

China's Counter Urbanisation: The Great Leap Backwards

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Abstract

China's urbanisation – its speed and extent - has become the stuff of legend: growing from an urban population of 17% in 1976¹ to around 64.6% of the total population in 2023² During this time, of course, the national population has also risen massively. As a number of researchers have pointed out, Chinese statistics have always been difficult to interpret or to accept, but we have a reasonable assumption that China's population in 1975 was between 850 –931 million³; and at its peak in 2022, it was 1.41 billion. In other words, its urban catchment increased statistically and numerically, from around 140 million to 945 million.

However, in recent years, a number of factors have influenced the relentless rise in China's urban population and recalibrated relations with the rural areas. This paper seeks to explore a few of these issues; namely the impact of Covid (and, more importantly, the lockdown of society); the housing crisis and its impact on the national economy; the historical and contemporary influence of a national self-sufficiency narrative, and the consequences of population decline. All of these stories are wrapped up in the urban v rural divide that continues to blight the country. Whether this societal division can be resolved into a more liberal definition of free movement - regardless of relations to land designation - is yet to be resolved, but there are changes currently taking place that will redefine the way that urban and rural areas and occupants are conceptualised. This paper is a short exploration of the possibilities and challenges arising from this socio-political shift in China's historical-demographic organisation.

Keywords

China, self-sufficiency, de-urbanisation, Chengdu, eco-cities, greening

CHINA'S URBANISATION RATE

At the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there were 120 cities across the entire country. By 2024 – that's within just 75 years – it had amassed a total of 662 cities, some 160 of which have more than one million residents.⁴ It has 21 megacities (defined, according to the Notice of the State Council on Adjusting the Criteria for Urban Classification as those urban areas with a resident population of over 5 million living in central urban areas), seven cities with a population of more than 10 million (classified as “super large-sized cities”) including, of course, Shanghai and Beijing with a population of more than 20 million.⁵ It is also developing regional clusters – linked city regions - as significant power blocks in their own right.⁶

China's rapid pace of urbanisation has been well documented. Although there are several layers of artifice in the classification of Chinese cities (mentioned later), the urbanising dynamic associated with the country still represents an impressive journey from a rural, peasant economy to a high-tech powerhouse over the course of merely a few generations.⁷

China may classify itself as a developing nation, but it is predominantly “an upper-middle-income country”⁸ that has lifted over 800 million people out of poverty, predominantly through its urbanisation. Admittedly, while President Xi Jinping formally announced in December 2020 that “China has accomplished its poverty alleviation target”⁹ there are still small but significant pockets of deprivation, and the United Nations

Development Programme claims that there is evidence of “multidimensional poverty” affecting 17.4% of the population; such deprivation includes a lack of adequate housing, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel, nutrition and school attendance.^{10, 11} For instance, 2.4 million rural children aged 6 – 17 years were found not to be attending school across many rural areas.¹² And even though there is still abject poverty and associated health and well-being issues in a number of areas of the country, things are generally improving. Those living at or below the International Poverty Line of US\$2.15 per day has been virtually eliminated:¹³ it might seem a low bar when the average wage in China is US\$44 per day, but the alleviation of poverty in China has been a remarkable first step in a series of socially-beneficial improvements.

As society develops, so the population's material expectations in the world's second largest economy have grown rapidly. The lead writer from Hong Kong's University of Science and Technology notes, “Thanks in part to urbanisation, China's economy grew at an average annual rate of more than 10% and the share of urban GDP within the national total doubled between 1978 and 2017.”¹⁴

It's quite clear that China's urban drive has tended to be dialectically related to its rise as a global power. In other words, China's urbanisation has helped to drive innovation and economic dynamism, which in turn requires a larger urban workforce that then pushes for more, bigger and better metropolitan areas. Of course, China's desire to enter and rise up the

ranks of the global order has also provided a significantly pragmatic rationale for its conscious urban strategy. As a result, the new cities – the expanded cities – have to be better than the smoke-stacked, car-centric, smog-dominated urban centres that were prevalent at the end of the millennium.

GREENING THE ENVIRONMENT

Chinese cities, especially 1st Tier cities, now claim state-of-the-art infrastructure, contain decent facilities and their urban focal points often tend to centre on shopping malls and cultural assets rather than the Party headquarters, ceremonial squares, and municipal edifices of yesteryear. However, it is notable that the trend towards a necessary and desirable modernising impulse of the 21st century, has meant that, as one researcher puts it, those “mass-rally squares (have been) refashioned through policy and practice as important elements of green urbanism.” The Party’s technocratic approach to the issue of urban beautification has tended to place particular importance “on greening rates”¹⁵ whereby the state is mandated to measure everything, using specialized greening indicators, vegetation indices and ecological datasets.

