

# Is Chinese urbanisation unique?

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## Abstract

The future of cities in China is becoming increasingly important, not just within China but globally. China's urban population has grown from about 200 million in 1980 to about 800 million or 59% in 2018: that is about twice the total population of the USA and 1.5 times the total population of the EU. China has over 100 cities with over a million people. There are also more and more papers being written about urbanisation in China. However, urban development in China is very unlike urban development in the west or in many other developing countries. Despite the growth of a large, dynamic market sector, China is still a Communist country in terms of the pervasive and leading role of the party and the state. The question posed in this commentary is whether urbanisation in China is unique; or, to be more precise, whether the post-reform Chinese experience of urbanisation since around 1980 is so unusual that it constitutes an entirely unique case which lies outside conventional generalisations about urban change processes. This question links to recent discussions of comparative urbanism in which various scholars have grappled with questions about the generalisability of urban theory and experience. The tentative conclusion is that Chinese urbanisation may be unique and is certainly not easily subsumed into standard discussions about urban development and urban change.

## Keywords

agglomeration/urbanisation, China, economic processes, housing, land use, local government, urban development

## 摘要

中国城市的未来变得越来越重要，这不仅是对中国而言，对全球而言都是如此。中国的城市人口从1980年的2亿左右增长到2018年的8亿左右，即59%，是美国总人口的两倍，也是欧盟总人口的1.5倍。中国有100多个城市的人口超过100万。关于中国城市化的论文也越来越多。然而，中国的城市发展与西方（或许还有许多其他发展中国家）的城市发展非常不同。尽管中国有一个庞大而充满活力的市场部门，但就党和政府的普遍主导作用而言，中国仍然是一个共产主义国家。这篇评论中提出的问题是中国的城市化是否独一无二；或者，更准确地说，中国自1980年左右以来经历的改革后城市化是否如此不寻常，以至于构成了一个完全独特的案例，超出了对城市变革过程的常规概括。这个问题与最近关于比较城市化的讨论有关，在这种讨论中，许多学者都在努力解决关于城市理论和经验的普遍性的问题。我们的初步结论是，中国的城市化或许是独一无二的，肯定不容易被纳入关于城市发展和城市变革的标准讨论。

## 关键词

集聚/城市化、中国、经济过程、住房、土地使用、地方政府、城市发展

## Introduction

The future of cities in China is becoming increasingly important, not just within China but globally. The reasons for this are partly self-explanatory. China has gone from being a poor, largely undeveloped, rural agrarian-based economy until 1978 when Deng Xiao Ping initiated his opening-up programme, to being the second-largest economy in the world measured at market prices and the largest in terms of purchasing power parity. It is the world's largest country in terms of population, and its urban population has grown from about 200 million in 1980 to about 800 million or 59% in 2018: that is about twice the total population of the USA and 1.5 times the total population of the EU. China has over 100 cities with over a million people. If we want to look at the changing nature of global urban development, China is where one very important future is unfolding. In addition, as this special issue and other recent issues of *Urban Studies* and other journals show, there are more and more scholars (Chinese and non-Chinese) writing papers on urbanisation in China. Urban studies in China is going to become increasingly important in the years to come (Wu, 2016a).

However, urban development in China is unlike urban development in the west, and very unlike that in many other developing countries. Unlike many western countries, which often share a broadly similar economic and political history (free market or mixed economy, social democratic regimes etc.), China is very different, both economically and, above all, politically. Despite the growth of a large, dynamic market sector, China is still a Communist country in terms of the pervasive and leading role of the party. Its stance is officially labelled as 'Socialism with

Chinese characteristics', though some see it as Capitalism with Chinese characteristics (see Peck and Zhang, 2013; Walker and Buck, 2007; Wu, 2008; Zhu, 1999).

What is not in doubt is the crucial role of the state at both the central and local levels. This has had an important influence on urbanisation, not least in terms of central government policy to dramatically increase the percentage of the population who are urban. In general, this level of direction simply does not occur in western countries. So too, the scale and pace of urbanisation in China in the last 40 years has been so remarkable in scale, speed and extent that it is the greatest and probably the most rapid urbanisation the world has ever seen. In addition, all urban land belongs to the state and it is local government which makes decisions on the scale, extent and timing of land release for development. In many respects, notwithstanding its rapid growth, the private sector is still the handmaiden of the government in terms of decision-making power (Wu, 2018).

