put forward by some people, they simply mean to reach the aim of delaying the urbanization process by limiting the development of urban population. And the state has made the strict regulations concerning the inter-check between construction land in cities and towns and population scale.

Firstly, if the whole regional space all over China is considered, the surplus labor force in rural areas are bound to find the new living space, and land resources is limited. (According to the studies by Rural Development Research Institute of Chinese Academy of Society and Science, 151 million labor force are big enough to realize the complete harvest on land in China. At present, the net overstocked labor force in rural areas have reached 200 million). Even through deep and extensive development of macro-agriculture, still quite a large population must re-settle down in the regions beyond the rural areas, as wherever people are, making a living problem for people should be always solved, which is the transformation of economic structure and social structure. The famous sociologist PAUL HARRIS ever said "In fact, migration is a kind of form to use the feet to show people's own wills, and it requires that they can take one seat at the banquet which is being held. Happening of migration is because social and economic development doesn't balance to each other and distribution of the benefits caused by the economic increase is quiet unequal, which is a protest against the unbalance." M P TODARO, an American economist in development, quantitatively illustrated the inner-motive power of the model of population migration as:

$$M(t)/S(t) = r + P(t) \cdot f[d(t)]$$

where $M(t)$ is the increasing quantity of population in t period; $S(t)$ is the original urban population total in t period; $f[d(t)]$ is the actual rate of income disparity between urban and rural population; $P(t)$ is the possibility of employment for rural population in city; r is the natural increasing factor of urban population.

However, data show that at present, as the potential energy in China formed by the income gap between town and county is very high (Table 2), and ow-

ing to the development of modern society and technological progress in communication and transport, etc., the rural population are no longer limited to their original thoughts and living habits and don't ignore the living environment outside for themselves any longer. It possibly stimulates them to have more hopes in terms of their social status, level of consumption and the future for their children, which far exceed those provided on the basis of national conditions. It's just such super high hopes that lead to a massive migration force to move to cities in spite of day or night (YAN, 1991). If the surplus population are forcibly restrained in the countryside, it will not only result in the low efficiency of agriculture production, and the over-development and destruction of resources environment, but also initiate the further social conflicts so as to affect the city (In recent years, the chaos of social security in urban and rural areas are also affected by this factor). How can

people talk of sustainable development? Therefore, it is practical and effective to positively adopt the dredging measures.

It also needs to dialectically look at the idea "the enlargement of urban scale wastes a lot of land". It's true that the township enterprises and development zones that have spurred up everywhere have occupied a lot of valuable land resources. But this kind of partially extensive use method can't cover up the facts that construction land per capita in cities and towns in China, especially the land used for residence, road and afforestation is overall on the low side (it was 101.55 m² per capita in China, whereas in the western common cities, it was about 200 m² per capita, even those megalopolises where land use is in short supply, land use per capita also exceeded 100 m²), while in cities and towns, especially in the megalopolis, the spatial bearing density for people has almost been saturated

Table 2 The income & consumer gap-times between urban and rural people

Item	1952	1970	1978	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1990	1991	1995
Income gap	-	-	2.37	1.70	1.72	1.95	1.98	2.05	2.02	2.18	2.58
Consumer gap	2.40	2.28	2.90	2.26	2.24	2.37	2.55	2.71	2.94	2.94	3.34

Source: China Rural Statistical Yearbook, 1996.

Table 3 Comparison of the average population capacity of cities with different scales in China ($\times 10^4$ persons/km²)

Year	Megalopolis	Metropolis	Medium-sized city	Small city	Average
1982	1.54	1.19	1.10	0.87	1.22
1985	1.56	1.19	1.11	0.85	1.24
1988	1.50	1.10	1.06	0.84	1.14
1991	1.52	1.03	1.03	0.83	1.12

Note: Megalopolis with a population of $\geq 100 \times 10^4$; metropolis, 50×10^4 ; medium-sized city, $20 \times 10^4 - 50 \times 10^4$; small city, $\leq 20 \times 10^4$.

Source: SHI Yuan-an, 1996. Analysis of unusually increase of urban population and land in China since the 1980s. *Urban Issue* (1). (in Chinese)

(Table 3). Of course, China is constrained by the land resources conditions, the economic intensive level for land use in cities and towns still is not high (mainly referring to land of production use). But there is no denying the fact that, too many restrictions placed on land use scale in cities. Actually they are imposed on completing of urban functional construction and raising of environmental quality, and the most affected is undoubtedly people's residential living space. On the one hand, the urban economic total should be raised; on the other hand, no effect is spared to constrain the

urban scale, which is obviously an awkward matter.

According to the relevant data, the main reason for the decrease of cultivated land in China at present is to reduce the cultivated land for afforestation (29.7%), as well as to reduce the farming land for grazing (18.4%). In recent years, the newly-increased land of urban use accounts for 3% - 5% of the decrease of farming land in the same period. Reducing the original land area for 389 cities newly increased after 1981, the actual increase is lower than this figure (XU, 1997), and the elastic coefficient for land use is also basically

Table 4 Elastic coefficient for construction land in 31 metropolises (1984 - 1995)

	1993	1995	Increase rate of 1983 - 1995 (%)
Total land use (km ²)	3592.8	4906.5	136.56
Total population (× 10 ⁴ persons)	5210.9	6833.6	131.14
	Average annual increasing rate of land (%)	Average annual increasing rate of population (%)	Elastic coefficient of land
1984 - 1995	2.63	2.28	1.15

Source: China Urban Statistical Yearbook (1985 - 1996)

in conformity with the agreed 1.15 by the domestic land experts (Table 4). It's thus clear that such an increasing speed for land of urban use is normal, and no basic conflicts between urbanization development and agricultural development exist.