Target-setting bureaucracy aside, cities have cleaned up their act to become acceptable places (with more amenities and better urban quality and utility) catering for the expectations of foreign experts, investors. and a growing number of sustainability consultants on the globalised conference circuit. This was symbolically expressed at the Shanghai Expo in 2010 with the motto “Better City, Better Life” when,

as Shaun Rein, managing director of China Market Research Group says, the Expo showed “that Shanghai is ready to be a prime-time modern global city.”¹⁶ It was something of a turning point at which the quantity of cities became less important than the quality of the urban condition.

Just as English urban planner, Ebenezer Howard had conceived of a “town-country” ideal in order to alleviate the problems of congested, polluted and overcrowded cities in Victorian England 125 years ago, so China’s “National New-Type Urbanization Plan” that was introduced ten-years ago, focused on “green city development.”¹⁷ Its focus was to reduce overcrowding, pollution, and congestion. It added some opportunity for leisure and relaxation, introducing nature into the concrete jungle. The development of Tianfu Park City, for example, a new urban ecological area on the outskirts of Chengdu (urban population, 16.8 million) was reputedly modelled on Howard’s Letchworth Garden City,¹⁸ with major differences in scale and ambition, of course. Whereas Letchworth Garden City totals 20km², Tianfu has provided an equivalent area merely of greenery - 19.5 km² - included as 1,556 new public gardens.¹⁹ This is China’s Kuznets Curve moment. It means that whereas China’s long game previously focused on quantity - or economic growth as the numerical measurables of urban expansion, in percentages of people raised out of poverty - now it claims to be looking at quality of those lives and the liveability of those places that they inhabit.

ROLE REVERSALS

The flipside of greening the city, is industrialising the villages. Whether it is seasonal rural tourism, the promotion of heritage crafts and ecological leisure pursuits, or large-scale commerce, factories and infrastructural maintenance work, the rural economy is being reorganised. In part this is devised as a levelling up strategy so that the so-called “left-behind” areas can benefit in some of the generalisable gains of China’s economic improvements.

For about 35 years, China’s rapid development has caused understated harm to rural communities as young men and women leave their families and hometowns to labour in the factories, construction yards and restaurants of Guangzhou, Shenzhen or Shanghai, etc. leaving their children and elderly relatives to fend for themselves. UNICEF claims that, in 2020, there were 42 million children in agricultural communities with absent parents.²⁰ There is, of course, a flow of migrant labourers’ wages from the industrial regions back home to the villages, but increasingly, the realisation of real emotional and psychological harm caused by the long-term separation of parents and their children has forced the state to intervene to try to ease the situation. As a consequence, the Party has recently been encouraging locals to remain local and not to migrate. In reality, China is sending labouring migrants back to reinvigorate their villages and to focus on the merits of family and community but also to consciously halt the flow of migrant labour from rural areas, to build up some of the rural economy in order to encourage people to

stay, and to bolster consumer spending within China’s heartland.

The digital economy has also facilitated some to remain in villages (rather than migrate to sell one’s labour in a sweatshop elsewhere) by allowing a Working From Home culture that has impacted much of the world during and post-Covid. Concentrated investment in informational infrastructure means that the internet penetrates deep into China’s rural heartlands, and, in some instances, it allows erstwhile migrants (those who bring essential skills to the more high-tech sectors of Beijing or Guangdong) to work from their eyries in Henan and Shaanxi province, for example. These are the exceptions, of course and many of the rural poor are not benefiting financially from these policy shifts.^{21, 22} So while the state media, Xinhua, claims that, as a result “well-educated young people with new ideas and skills, began to move from big cities to the countryside,” returning as “new farmers”²³ in fact these forced returnees don’t want to be farmers.²⁴ It cannot be merely a statistical coincidence that anyone living in the countryside is removed from China’s unemployment statistics (because the authorities consider that rural inhabitants can at least farm if they have no other work).²⁵

PROBLEMS AHEAD

In 2023, China’s population fell by around 2.3 million, a significant figure in small European countries, but just 0.16% in China’s case. However, it is a significant moment, representing the first downward turn in the relentless growth of the population for 400 years, (and especially in

the last 50 years). Add to that the demographic shift and you have a recipe for real concerns.²⁶ In 2023, approximately 21% of China's population was over 60 years old; where the retirement age is 60 for men, and 50 for "ordinary female workers." By 2049 - the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Peoples' Republic of China – it is predicted that 40% of the population will be over 60. To solve the problem, or at least to solve the appearance of the problem, the Party has decreed that the retirement age will gradually increase so that, by the time of the centennial celebrations in 2049, the retirement age will be at least, 63 for men and 55 for women and the figures will look slightly less daunting. Even if the Chinese authorities can convince themselves that massaging the numbers can solve the underlying problem of decades of demographic manipulation, there are a range of other concerns that have impacted on the way China sees the future. All of a sudden, China's irrepressible rise seems to be an altogether less harmonious project.