I want to pose the question in this commentary of whether urbanisation in China is unique; or, to be more precise, whether the post-reform Chinese experience of urbanisation since around 1980 is so unusual that it constitutes an entirely unique case which lies outside of conventional generalisations about urban change processes. Can we, for example, link Chinese urbanisation to that of Africa and Latin America? Can we draw parallels between Chinese suburbanisation and urban expansion in western countries, or is the experience of China so different by virtue of China's particular political system, local authority land finance system and the rapidity and scale of its development process that it lies outside conventional western

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experience? Or does it in fact have major parallels and similarities to urban experience in other countries, albeit with big differences, so that we can see China as simply a special or particular case of more general processes and theories seen elsewhere across the globe? This question links to recent wider discussions of comparative urbanism in which various scholars have grappled with questions about the generalisability of urban theory and experience (see Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2014, 2016; Scott and Storper, 2014).

These questions may strike some readers as peculiar, but others will know that there has been a long debate about American 'exceptionalism' by virtue of its recent settlement history, its rapid growth, its specific migration history, its racial segregation, its global role and its democratic political system. For many (particularly conservative) thinkers, America existed outside of conventional dialogue about most European countries, and the American experience (and values) was claimed to be unique (Lipset, 1996; Murray, 2013). In recent years, however, the notion of exceptionalism has come under critical attack on a variety of fronts (Cha, 2015; Koh, 2003; Sachs, 2018; Nye, 2019; Walt, 2011; Hoffmann, 2011) and the consensus now seems to be that America is not unique, merely different. It is worth noting in this context that until the 1980s (and perhaps later) many American urban texts often wrote about the North American city as though it were the default global urban model. It is now increasingly clear that it is not (and never was). The North American city is but one form of many.

It is, however, legitimate to pose a rather similar question about urban exceptionalism in China, a country distinguished by its size, its culture, its long history, its political transformation to Communism, the famine of Mao's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and, most recently, the

transformation initiated by Deng Xiao Ping in 1978 which has been crucial in propelling China from a poor, undeveloped country to one of the two biggest economies in the world (Dunford, 2016; Hamnett, 2018). It can be argued that China can be put in a similar category to Russia and Eastern European countries, which experienced a long period of state socialism but have subsequently reverted to a market economy. Yet it is very questionable if China fits into such a category since much of the economy and land ownership are still dominantly state-controlled and the party is paramount. There are also very important issues about the hukou system, internal migration, the taxation system and the key role of local government in development. So while we clearly cannot generalise from China, the question is can we include China in more general urban theory or is China just 'exceptional' – part of a parallel universe of Chinese urbanisation and urban development which simply cannot be squeezed into conventional frameworks and assumptions (see Waley, 2012)? Of course, every city and every country is different and exceptional in some way, and generalisation almost always means some loss of specificity, but the question regarding China is whether it is exceptional rather than simply very different. To sketch a preliminary answer to this question, I will briefly discuss various issues regarding Chinese urbanisation. My preliminary answer is that Chinese urbanisation may be unique. At best, it cannot simply be incorporated into a more general urban theory without very major caveats.

### **Urbanisation in China: scale, speed and extent**

The scale of urbanisation in China has been unparalleled in both scale and rapidity. The basic figures are well known. China has gone from being an overwhelmingly rural agrarian

peasant country in 1980 with just over 20% of the population urban, to more than 59% urban in 2018 and an increase of 500 million people living in cities. China now has over 100 cities of over 1 million people and 10 cities with over 10 million, although many cities have experienced massive administrative overbounding and now encompass hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of rural, agricultural land and small towns. And now China is looking at a policy of urban mega regions, as Yeh and Chen (2019) discuss in this issue.

In terms of scale there is nothing to match China, although the urbanisation of the UK during the Industrial Revolution, and of the USA in the late 19th century, was also very rapid and compressed. However, in the UK most major industrial cities which emerged, excluding London, had fewer than a million people (Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham), and Paris and Berlin were not much bigger. Both Shanghai and Beijing now have around 23 million people, with other cities having over 10 million (Miller, 2012). The urban population of China is now around 800 million: over twice the total population of the USA.