City is most characterized with its intensiveness (population, resources, industry, economy, etc.), and the intensive benefits in metropolis are very clear. Developed countries in the world almost don't avoid the growth of metropolis while developing the economy. In China, the economic increase for a long period will still draw support from the main force of metropolis. So-called urban problems, to considerable extent, shows the insufficiency of development of hardware and software in cities. It's really like "refraining from doing the necessary things for fear of a slight risk" if the strategies are adopted to restrain metropolitan development simply from the viewpoint of "city size". Even in terms of the areas in South Jiangsu Province, new changes have taken place to the "South Jiangsu Mode" which has been propagated and advocated all along. Gathering of population and industries in small towns is a low-level one with considerable administrative interference in it. Under the market-oriented conditions in recent years, they have gone through the process of "Re-urbanization" gathering in medium-sized and small cities, and their original space is substituted and occupied by production factor from comparatively backward regions. Therefore, small towns are facing a universal decline. From the above, we realize that "leaving the land not leaving the village" urbanization in the countryside of South Jiangsu is actually only one stage, not a kind of mode or ending of urbanization process.

For a period of time in the future, continued growth of Chinese urbanization is inevitable. The proper guide and control is necessary to adjust land of

urban use structure and tap the benefits. But the urban scale can't be simply limited without exception. Seeing from control measures of Chinese urbanization in future, one of the important measures is to take advantage of its own original registered permanent residence to control and guide the quantity, speed and space of rural population transferring to cities and towns, and selectively and orderly open some towns and medium-sized and small cities.

3 SUBURBANIZATION SHOULDN'T BE OVER-OPTIMISTIC PHENOMENON

Has suburbanization for residents emerged in China? It seems that more and more scholars have recognized it. Suburbanization for residents, in literal sense, is a voluntary migration action with people gathering in central areas to some extent in the course of urban development, and with the guarantee of rich life and transport conditions. From analysis of its happening mechanism, suburbanization in essence is the result of pursuing the superior residential conditions. If the downtown area can provide people with enough comfortable living space, in addition, its convenient facilities that can't be substituted offset its gap with suburban environment, it's hard to make the conclusion whether suburbanization for residents is the inevitable stage of urbanization or not. It's worth discussing whether decline of population in central areas indicates the beginning of suburbanization. Let's take the population spatial transfer in Suzhou City as the case (Table 5). According to population transfer mode by P. HALL, it can be concluded that suburbanization of population in Suzhou has taken place with the characteristics of external migration and dramatic increase of population in fringe area from the core areas. But further analysis is made that the main motive power for the

Table 5 Characteristics of population spatial transfer in Suzhou City (1982 – 1990)

Spatial levels	Population in 1982	Population in 1990	Net increase of population	Net increase rate (%)	Average annual increase rate(%)
1. Core downtown	369. 968	336. 955	33. 013	- 8. 92	- 1. 16
2. Fringe downtown	187. 206	327. 852	140. 646	75. 13	7. 26
3. Fringe village and town	185. 260	209. 768	24. 568	13. 27	1. 57
Total for fringe areas (2 + 3)	372. 406	537. 524	165. 214	44. 36	4. 70

Source: Evolution Mechanism and Control Research of Land in Cities and Towns, Suzhou District. Nanjing University

process is economic aim. In the function, the residential action is basically subordinate and passive, in particular, decline of population in core areas is led to by promotion of governmental strong will and prompting of high business profits (In essence, it's different from the western suburbanization. The beginning of large-scale urbanization in western countries is an indication of decline of central cities. However, on contrary to it, the construction of downtown in China is now in the ascendant), and is an over-market action. P HALL simply took the relative movement of population in different urban districts as the standard for urban suburbanization, describing the spontaneous suburbanization mode under the conditions of the pure market action in western countries. However, it can't differentiate the suburbanization from population disperse in central areas resulted from reformation of urban central areas. So, we may make the mistaken conclusion that the suburbanization in China has begun. Virtually, it is just urban expansion, which is in unstable conditions. In fact, population external migration from downtown in China is fundamentally a kind of passive course and organizing action: the low-income class are forced to move to the suburbs. The inferior suburban facilities, the inconvenience of commuting and the limits of places for working and children's education make those external migration population have the rebounding trend, while the downtown provides the rich with spacious residence, which, thus, causes the disintegration of the old residential community, the difficult conformity of new residential community, the conflicts among urban rural and floating population communities and the germination of opposing feelings from different classes. If not well dealt with, they will cause the further social contradictions and enough attention must be paid to them from the relevant authorities. Speaking from this sense, it's better for us to emphatically study the cor-

responding mechanism and influence of urban expansion than to make efforts to study when suburbanization will start in China. In the future, as it's impossible for cars to become the common tool of transport for urban households, which, therefore, limit the commuting radius (6 – 8 km) permitted in cities. The trend of spreading growth of cities becomes very severe. The group-like urban distribution structure absolutely can't only stand in this pattern. The balance problem among population, employment and education of different groups must realistically be well-solved.

Perhaps, it's not necessary to painstakingly pursue the stages, such as urbanization index and suburbanization, and successively carry on the complete mode of western urbanization. It's really meaningful to be based upon Chinese conditions, guarantee the fairness, keep the social stability and orderly adjust the urban structure so as to realize the exchange and radiation of urban and rural areas with the economic activity as the main body. Para-market mechanism combined by market adjustment and governmental interference is not only the inevitable result decided by the characteristics of the current Chinese urban development in special objective society, economic background and the market of its own, but also the theoretical choice in conformity with the development logic of market theory.

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