



Development and transition of small towns in rural China



Chaolin Gu^{a,*}, Yan Li^b, Sun Sheng Han^c

^a School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, China

^b Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan

^c Melbourne School of Design, The University of Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Small towns are important drivers for China's urbanization, but at the present they have no autonomy in deciding whether or not to sell their land, what the planned future is, how urban land will be developed, whether or not to borrow and/or raise funds from the financial market. The public services and facilities such as schools, hospitals, cultural and community centers, and public housing are usually poorly developed in small towns, failing to meet the basic needs for urban growth. As such, both the development of rural China and the broader urbanization and modernization processes are checked by inadequate power of decision-making and poor services in small towns. This paper advocates the designation of a new type of city in China, i.e. "county-serviced city" (CSC, *xian guan shi*), to qualified small towns within the existing administrative hierarchy. The CSC will have the same rights as all other Chinese cities in dealing with their economic development, but it will remain in its current position as a township level unit in the administrative system and continue to be served with social services and public goods by its county government. The paper is presented in seven sections with an emphasis on the principles of "decentralization" and "small government, big society", the experiences in other socio-economic and cultural contexts, and a scenario of status-change in *Nancun* township, *Qingdao*, *Shandong* Province.

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1. Introduction

In 2014, China's urbanization level reached a remarkable level of 54.77% with 749.16 million of its population urban. This significant progress with more than half of the Chinese now live in cities is an accumulative outcome of rapid urban growth in the past 40 years (Zhang & Han, 2009). However, China's urbanization level is still lower than the average in developed countries where 80% of their population is urban; it is also lower than the developing countries which have a similar per capita income but have 60% of their population urban (United Nations, 2013). According to *National New Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)* released in 2014, China's urbanization level in 2020 will reach at 60%, and about 100 million rural population will become new urban residents. The UN Population Division also expected that China's urbanization level will reach at about 76% in 2050. *The Government Work Report 2015* launched by Premier Li Keqiang revealed that urbanization is a

fundamental way to reduce the disparity between China's urban and rural areas; it is also the main source of the largest internal demand to stimulate instant economic growth in China. It is particularly worth to note that the Chinese central government has chosen to focus on the "three 100 million people", i.e., 100 million agricultural population to settle in cities and towns, 100 million urban residents to have their housing in shantytowns and/or urban villages redeveloped, and 100 million new urban residents to settle in cities and towns in the central and western regions. The latter 100 million new urban residents in the central and western regions aim to rectify the regional imbalance of urbanization in China. In 2013, for example, the eastern region had over 63% of its population urban, while the central and the western regions had only 49.7% and 46.0% of their populations urban respectively. Moreover, the pace of urban population growth varied greatly between different cities grouped by population size. According to census data, there was an obvious trend in the period 2000–2010 that China's population has concentrated in megacities, very large cities and big cities. At the same time, small cities with resident population of 0.5 million or less also accelerated in growth (Table 1). This is especially true to county-level city and towns serving as county-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gucl@tsinghua.edu.cn (C. Gu), yanli@apu.ac.jp (Y. Li), sshan@unimelb.edu.au (S.S. Han).

Table 1
China's urban population growth (2000–2010).

City groups by size	2000 (The fifth Chinese census, million)	2010 (The sixth Chinese census, million)	Growth (%)
Megacities (1) (10 million)	48.68	73.35	50.68
Very large cities I (5–10 million)	41.27	59.52	44.20
Very large cities II (3–5 million)	30.26	42.54	40.60
Big cities (1–3 million)	66.07	92.90	40.61
Medium-sized cities (0.5–1 million)	74.37	98.66	32.67
Small cities and towns (0.5 million or less)	198.58	303.23	52.70
Total	459.22	670.20	45.94

Source: Data from the Fifth and the Sixth Census.

Table 2
Addition to urban population in Chinese cities (2000–2010).