One of the major drivers has been rural to urban migration on a massive scale driven by the desire of rural migrants to increase their standard of living. The estimates vary, but there are perhaps 200 million rural migrants in Chinese cities, many of them living in cramped conditions in urban villages on the city periphery. Crucially, because of the locality-based citizenship restrictions most of them do not possess an urban hukou and they are therefore not eligible for city-based education, housing or medical care. All countries undergoing rapid urbanisation experience large-scale rural to urban migration, but China's hukou system sets it apart from other countries (Cui, 2018; Chan, 1996).

The pace of change has been dramatic. In 1989, the great majority of people in Chinese

cities still travelled by bicycle, there were very few cars and large areas of the Pearl River Delta were still occupied by rice paddies and water buffalo. Cities such as Shenzhen, Foshan and Dongguan were relatively small and largely low rise, and most of Pudong still consisted largely of old farms and derelict factories. The subway system in Beijing and Shanghai was also still very small scale. Subsequently, the pace of subway construction has been remarkable. Shanghai and Beijing now each have about 15 subway lines broadly comparable to London, New York and Paris in scale and extent, and many other cities such as Tianjin, Ningbo and Chengdu have rapidly growing subway systems. The pace of development is phenomenal, as Friedmann (2005, 2006) and others (Li and Tang, 2000; Ma, 2002; Logan, 1993, 2002; Wu, 2006; Wu et al., 2007; Gaubatz, 1999) have noted.

I am not convinced that Chinese experience cannot be easily incorporated into a wider body of urban theory simply because its growth and suburbanisation outcomes have been much bigger and faster than elsewhere, although this is important. However, there are crucial differences between China and other countries, in terms of the *processes* of urbanisation, particularly in terms of the key role of the party and the state and the state ownership of land and financing of development (Hsing, 2010; Lin, 2007, 2014; Lin and Ho, 2005). The nature of Chinese urbanisation is fundamentally different from elsewhere.

## The role of the state

It is arguably the political dimensions of Chinese urbanisation which make it so unusual. First, urbanisation is happening partly as a result of government policy to move people out of agriculture into cities in an effort to increase productivity and living standards. Second, notwithstanding the

rapid marketisation in China, the state, both central and local, is still profoundly important in setting the framework for urban expansion and as a key player in the process (Wu, 2018). This is partly because the state is the monopoly owner and supplier of land, partly due to local officials' drive to grow and expand their cities in order to increase their influence and importance (Chien and Woodworth, 2018) and because of the unusual basis of local government funding in China, where cities fund their activities in part by the acquisition and conversion of rural land to urban use and its sale to developers to generate income (Lin and Ho, 2005; Shi, 2019). There is a strong, built-in incentive to develop rural land. The role of the state in terms of urban development is immense and decisive. Most Chinese cities have witnessed massive extensions and expansion, and in almost all cases these were planned and overseen by the local state even if generally handed over to development companies to implement. Moloch's (1976) thesis 'The city as a growth machine' was based on American experience, but arguably the growth of Chinese cities can be seen in similar terms – though in China the state takes the leading role, not least because local government in China gains government approval from high growth targets and growth is a source of revenue generation. The process is still primarily local and state-led, with developers being brought in to undertake the development of particular areas (He and Wu, 2005; Tomba, 2017; Yeh and Wu, 1996; Yeh et al., 2015; Shin and Zhao, 2018).

### **Rural land acquisition and urbanisation**

Where China is clearly very different is in the process of rural land acquisition and transformation to urban land uses. This has taken place on a huge scale and rural

farmers have been dispossessed and moved off the land. As this land belongs to the state, local authorities can simply re-designate it for urban uses under a process of eminent domain. It is through this process that cities have expanded hugely into surrounding previously rural areas. The loss of valuable agricultural land is generally not considered. The farmers are compensated for the loss of their land and livelihoods with new apartments (and not just one – it can be three or four), but they have undergone a process of forced urbanisation and the urban villages which surround most Chinese cities are a remarkable phenomenon. In addition, many surrounding rural counties are now under the jurisdiction and control of city governments – hence the sometimes exaggerated claims about the rate of urban growth. Chengdu is now apparently home to 15 million people, but this includes the administrative area which stretches out around 50 km beyond the city. The actual continuously built-up urban area within the ring road houses around 10–11 million people (Lin and Ho, 2005; Lin, 2007, 2014; Shi, 2019; Tao et al., 2010). Today, however, there are major debates about green cities and green ways (Zhang et al., 2019; Wu and Phelps, 2011).

