



## Note on urbanization in China: Urban definitions and census data



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### ABSTRACT

The first release of the Sixth National Population Census results in April 2011 revealed that mainland China had a total population of 1339.72 million, of which 665.58 million resided in urbanized areas. This suggested that the urbanization process had accelerated during the period 2000–2010, with an increase of the urbanization rate from 36.09% to 49.68%. However, due to the incomparability of the Censuses data, caution must be taken when urbanists investigate or model Chinese cities by such datasets. This research note summarizes and compares the shifting definitions of city (市, *shi*) and urban population (城市人口, *chengshi renkou*) statistics with an emphasis on the Sixth Census, and analyzes their implications for measuring and understanding the urbanization process in China.

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## 1. Introduction

As a result of rapid economic growth in the three decades since the initiation of economic reforms in 1978, China has undergone rapid urbanization, which may be considered one of the fastest and largest in the world history (World Bank, 2002). The latest (sixth) population census taken on November 1st of 2010 confirmed the steady growth of the urban population in China. In April 2011, the first communiqué on the Sixth Census released by China's National Bureau of Statistics reported that, among the total population of 1339.72 million, 665.58 million were urban residents (*chengshi renkou*) (NBSC, 2011a, 2011b). It suggests that the urban population share in China rose significantly from 17.92% in 1978 to 49.68% in 2010, rising by 493.13 million. As a point of comparison, as of December 2010 the entire U.S. population numbered 310.86 million.

This dramatic and huge urbanization process in China, the largest country in the world in terms of population, has many important implications for the rest of the world. On the side of “supply”, millions of migrants moving from rural to urbanized areas have provided an abundant labor force, which partly explains the competitiveness of “made-in-China” products in the global market (Du, 2006); on the side of “demand”, the large number of new urban residents who are eager to improve their living conditions creates enormous need for almost everything, from tasty foods, larger apartments, and better health care, to fancy clothes, limousines, art collections and other luxuries (Ye, 2000).

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Although urbanization and urban development in China have gained increasingly more attention from the academic community, understanding the data of the urban population and urbanization level is no easy task. Some economists have cast doubt on the GDP statistics in China, arguing that they have been fabricated and exaggerated (Rawski, 2001). Intuitively, compared with GDP statistics, population statistics ought to be more reliable as it is easier to count people than to assign and calculate the value of products. The existing literature, however, consistently points to serious troubles with population statistics (Chan, 2003; Chan, 2007; Chan & Hu, 2003; Ma & Cui, 1987; Zhang & Zhao, 1998; Zhou & Ma, 2003). One of the main difficulties in understanding China's population statistics is that not only are definitions of the urban population complex, but they have also been adjusted over time. The shifting urban definitions confuse not only foreign scholars but also Chinese experts.

It is of note that in Mandarin the word *shi* can refer either to an administrative city-region or to an urbanized area (also known as 城市 *chengshi*). Thus, the English terms “urban” and “city” are used carefully in this study and are not interchangeable. For instance, we use “urban population” rather than “city population” when referring to the population of an urbanized area (*chengshi renkou*). In this essay, we summarize and compare the statistical criteria defining China's city (*shi*) and urban population (*chengshi renkou*) employed by the National Bureau of Statistics over the past decades, with an emphasis on the Sixth Census taken in 2010. We highlight the implications of shifting urban definitions in measuring and understanding China's urbanization process. In Section Two we first introduce the definition of a city and the administrative hierarchy of the cities in China, underscoring that in China a city (*shi*) is not the same as an urbanized area (城市地区, *chengshi diqu*). Section Three explains the shifting definitions of urban population (*chengshi renkou*) and discusses their relationship to the changes in urbanization level. Section Four analyzes the latest definition of urbanized area in the Sixth Census and compares it with other countries' population statistics. Section Five applies these definitions and concepts to examine the urban population and urbanization level according to the data already released from the Sixth Census and decomposes the factors contributing to the increase of urbanization level between 2000 and 2010. The final section concludes by highlighting new trends in the urbanization of China, common pitfalls in urban statistics that scholars need to avoid, and indicates future research directions once more detailed data from the Sixth Census are released to the public.

**2. The definitions of city (*shi*) in China**

Theoretically, the city is an important type of social organization that serves as a driving engine for economic growth. Many empirical studies have found that most manufacturing and service production is more efficient when undertaken in cities, where firms can benefit from better intermediate goods supply, greater labor pooling and knowledge spillovers (Duranton & Puga, 2004; Glaser, 1998). As loci where firms can easily copy best practices in technology and management from each other, cities are the centers of innovation as well (Glaeser & Mare, 2001).

Despite its importance in reality and in comparative economic analysis, across the world, there exists a variety of definitions and classification schemes for the city. The difficulty in creating a clear definition of a city is due to its complicated nature as a form of social organization, which inherently has intricate social, legal and political implications. Perhaps for the sake of simplicity the technical

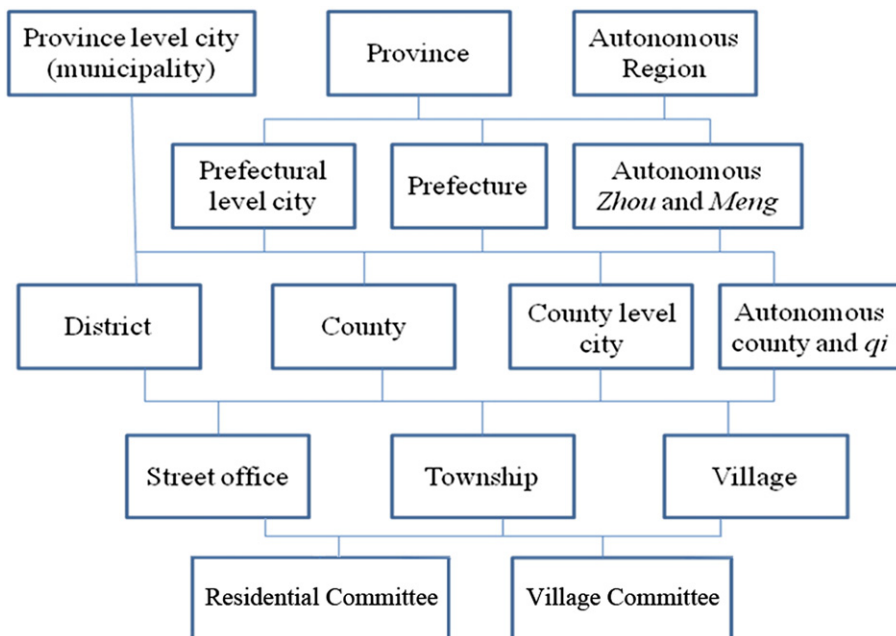


Fig. 1. The administrative divisions in China.

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