New urbanization: A new vision of China’s urban-rural development and planning

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New urbanization is a new state policy and guideline of urbanization, which represents a new stage in the development of cities and towns in China. The average urbanization level across the country has exceeded the symbolic 50% in 2011. Since then, new urbanization, as a national urban development strategy, has become a concern and has been comprehensively promoted (Wang and Li, 2013). Once implemented, the strategy is certain to reveal a new development vision of urbanization in China and demand new requirements in urban-rural development and planning.

1. New urbanization: a consequence of the evolution and development of the Chinese urbanization policy

Urbanization in China is dominated and guided by the Chinese government. Urbanization policies and guidelines are important means for the government to regulate urbanization development given that these policies determine the relationship between industry and agriculture, between the urban and the rural, and among large, medium, and small cities and towns. These policies, combined with the guiding regional relationship and central-local relationship against the background of national regional development, drive the urbanization process.

During the planned economy period (1949-1978) before the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the Chinese government proposed the development and construction policy of “the industry and agriculture combination and the urban and rural combination to benefit production and facilitate daily life.” However, what was implemented during this period was an industrialization-dominated and production-oriented strategy. Therefore, industrialization during the planned economy era was separated from urbanization. The urban-rural dual household registration, price, land, and social security systems supported the industrial development, whereas benefits to agriculture, villages, and peasants were sacrificed to channel accumulation and support into industrialization. From the 1960s to the Cultural Revolution, “the politics in the first place” in Chinese ideology led to serious economic stagnation, along with the emergence of such phenomena as the practice of “sending urban residents and intellectuals into mountainous and rural areas” and “counter-urbanization.” As a result, the urbanization process was nearly halted or even retrogressed.

The Chinese government gradually placed importance on urban construction after the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, thereby encouraging the development of small towns to promote the local urbanization of villages. The government began to pay attention to building and developing economic zones (with central cities as the core) in the 1980s, establishing the mode of “developing counties driven by cities.” The Chinese government gradually abandoned the urbanization policy of “controlling the scale of large cities and developing small and medium cities,” respected the benefits of scale and the aggregation
effect of urbanization, and advocated the development of central cities in both size and strength. As a result, metropolitan areas and town clusters gradually became the core barriers of rapid urbanization. In 2008, the new Urban and Rural Planning Law was promulgated, and urbanization and new rural construction were equally emphasized as two complementary aspects of the urbanization process. In 2012, the central government expressly proposed the strategy of “new urbanization” and placed it in a position as important as agricultural modernization, new industrialization, and informatization, thereby boosting the new urbanization process, as required by the “synchronized development of agricultural modernization, new industrialization, informatization, and new urbanization.”

The Chinese urbanization policies that have been adopted since 1949 have evolved according to the following paths: non-urbanization and industrialization-oriented development by sacrificing rural development during the planned economy period → the practice of sending urban residents and intellectuals into mountainous and rural areas (counter-urbanization) during the Cultural Revolution → urbanization characterized by “controlling the scale of large cities and developing small and medium cities” during the planned economy transitional period → urbanization guided by central cities during the market economy development period → urbanization with Chinese characteristics, featuring the integrated development of urban and rural areas during the market economy improvement period → new urbanization characterized by the synchronized development of agricultural modernization, new industrialization, informatization, and new urbanization during the market economy normalization period. As a new urbanization policy in China, new urbanization inherits, develops, and breaks the past policies that have guided town development and urbanization. It particularly represents a coordinated and sustainable urbanization path that abandons the past practice of being placed in a “double squeeze,” when China’s financial strength was not yet strong.

2. New urbanization: An inevitable stage in the development of Chinese urbanization

Between 1949 and 1978, urbanization in China witnessed as low growth in the early stage and drastic fluctuations in the late stage. Urbanization during this period was poorly developed, the urbanization level remained less than 20% for a long time, and the urbanization rate increased from 10.6% in 1949 to 17.9% in 1978, a mere 7.3% point increase in over 30 years. Urbanization progressed rapidly after 1978, with the urbanization rate rising to 26.44% in 1990, 45.68% in 2008, and 51.27% by the end of 2011. The increase rate was three times the world average level of the same period. In 2013, China’s urbanization level exceeded 53%, thereby changing the basic pattern of “developing China by relying on agriculture.” However, the rapid spatial urbanization did not lead to a corresponding population urbanization (Zhu, 2013); instead, it resulted in a series of problems that occurred in phases. In the first phase, the problems involved universal waste, overdraft, and efficient and immoderate development of urban land, resources, and environment. In the second phase, during the movement of “devouring villages by cities” in the urban development enclosure process, some peasants had to reside in settlements after the “movement and merger of villages” or even storied houses. Some villages could not be temporarily demolished, and some rural areas became urban “enclaves” (or “villages in the cities”) as a result of the excessive development speed. These problems continue to be the difficulties in today’s urban transformation and renovation in China (Wang, 2012). In terms of urban construction, the following phenomena occurred: broken and heterogeneous urban forms, building texture, and environment scale in multiple scales under the collapsed value evaluation criterion.

“The hometown that we cannot return to” reflects a serious problem in villages. Today, the traditional mode of construction generated by convention, effectiveness, and regional background and mode. As such, new problems and severe problem. In the past three decades, given the low efficiency of land utilization, inefficient recycling of energy and water resources, and low ecological environment support capacity, urbanization level has increased by 1 percentage point, 1004 square kilometers of urban land have been added, 60 million tons of standard coal have been consumed, 1.7 billion cubic meters of urban water have been consumed, and the ecological environment quality comprehensive index has decreased by 0.0073, thereby triggering the loss and degradation of ecological system functions and seriously impairing the sound development of towns (Technological Development Promotion Center of Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development, 2014).

New urbanization refers to a stage after the urbanization level exceeds 50% when rapid urbanization reaches a certain stage. Given the new development problems and contradictions that unfold during the urbanization development process, and based on the new development background and situation, the “new normal” of urbanization represents a shift from quick speed and large scale to quality improvement and structural adjustment. In China, the “new normal” of urbanization supplements a series of changes in socio-economic development. For instance, the opening-up policy changes from “bringing in” to “going out,” from foreign investment-driven development to innovation-driven development, and from “demographic dividend” to “talent dividend.” It also pertains to shifts in aging, motorization, social differentiation, popularization of the high-speed rail and information network, and public service benefits. Therefore, the new urbanization stage differs from the traditional urbanization stage in terms of developmental background and mode. As such, new problems and contradictions that also differ from traditional ones are likely to arise.

New urbanization is characterized by human-oriented, ecologically civilized, smart, low-carbon, green, and environment-friendly features that are designed to coordinate
production, living and eco-space, synchronized agricultural modernization, new industrialization, informatization, and new urbanization. According to the Report on the Work of the Government completed during the second session of the 12th NPC National People’s Congress in 2014, the issue of “three 100 million people” should be settled as a priority; that is, the settlement of the agricultural population of 100 million in cities and towns must be promoted by renovating their homes in shantytowns and urban villages, and by guiding their local urbanization in the central and western regions of China. This target is likely to give rise to changes in a series of planning and design concepts concerning urban and rural planning and architecture. The traditional thinking of “elites in technology” should be changed, discussions of professional concepts should be conducted with communities and at the grass-roots level, and practical ethics planners and architects should be introspected.

References


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