### **The transformation of existing urban areas: Redevelopment and gentrification**

It is well documented that the housing market in China underwent massive changes in the late 1990s as a result of a move to a predominantly market-based system. The old work units were privatised or sold and most new housing is now commodity or market housing, with some housing provided to compensate households experiencing redevelopment or rural land expropriation (Logan et al., 2009, 2010; Wang and Murie, 1996, 1999, 2003).

What about the transformation of existing urban areas, particularly inner-city redevelopment and gentrification? There are similarities to the western experience in terms of inner-city redevelopment, social upgrading and displacement, but the fundamental difference is that the process is usually state-initiated, takes place rapidly, is accompanied by mass displacement and can be on a very large scale. The pre-existing poor, low-income groups are generally relocated to the urban periphery in a brutal form of displacement, and there is generally little possibility of individuals refusing to move or sell. The land belongs to the state. This is how whole neighbourhoods of old inner-city housing in Chinese cities have been cleared and redeveloped (He, 2019; Huang and Yang, 2017; Tomba, 2017; Yang and Ley, 2018; Yang and Zhu, 2018). There have been many cases of urban renewal in the west (Yeh et al., 2015) – e.g. in the USA, the UK and France – but although the end result may have been the same, the scale has been smaller, the timescale longer and the process less brutal (Zhang and Fang, 2004). The social consequences are broadly similar, with communities being broken up, social networks destroyed, and relocation to the urban periphery. The inner-city areas are then redeveloped for offices or luxury apartments. In China, there is a clear pattern of winners and losers (He and Chen, 2012; Shin, 2009; Wang and Wang, 2019; Wu, 2016b) (see Chen et al., 2019; Cui, 2018; Wang and Wang, 2019). But it is not a simple one-way process, as many of the households relocated from the inner city often lived in extremely poor, cramped housing, sometimes without water or sanitation. For them, relocation has meant large new housing as compensation, albeit on the periphery. For almost all, there is no choice or alternative. Once residents are served with a mandatory notice to quit, often with only a month or two's notice, they have to go.

There is no serious process of legal challenge as in the west.

Then there is the pervasive process of urban clearance, redevelopment and renewal with massive suburban expansion. This gentrification of inner urban areas and export of the poor to the suburbs is in some ways a repeat of the process already seen in the UK, the USA and other western countries, but the similarity is rather limited as the process is predominantly state-led and even financed, even if external developers and capital are brought in. The gentrification of existing residential areas by individuals is very rare: the state leads and the market follows (He, 2007, 2019; He and Wu, 2009; Huang and Yang, 2017; Wu, 2016b). Thus Tang (2017: 487) states that 'In Hong Kong, the issue is not "gentrification", but urban redevelopment based on the interrelated processes of land and property development.' So too, Tomba (2017: 516) convincingly argues that: 'In rapidly urbanizing areas of China, gentrification is not a phenomenon derived from the rebalancing of a city's economic, political or cultural dynamics, but rather a significant feature of the production and reproduction of state authority through urbanisation.'

Another area of difference is that the construction quality of new developments is often very poor. It is difficult to know what the structural standards are in terms of steel and concrete, but the overall finish, tiling, pavements and surroundings are often very low quality. It is probable that a lot of buildings will have to be demolished and rebuilt within 20 years, as otherwise they will start to slowly disintegrate. This will be difficult in apartment buildings where individuals have bought apartments. What compensation process will be used? Who, if anyone, will be legally or financially liable for reconstruction? This differentiates China from, say, the Georgian and Victorian housing of London or Haussmann's Paris. Everything has been

built at such speed that the life expectancy of many buildings and infrastructure will be relatively short. It is very possible that China will undergo a second or even third construction boom in the next 20–30 years to replace crumbling buildings (Clarke, 2017).

