



Assessment on the urbanization strategy in China: Achievements, challenges and reflections



Xingliang Guan^a, Houkai Wei^b, Shasha Lu^{c,*}, Qi Dai^d, Hongjian Su^b

^a National Academy for Mayors of China, Huixin West Street, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100029, PR China

^b Rural Development Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, No.5, Jianguomen Street, Dongcheng District, Beijing 100732, PR China

^c School of Economics and Management, Beijing Forestry University, No.35, Tsinghua East Road, Haidian District, Beijing 100083, PR China

^d School of Foreign Language, Beijing Forestry University, No.35, Tsinghua East Road, Haidian District, Beijing 100083, PR China

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ABSTRACT

The “China Dream” is an “Urban Dream”. Urbanization is an inevitable requirement for promoting social progress. The Chinese government sees sustainable urbanization as an engine of modernization and economic growth. And the country's urbanization has followed a unique course and is perhaps the greatest human-resettlement experiment in the world history, unprecedentedly transforming the Chinese society in a very short period of time. Yet problems have arisen during the historical process, China's unique path to urbanization has avoided many of pitfalls existing in the developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America. This paper attempts to conclude the good jobs as well as problems in China's urbanizing process which might provide successful experience for the underdeveloped nations and regions to promote urbanization. The most brilliant achievement of urbanization in China is that thousands of years' agriculture-dominated country has ended and a new urbanized country has formed, which only consumed several decades. The country's urban infrastructure, living conditions and public service for urban residents have made great improvements. The fostering urban agglomerations are considered to lead the country's socio-economic transformation and possess the greatest potential for the urbanization and economic growth in the coming decades. In general, the traditional land-centered urbanization in China is a typical “incomplete urbanization” and “low-quality urbanization”, presenting impressive characteristics of “four highs and five lows”—high investment, consumption, emission and expansion, and low level, quality, harmony degree, inclusiveness and sustainability. Undoubtedly, the traditional urbanization of China is increasingly difficult to continue and the transformation process should be speeded up as soon as possible. The country should actively explore a people-oriented new-type urbanization way, i.e. an intensive, efficient, rural-urban integration, harmonious and sustainable urbanization model.

1. Introduction

The Nobel laureate in economics Joseph E. Stiglitz once said: “high-tech development in the United States and China's urbanization would be two key factors affecting the process of human society development in the 21st century”. Urbanization refers to the process of expansion in urban population and urban scale, and the corresponding series of economic and social changes (Wang, Hui, Choguill, & Jia, 2015). The essence of urbanization is a region's or a country's transformation development in economic structure, social structure, and spatial structure. In terms of economic structure, urbanization involves the process of agricultural activities transition to non-agricultural activities and the upgrading of industrial structure; in social structure, urbanization involves the process of rural-to-urban migration and urban areas' culture,

lifestyle and value diffusion to the countryside; and in spatial structure, urbanization involves the process of a variety of production factors and industrial activities gathering to urban areas and the following redistribution (Wei, 2014). Urbanization is an important engine of modernization and economic growth and considered to be the inevitable trend of human social development (Bai, Shi, & Liu, 2014).

The “China Dream” is an “Urban Dream” (Taylor, 2015). China's urbanization process has followed a unique course and transformed the country in a very short period of time since the reform and opening up (Chen, Liu, & Tao, 2013; Long, Zou, Pykett, & Li, 2011, 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Zhang, 2008). The country's urbanization and urban development have made remarkable achievements, yet problems and unhealthy factors have increasingly arisen, involving high costs, heavy pollution, serious “urban diseases” and sharp social issues. It is a good

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: wei_houkai@263.net (H. Wei), sasafly0505@163.com (S. Lu).

