Habitat International 42 (2014) 103–110

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Habitat International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/habitatint

Urbanization in remote areas: A case study of the Heilongjiang Reclamation Area, Northeast China

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Keywords:
Urbanization
Resettlement
Heilongjiang Reclamation Area

A B S T R A C T

In a remote part of Northeast China, thousands of villages have disappeared from the map. Their inhabitants, more than 600,000 farmers, have been instructed by the government to relocate to nearby towns and commute to their farms to work. By concentrating the dispersed rural population in a small number of urban cores, the government hopes to improve housing conditions and accessibility to services, stimulate economic development, and free up more land for farming. This paper analyzes this kind of urbanization, which is distinct from the much-studied city-centered urbanization and in situ urbanization in coastal China. In addition to the resettlement program, this urbanization process is driven by agricultural modernization and economic liberalization. Urbanization has produced a rural–urban hybrid settlement system where urban construction coexists with a mostly agrarian economy. Urbanization has also improved the livelihood of many rural households, but there are significant social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that urbanization in post-reform China is primarily driven by rural–urban migration and the growth of existing cities (Chan, 2010; Zhang, 2008; Zhang & Song, 2003). Since 1978, the discontinuation of collective farming and the commune system, the relaxation of rural–urban migration control, and uneven geography of economic development have created what is often coined 'the largest human migration in history'. In 2011, there were 230 million migrant workers, approximately 80% of which were from rural backgrounds (Wang & Fan, 2012). These migrant workers typically go to eastern seaboard regions of Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Beijing, Jiangsu, and Fujian, where economic opportunities are abundant. Rural migrant workers significantly contribute to the rapid growth of cities in these areas, but are still subjected to socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural discrimination that renders them second-class citizens (Wong, Li, & Song, 2007). At the same time, the expansion of cities leads to the conversion of agricultural land into development zones (Yang & Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2011) and up-scale gated communities (Lo & Wang, 2013). In most cases, entire villages are uprooted, though occasionally they are left intact and become urban villages (Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2009). Landless farmers in these urban villages often embrace new livelihoods as landlords, renting out their property to migrant workers working in nearby factories (Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2010).

Although important, city-centered urbanization is far from a totalizing phenomenon in China, and scholars have posited an alternative pathway to urban development known as in situ urbanization (Zhu, 2000; Zhu, Qi, Shao, & He, 2009). In this model, rural settlements and populations gain urban elements without significant spatial relocation of their residents. The role of local leaders in initiating rural industrialization through establishing township and village enterprises is often emphasized (Fei & Luo, 1998; Friedmann, 2006). Also known as 'urbanization from below,' (Shen & Ma, 2005) the majority of these rural enterprises are privately owned, although many were registered as collective enterprises to prevent political persecution before Company Law was introduced in 1994 (Huang, 2012). Alternatively, some rural areas in China have successfully industrialized and urbanized through utilizing foreign direct investment (Zhu, 2000). A classic example of this so-called 'urbanization from outside' (Sit & Yang, 1997) is Shenzhen in the Pearl River Delta. A neglected fishing outpost during the Mao era, this dilapidated and depopulated village developed into a thriving metropolis and economic powerhouse with a population of over ten million people, primarily