## The housing market

Then, of course, there is the housing market itself, particularly the construction and house price boom. Housing prices in Beijing and Shanghai are now broadly comparable to those in cities like London, and housing affordability is a massive problem, with house prices in second- and third-tier cities also increasing rapidly (Hu and Kaplan, 2001). House price booms (and busts) are common in many western countries. The UK has had four booms and busts since 1970 and the global financial crisis was triggered by the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the USA. The housing market bust which followed hit deep in Ireland, Spain and other countries. So far China has had slowdowns but no significant housing market collapse. Many commentators fear what will happen if and when this occurs. So many people in China are invested so heavily in residential property, much of which is empty, that a serious house price collapse is likely to trigger a major national financial crisis unless somehow the state steps in to prop up the housing market through guaranteed prices or mortgages. The costs would be immense and the risks horrific. If a house price bust does happen and the state does not intervene, the risk of widespread social unrest is very high. This would not be the dispossessed rural peasant farmers, but metropolitan multiple property owners who suddenly find that their property wealth is in ruins, their debts exceed their equity and they face repossession. Gan et al. (2018) estimated, using novel measures such as electricity bills, that there are currently about 50 million empty

apartments in China, most of which have been built or bought speculatively. There are large peripheral parts of some cities where blocks of apartments or developments have remained empty since their construction. But Glaeser et al. (2017) argue that the Chinese housing boom is not totally detached from underlying housing demand.

## Conclusions

So, how can we answer the question of whether Chinese urbanisation is unique? Perhaps it is impossible to give a general answer. Perhaps the answer must be subject- or issue-specific. Perhaps the answer lies in the nature of the urban change processes rather than in their scale or pace. A specific body of work has emerged on the transition from socialism to the market in Eastern European cities, looking at housing, gentrification, segregation and so on. These countries had experiences in common (40 years of state socialism) which differentiated them from western cities, but in general they have now adopted western capitalist models. Most Chinese urbanisation has taken place since the 1978 reforms and, while the role of the market and private enterprise has grown enormously, the state is clearly still in charge of the overall urban development process. Wu (2016) has raised the crucial question of the role of Chinese cities in global urbanisation. Can we simply incorporate Chinese examples and case studies into existing literature or do we need to establish entirely specific theory and analysis of Chinese urbanisation? Or are there broadly similar overall global processes (suburbanisation, regeneration, redevelopment) and do we just need to analyse and discuss how they manifest themselves in China? Can we then seek to examine urbanisation in China as an example of more general global processes? My tentative answer is that we cannot simply incorporate Chinese urbanisation into

existing western-dominated literature without a very clear understanding of the major differences between the Chinese and western or third world experience.

What is likely is that, given China has 1.3 billion people and over 100 cities of over 1 million people, the historic dominance of the US experience in urban theory will inevitably shrink and even disappear. European researchers in the 1970s may remember trying to square the theories of Burgess, Hoyt and Alonso and the 'Chicago model' with the existence both of a middle class who remained resolutely urban and of large areas of social housing in many European cities. It took some time for researchers to grasp that European cities were different and that it was pointless and counterproductive to try to shoehorn European urban experience into North American models. Maybe researchers on Chinese cities need to learn the same lessons. Even quite recently, Scott and Soja (1998) put forward what some have seen as a claim for Los Angeles to be seen as the basis of urban theory (see Coffey, 2008; Dear, 2003), though it is unlikely that LA is a template for the urban future. In purely numerical terms, American cities are a minority species. European cities outnumber them in total population, and the cities of the third world have vastly more people than in the USA.

Equally, however, Chinese cities cannot provide a general template for urban development, not least because of the dominant role of the state and the ability to push through central decisions very rapidly. China is very unusual politically, and we are unlikely to see a Beijing school of global urban theory emerge anytime soon. There may, however, be a case for a specific school of Chinese urban theory trying to theorise the peculiarities and particularities of Chinese urban experience and to compare and contrast these with those elsewhere. This will be particularly important to break out of the tendency to

carry out very technical and detailed quantitative analysis, which seems to characterise an increasing number of Chinese urban papers.

My admittedly tentative conclusion is that Chinese urbanisation and processes are so different from both western and other developing country experiences that it is difficult to subsume them. We can certainly look at suburbanisation or gentrification or social segregation or any other processes and look at parallels and differences, but the underlying structural differences in terms of the role of the state and the market, the nature of land ownership, the lack of citizen-level input into decisions and the dominance of the state all point to a very radically different form of urbanisation ... urbanisation with Chinese characteristics.


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