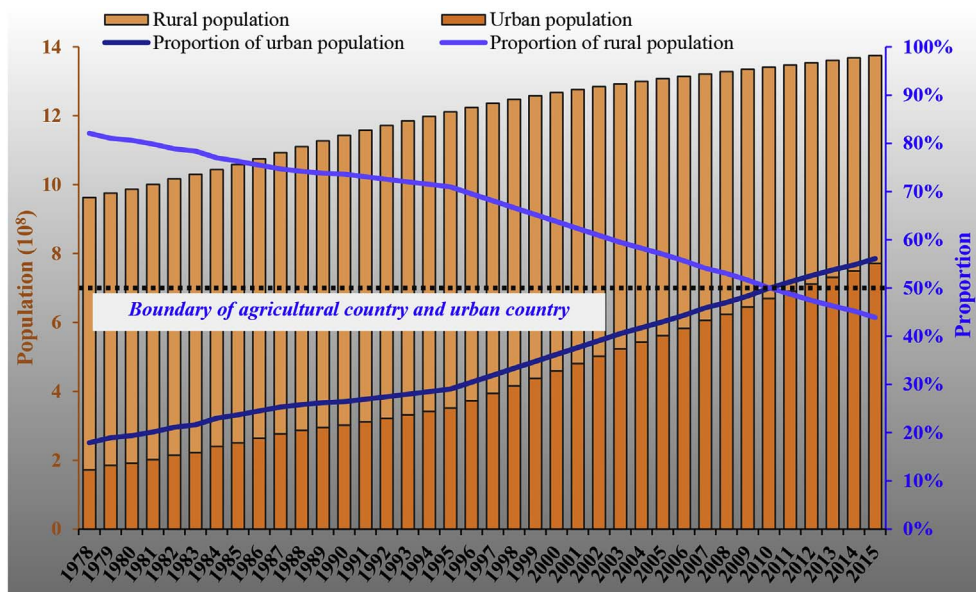


Fig. 1. Urbanization level, and urban and rural population in China from 1978 to 2015.

Note: The data comes from *China Statistical Yearbook* (NBSC, 2016).

job to conclude the achievement, challenges and reflection of the urbanization process in China for that the underdeveloped nations in Africa, Asia and Central and South America can learn from it. This paper therefore summarizes the achievements, investigates the main problems and its causes, and in particular, carries out reflection on various drawbacks of the traditional urbanization strategy in China.

2. Achievements of urbanization in China

China has made brilliant achievements in sustained rapid socio-economic development as well as large-scale urban population growth since its reform and opening up in 1978. The main achievements could be summarized as follows.

2.1. The largest agricultural country successful transition to an urban country

China has experienced a rapid and continuous process in urbanization since its reform and opening-up, which has resulted in great changes in social structures (Fig. 1). For instance, the urban population increased from 172.45 million in 1978 to 771.16 million in 2015, with an average annual increase of 16.18 million; the corresponding rural population reduced from 790.14 million to 603.46 million, decreasing by 5.05 million annually. As a result, the urbanization level of the country increased from 17.92% to 56.10%, with an average annual increase by 1.06 percentage points. In particular, the pace of China's urbanization significantly accelerated since 1996 and then maintained at a high speed with an annual increase by 1.35 percentage points from 1996 to 2015, which is 4.5 times higher than that in 1949–1978 and 1.9 times higher than that in 1978–1996. In 2011, the urbanization level of China exceeded 50% for the first time and the permanent population living in urban areas exceeded those living in the countryside. This indicates that thousands of years' agriculture-dominated country ended and a new urbanized country has formed.

Compared with the worldwide urbanization process at the same period, China has made more significant achievements than other countries. According to the 2014 revision of the *World Urbanization Prospects* produced by the UN Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the global urbanization level increased from 39.4% in 1980 to 51.6% in 2010, with an average annual increase by only 0.41 percentage points and the urbanization level in China has increased from 19.4% to 49.2% during the same period, with an average annual increase of 0.99 percentage points. During this period,

the urbanization level in the developed countries increased from 70.1% to 77.5%, with an average annual increase by only 0.25 percentage points; while the urbanization level in the under-developed countries increased from 29.5% to 46.0%, also with an average annual increase at a low level—only 0.55 percentage points. In 2014, China's urbanization level has reached the world's average level in the history. Considering the time of the urbanization level from 30% to 50%, it costs more than 50 years in average in the world—nearly 40 years for the United States, more than 20 years for Japan, and only 15 years for China.

2.2. Urban areas continuously playing a predominant role in the national economy

With a rapid increase and massive agglomeration of population, production factors and industries, the functions of urban areas in China have been further strengthened. Urban areas are taking a control in the national economy with obvious enhancement in their scales and economic strengths. A large number of global cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Chongqing, Wuhan and Xi'an etc. have positioned themselves as regional and national centers, even as an international metropolis, dominating the comprehensive competitiveness and development of the country of China in the globalization processes (Lin, 2002; Zhao, Chan, & Sit, 2003). Also, the small and medium-sized cities are playing an active role as centers and radiators in stimulating economic and social development in the surrounding countryside area with an irreplaceable contribution.

The demographic and economic data in 2015 showed that 295 prefecture-level cities and municipalities covered a total built-up area of 733,490 square kilometers, which accounted for only 7.6% of national territory area, while the total population over this area reached 446.38 million accounting for 32.5% of the total population in China; the gross domestic product (GDP) amounted to 42.8 trillion Yuan accounting for 62.5% of China's GDP, in particular, the added value of secondary and tertiary industries accounting for 66.9% and 73.8% of the total in China, respectively; the social consumer goods retail sales amounted to 19.04 trillion Yuan accounting for 63.3% of the total in China.

Compared with 2000, for cities of prefecture level and above, the proportion of the built-up area to the national land area in 2015 increased by 3.0 percentage points, while the proportion of GDP, the retail sales of social consumer goods, total investment in fixed assets, and local fiscal revenue to the national total increased by 15.3, 12.8, 6.1 and 6.2 percentage points, respectively. During this period, although

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