The lockdown severely impacted the economy and closed down many opportunities for migrant workers on the eastern seaboard. As we have seen earlier in this report, many fewer are coming for work, preferring, and encouraged, to stay at home. Added to this, as the construction crisis unfolds – a result of the Evergrande housing scandal – so still fewer will come. The online magazine, Sixth Tone says that "While the construction industry has topped the list in terms of migrant workers' average monthly earnings for the past decade, it accounted for just 15.4% of this workforce (in 2023), down

from 22.3% in 2014, indicating that more than 15 million labourers have left the industry in that time."²⁷ The Wall Street Journal writes "Until recently, housing construction was one of China's biggest industries, creating millions of jobs (but) commercial real estate is starting to run into trouble." Analysts at Japanese bank, Nomura add, "with 20 million or so unfinished, presold homes behind in their delivery schedules, the housing crisis is not over yet."

With global and domestic challenges threatening the unchallenged rise of China over the last four decades, in an unprecedented speech to the Party in October 2024, President Xi was compelled to note that "the road ahead will not always be smooth, and difficulties and obstacles are inevitable. We must remain mindful of potential dangers and be well-prepared, and resolutely overcome uncertain and unforeseen risks and challenges."²⁸ It would seem that China is having to trawl through its historical memory-bank to try to reset the narrative.

THE RURALIFICATION OF THE URBAN

China has always had an historical obligation to honour agriculture, rural regions, and farmers ("San Nong"/三农) and celebrate the CCP's rural foundations. Indeed, over the last forty years, it has prioritised agricultural and rural issues above all others in its annual pronouncements. It is the focus too of its current Rural Revitalization Strategy, introduced by President Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress in 2017. In 2022 alone, rural areas were provided with 400 billion yuan (\$62.86 billion) of loans from the China Development Bank²⁹ during the tail

end of Covid, aimed at protecting its food supply within China: ensuring a regular supply of domestic agricultural basics.

Indeed, this kind of self-sufficiency has long been a concern for Chinese administrations – in pragmatic and cultural terms – harking back even before the great famine of the Great Leap Forward. But recent events such as China’s draconian Covid lockdown, economic decline, and the war in Ukraine have renewed a sense, and a need, for Chinese self-protection. China, for all its agricultural potential is the world’s biggest importer of food, such that its reliance on domestic food production has fallen by 30% in the last 20 years. The ruling party now considers this trend a food security crisis. Once again, in the political mindset, it believes that if the delivery of food and resources are not guaranteed – if delivery might be blighted by external forces of war, lockdown, trade disputes or tariffs, for example – then China will have to do it themselves. Its own farmers are being called upon to feed the nation. In June 2024, the Chinese Communist Party passed its first food security law that seeks to lower its reliance on overseas purchases through what it now calls “basic self-sufficiency in cereal grains and absolute self-sufficiency in staple grains for food use”.³⁰ Suddenly, the urban reliance on the agricultural sector has flared up again, reminiscent of the Mao era. Similarly, China might be reacting to this problem in an equally technocratic manner.

Here is one example. Chengdu is the core city of the Chengdu–Chongqing Urban Agglomeration, the largest urban agglomeration in South-

west China. Over the last 20 years, the city has increased its urban area by a factor of five, and yet its concurrent concentration on environmental improvements has allowed it to be known as the “National Forest City.” It has also been awarded the “Most Happiness-Inspiring Cities” certificate. As we saw earlier, Chengdu’s Tianfu New Area is feted because of its parks, gardens, and walkability. Indeed, the local government has spent several years and invested around US\$5 billion to create these “greenways” that were part of a plan to encircle the city (“to envelop Chengdu in one massive garden”) and to transform the urban environment. China Daily claimed that by 2035, Chengdu would have completed its “beautiful, livable garden city... driven by an ‘ecological civilization’.”³¹

Fast forward to today’s more uncertain times – just five years later – and the city authorities, under central Party command, are ripping it all up to return it to agricultural land. The government has mandated that forests be turned back to farmlands but in the minds of many a local government apparatchik, that also means turning any useable land into arable land. Quoted in the Financial Times, an official says, “We reclaim these plots to send a signal that we care about food security... Output is not a priority.” A recent report by Radio Free Asia cites a local news story: “The government has made it clear that only grain and vegetables can now be grown on farmland, and that... previous farmland must be reclaimed.”³² Bulldozers have already started ripping up green areas and replanting with wheat. The happiness quotient of the tax-paying locals who funded the original

urban greening project has fallen. Some people have called it a “New Great Leap Forward” to compare it to the target-driven absurdities of the Mao-era. That was a time when ever more unfeasible food production targets were handed down to agricultural work units, who, in turn, fabricated results or produced ever poorer quality foodstuffs to hit those targets. The lessons haven’t exactly been learned.