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2013.11.003

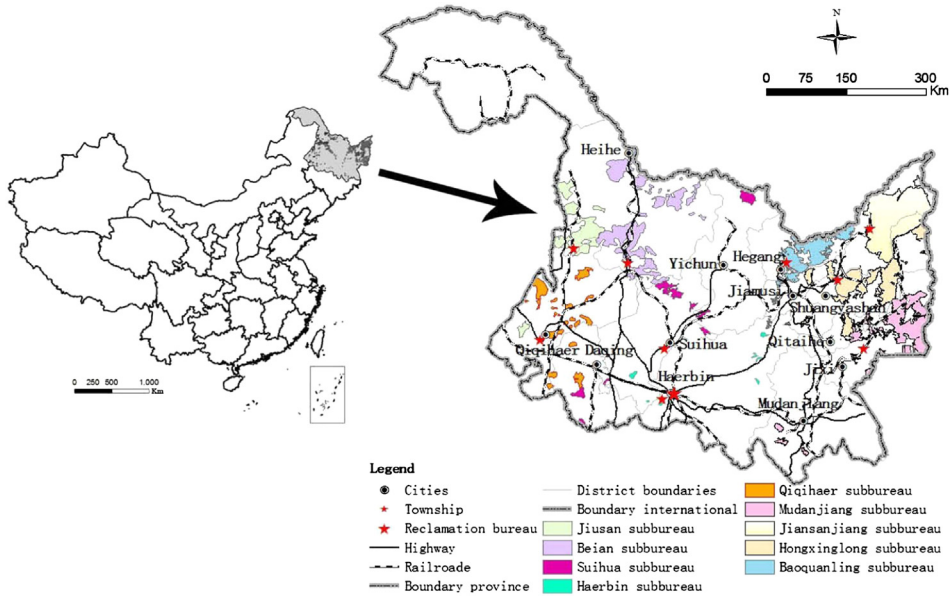

Fig. 1. The Heilongjiang Reclamation Area.

through investments from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Chan, 2011; Fei, 1992; Ng, 2003). That most of the city's inhabitants are migrant workers reminds us that in situ urbanization and rural–urban migration are not mutually exclusive, and the synergy of the two urbanization processes is referred to as 'dual-track urbanization' (Shen, Feng, & Wong, 2006). In situ urbanization in China is limited to rural areas neighboring existing metropolises and therefore can be understood as an infiltration of urban activities into the surrounding countryside. Based on this understanding, scholars have drawn similarities between in situ urbanization in China and the influential *desakota* model developed by McGee (1991) based on his observations of Southeast Asian cities, such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok (Xie, Batty, & Zhao, 2007). However, these studies mainly focused on the eastern China, urbanization studies in remote areas of China have been neglected in some degree (Gu, Wu, & Cook, 2012).

Reclamation areas (*kenqu*) in China are remote regions that were formerly uninhabited wilderness areas designated for the purposes of agricultural reclamation and border security. These regions are distributed widely within 31 provinces and municipalities in China, but those located in Heilongjiang, Xinjiang and Hainan provinces are the largest. Since most reclamation areas are dispersed in remote parts of China beyond the influence of existing metropolises, their experience with urbanization is distinct from the two models of rural–urban transformation identified above. In this paper, we take the Heilongjiang Reclamation Area (HRA) as a case study and examine the urbanization mechanisms and consequences in the region. We begin with a brief discussion of the characteristics, development history, and governance of the HRA. Then we explain the HRA's urbanization mechanisms, followed by an analysis of the result of the transformation, which is a rural–urban hybrid settlement system, and the main challenges of this top-down urbanization process. This paper concludes with suggestions for future research.

The Heilongjiang Reclamation Area

The HRA is located in Heilongjiang, which is the northeastern-most province of China, bordering Russian Siberia for most of its northern and eastern boundaries. The region earned the nickname the 'Great Northern Wilderness' (*beidahuang*), reflecting the remoteness, inaccessibility, and sheer vastness of the area. Covering approximately 55,400 km^2, the HRA is not continuous, but rather comprises pieces of land distributed along the China–Russia border (see Fig. 1). These are the largest reclamation areas in China and are famous for their fertile soil and plentiful water resources. However, farming in these areas has always been hampered by long, harsh winters that rule out the utilization of multiple cropping sequences prevalent in other parts of China. As of 2011, the most important crops in terms of areas planted were rice (46%), soybeans (22%) and corn (22%).

HRA has a low population density, which is unusual for China's agriculture-based rural areas. In 2011, the HRA's population stood at 1.71 million. The population density, at 30.9/km^2, is very low by Chinese standards. The low population density is a reflection of a low population growth rate since 1978, averaging to only 0.02% per year. The low population growth rate can be attributed to two causes. First, the implementation of the one-child policy beginning in 1978 has had a significant effect on the country's natural population growth rate, and the HRA is no exception. Most farm workers in the HRA are classified as non-agricultural and therefore do not enjoy the special allowance of a second child if the first child is a female.[1] In 2006, the HRA's natural population growth rate became negative for the first time and continued to decline to −1.26% in 2010. Second, migration is another reason for the low population growth rate. After 1978, a lot of volunteers who came to HRA reclamation during the Mao's era gradually go back to their hometown. What's more, a lack of economic opportunities in the HRA has triggered a out-migration in recent years.

[1] Chinese population is classified into either agricultural or non-agricultural; the former group is entitled to land ownership and receives more lenient regulation with regards to the one-child policy. The reason for the HRA farmers being classified as non-agricultural is that the land in the HRA is owned by the state, not by the peasants. Because the HRA farmers do not own land, they cannot be classified as agricultural.