City groups by size	Addition to urban population (million)	Addition to migrant residents (million)	Proportion of new migrants to new urban population (%)
Megacities(1) (10 million)	24.66	14.78	59.94
Very large cities I (5–10 million)	18.24	9.35	51.26
Very large cities II (3–5 million)	12.28	6.89	56.11
Big cities (1–3 million)	26.83	11.61	43.27
Medium-sized cities (0.5–1 million)	24.30	7.04	28.97
Small cities and towns (0.5 million or less)	104.65	3.43	3.28

Source: Data from the Fifth and the Sixth Census.

seats. Data about migrants in cities also indicate a similar trend of population concentration in larger cities (Table 2).

It has just reported that a 7% growth of the GDP was recorded in the first quarter of 2015. This is below the government expectations, and is the lowest growth rate since the world financial crisis in 2008. Even worse, there is a huge possibility for further slowdown of the Chinese economy. There are indications that traditional areas of economic growth such as manufacturing and the real estate have been weakened. Clearly, it is no longer feasible to rely on megacities, very large cities and big cities to absorb surplus rural population. The smaller cities and towns need to play a key role in China's new urbanization. However, the process of converting counties to cities was stopped in 1997, and the number of the county-level cities dropped from 400 in 2000 to 369 in 2011. The number of designated towns increased from 19,692 in 2000 to 20,401 in 2011. Nevertheless, more than 20,000 towns had little development thus could not assume a helpful role in accommodating new urban residents.

Apparently, the development of small towns has presented a bottleneck in Chinese urbanization. China has significantly restructured its urban administrative/spatial system since the 1978 economic reforms to empower central cities to play a leading role in driving national and regional economic development (Ma, 2005). This paper will examine the problems in small town development and discuss an operational solution for advancing China's urbanization and sustainable economic growth; the proposed solution is based on changes in the scale relations (as discussed in Ma, 2005) by introducing the County-Serviced City (i.e., CSC, or, *xian guan shi*) and reorganizing the urban hierarchy involving townships and counties.

2. Current status of China's small towns

Small towns in China are plenty. They are usually dominated by a single economic activity, weak in revenue making, and lack of power to self-govern. This situation has not only impeded the development of rural China, but also prevented China from further processes of urbanization and modernization.

2.1. Large quantity but small size

China's small town has a long history for more than 1400 years since the *Tang* dynasty (618–907), serving as central places in rural China (Zhong, 2014). There are plenty of them spreading all over the county. In 2014, there were 20,401 designated towns, 39.80% of them in the coastal region, 32.00% in the central and 28.20% in the western region (Fig. 1). However, the population sizes of towns are usually small. The average population of towns in China was about 6000–8600 people in built-up areas (Table 3).

2.2. Single economic activity domination

There are various economic activities that dominate the growth of China's small towns, but for any given town it is most likely that its economy is dominated by a single activity. A case study in *Hubei* Province shows that in small towns with a strong manufacturing sector, town expansion was fueled by manufacturing development (Gu, Zhao, & Zhang, 2012). Industrial development also stimulated the growth of the agriculture sector by providing farm product processing, and rural tourism. However, high dependence on industries, especially large scale factories, is a problem because when manufacturing is in its down turn, the town enters a stage of stagnation. In one of the towns in *Hubei* (i.e. *Qujiawan*), industrial decline forced the unemployed migrant farmers and fishermen to go back farming and fishing in their home villages, which were in remote locations about 15 km away from the town; they commuted everyday by motorcycle. This not only defeated the vitality of the small towns but also caused inconvenience to migrants thus led to decline in their standard of living. The trade town *Fengkou* has served as a center of trade, transportation, education, medical care and the real estate in the northern *Honghu* region. Its urbanization level increased to 40% even though it annexed a large area of rural land in 2001, and the linkages between secondary and tertiary sectors has driven the development of urbanization obviously. However, in general, employment of these small towns is still largely agricultural, accounting for 50% of the total employment in most towns but for 60% or more in a few (Gu et al., 2012).

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