

Chunfei WU, Xiaojiang LI, Pengfei LI

What should be done for the “second half” of China’s urbanization?

© The Author(s) 2017. Published by Higher Education Press. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)

China is experiencing the most extensive and fastest urbanization in human history. Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, with rapid industrialization, 750 million people have moved to cities and towns and the urbanization rate has increased from 17.9% to 57.4% by the end of 2016. As a result, the total number of cities has increased to 655, and these cities constitute the emerging multicenter networked urban systems (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). The transformation from “rural China” to “urban China” has been completed, and China has officially stepped into the “second half” of its urbanization.

Urbanization is of undoubted importance in the modernization process of China. However, compared with the “first half” of urbanization, the “second half” is facing numerous problems and challenges. Firstly, both the global and local economic environments have entered new phases in recent years—the phase of adjustment of globalization and the New Normal of Chinese economy. The changing macro environment calls for a transform to the traditional mode of extensive urbanization, otherwise it will lead to the deterioration of resources and the environment, the expansion of the gaps between urban and rural areas, and the excitation of social contradictions, which will probably cause the “middle-income trap” (Zheng, 2017). Secondly, while the problem of aging is getting more severe, the labor force that has supported the rapid growth of China for many years has declined in 2014 for the first time. Meanwhile, population mobility from the mid-west to the eastern coastal areas has slowed down, and population backflows occur in some areas. Thirdly, the new non-farm employment sector, which consists of

college graduates (57%) and new generation migrant workers, has exhibited new demands of life, which have changed from solving the problem of food and clothing to the pursuit of quality of life and personal development. This situation calls for new social space provided by urbanization. To address the aforementioned challenges and demands, the “second half” of China’s urbanization should take an efficient, inclusive, and sustainable path and focus on crucial topics, such as city spatial layout, urbanization path, and civilization.

Firstly, attention should be directed towards the balanced development of densely and non-densely populated urban areas. From the perspective of urban spatial development, dense urban areas are dominated by urban agglomerations, such as the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Pearl River Delta, which are mainly distributed along the coastal areas and the Yangtze River, and are gradually forming continuous megalopolises. From the perspective of development process, the population in dense urban areas continues to agglomerate, but its marginal benefit decreases and the development of non-dense areas accelerates. To be more specific, the proportion of permanent residents in densely populated areas has risen from 73% to 75% since 2000, whereas the proportion of the gross domestic product has declined from 87% to 85% mainly due to the slow growth rate in dense urban areas which is left far behind the rapid growth of non-dense areas. The gaps between densely and non-densely populated urban areas, as indicated by reports from the World Bank, will converge gradually with national development and increases in resident income (World Bank, 2009). Non-dense areas, which are characterized by abundant natural resources and cultural landscape, are capable of meeting the growing demands for leisure and tourism of the middle-income groups. This feature will provide essential support for exploring the new urbanization path with Chinese characteristics.

Secondly, the coordinated development paths of small-

Received August 25, 2017

Chunfei WU, Xiaojiang LI (✉), Pengfei LI
China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, Beijing 100037, China
E-mail: lixj@caupd.com

and medium-sized cities and towns should be given attention. Currently, super large-sized and large-sized cities, where excessive functions have been clustered due to resource allocation based on administrative-levels, host over 20% of the urban population, which will further aggravate the “great urban disease.” Meanwhile, nearly 60% of the new urban population is congregated in medium-sized and small cities and towns, which have low capability to provide jobs, services, and governance. In the next stage, the focus of urban development in China will shift from concentrating on scales to improving functions and breaking the growth inertia (Wu, 2015). Relying on the urban agglomeration platform and intercity cooperation, large cities will focus more on producer service, medium-sized cities on manufacturing, and small cities and towns on characteristic industries and servicing the villages. Therefore, large, medium and small cities with complementary advantages and distinctive features can form a coordinated development pattern based on the integration of transportation networks, ecology, infrastructure, and mechanisms. The characteristic developmental area should explore urban integration with regional center cities, and special development paths with small towns. The border areas should explore the special development paths of strongholds and corridors.

Thirdly, the urbanization and citizenization dreams of a large number of floating populations should be taken into consideration seriously. For the 230 million migrant workers who move to cities and towns without urban *Hukou*, the household registration system has prevented them from enjoying the corresponding educational and medical services and made them a special group in the urbanization process (Friedmann, 2005). To address this problem, varying citizenization policies should be implemented in cities that belong to different urban agglomerations and levels under the new urbanization framework of efficiency, inclusiveness and sustainability. To be more specific, super and extra large cities should reasonably

control the sizes; large-sized, medium-sized, and small-sized cities actively encourage residents to settle down; and counties and key towns promote “double-city double-dwelling” urbanization. In addition, by abiding by the urbanization rules and respecting the selection differences of various groups, differentiated and targeted urbanization strategies shall be implemented respectively in three groups (who migrates across provinces and cities, local urbanization within provinces, “double-town double-dwelling”) and three types of places (inflow place, outflow place, and relative balancing of migrant populations).

The “second half” of China’s urbanization will undoubtedly continue to proceed at a considerable speed. Quality, however, should be the basis for regulating future policies for China’s urbanization. To couple the concepts of the concepts of globalization and national development, policies should concentrate on ensuring fairness, balance, and sustainability, meeting the multiple values of middle-income groups, realizing inclusive development, assisting in pushing China across the “middle-income trap,” and realizing complete modernization.

References

- Friedmann J (2005). *China’s Urban Transition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- National Bureau of Statistics of China (2017). China’s urbanization continued to improve and city comprehensive strength significantly enhanced. Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/sjzd/201707/t20170711_1511794.html, 2017-8-15
- World Bank (2009). *World Development Report: Reshaping Economic Geography*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press
- Wu F L (2015). *Planning for Growth: Urban and Regional Planning in China*. New York: Routledge
- Zheng Y N (2017). The trap of urbanization in China. Retrieved from <http://www.zaobao.com/zopinions/views/story20170307-732910>, 2017-8-15