URBAN-RURAL IDENTITY CRISIS

The classification of China’s cities changes regularly, as does the Party’s official definition of who is an urban resident, who is a migrant or a temporary resident, and who is an outsider (a rural dweller). In the 1960s, for example, tens of millions of urban residents were reclassified, with their urban status revoked and removed to rural areas.³³ This change in human designation accounted for nearly 18% of China’s total urban population at that time. It is a brutal example from China’s past, where the urban population fell from 19.8% in 1960 to 16.8% in 1963 as predominantly urban intellectuals were shipped from the cities back to the countryside as part of Mao’s rustication movement. It was a failed experiment in “industrialization without urbanization”,³⁴ described by author Xuefei Ren as “a clear anti-urban bias in national policymaking in the socialist period.”³⁵ Post-Mao, a more logical approach to industrial urbanism took over, but even today, as China emerges as a “moderately prosperous society”³⁶ through the auspices of a socialist market economy,³⁷ China’s contradictory relationship with the rural peasantry and its urban residents continues.

In July 2024, the Chinese State Council released a directive that sought to address a significant problem with China’s potential development plans. This groundbreaking policy stated that it will “implement a people-oriented New Urbanisation Strategy”; one that will make the urbanisation of China’s rural migrant population its “primary task.” To do that, it needs a fundamental reform of its residency permits and it also needs to reframe how it understands the differences between “the urban” and “the rural.”

The hukou system is an internal passport that distinguishes the legal and social differences between those from urban and rural communities. It was introduced in the early 1950s and extended across China in 1958 as a way of controlling population movement. Even though it has gone through many iterations in the last 70 years or so, the general principal remains in place to this day. It is a household registration scheme that classifies people by the location in which they were born and their family’s historical status (determined by parental, especially maternal, inheritance), and it enables the state to allocate benefits and assert control accordingly.

Those with a rural hukou were traditionally those with access to the land – agricultural workers and their families - who were provided food allowances (often determined through the local commune’s authority, especially during the years of collective farming), while those registered with an urban hukou have been given preferential access to housing, healthcare, education, etc which were usually determined via

local work units. In 1964, the national census recalibrated how it defined the urban population to make it more favourable to its internal political agenda with rural people designated as “grain producers” and urbanites as “grain consumers.” More importantly, under the hukou registration system, by being denied urban status, agricultural workers were also excluded from education and welfare benefits. It has been a blight on the nation that there is effectively an internal passport that means that an accident of birth separates two tiers of life opportunities.

Now the differentiation between urban and rural is being challenged, as a consequence of the various problems facing Chinese society. As we have seen, China needs people to have more disposable income, it needs to resolve its housing oversupply crisis, it needs to re-invigorate cities post-Covid, it needs to resolve the demographic deficit, and predominantly it needs to build a sense of aspiration again. By removing the disparities related to the hukou system, it makes it possible to allow rural migrants to settle in urban areas and not be forced frequently to spend money on travelling to their rural hometowns to conduct registration matters, for medical attention, to enrol their children in school, etc. Announcing the measure Premier Li Qiang stated that it potentially grants 300 million migrant workers, rights to the city. Central Party policy wonks will undoubtedly assume that this ticks all the boxes. What could possibly go wrong?

These changes are significant and are to be welcomed, of course, as a further chipping away at the illiberal constraints on free movement across the country. The latest challenge to the status quo came on August 2024, when The State Council of China decreed that rural migrants will be permitted to buy property in order to integrate rural migrants into urban economies. At present, investment in Chinese real estate is expected to fall by around 50% in the medium term, and the housing and construction industry is slowing down dramatically, so it seems like a clever ploy to sell off some of the surplus stock. It seems like a win-win. But there have been concerns raised that “urban residents might view these migrants as competitors for jobs and resources, potentially stirring social tensions”³⁸ or that selling apartments to migrants to reinvigorate the housing market will inevitably lower the market value of urban hukou residents’ properties. This policy doesn’t apply to all cities (Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Beijing, etc have avoided opening up to this extent), but the blurring of urban/rural distinctions – this time, in terms of rights, finances and citizenship – continues. We wait to see what the consequences will be.

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