

China's Urban System: Is it rational to curb city size?

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Summary

In this paper, after evaluating China's urban system from the rank-size rule, I show that the constraining of large cities which the Chinese government is currently advancing is not rational. However, I argue that the development of metropolitan regions and city clusters, which is being undertaken as part of regional development strategies, is a strategy able to substitute for the constraining of large cities.

China's "New-Style Urbanization" policy is attempting to control population depending on the size of the city. The bigger the city, the more difficult become the conditions for peasants to turn into urban residents. With populations in excess of 10 million, the municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing, and provincial capitals, such as Guangzhou, Harbin, and Shijiazhuang, are the target cities for the curbing of population.

China's curbing of the further urbanization of large cities is a wish to avoid turmoil from the rapid influx of population to the cities.

Although industrialization and urbanization proceeded in parallel over the period of the First Five-Year Plan, the rapid industrialization ended up exceeding the manageable population volume of cities. This brought about a shortage of food and housing in the cities. Afterwards China entered the period of "industrialization without urbanization", by means of the strict management of urban population, and transferring of urban population to rural areas.

Since the Reform and Open-Door Policy, with the introduction of the rural household responsibility system and the demise of the people's communes, Township and Village Enterprises functioned as the supporters of the surplus labor force in rural areas. Peasants outside of those set off to work in the developing coastal cities, moving province. The population migration of the 1980s, called a "blind flow", was the target of a government clampdown. Going into the 1990s this became an orderly migration of labor under government direction, called a "tide of migrant workers". From the 2000s on a further freeing-up of labor movement progressed, migration to small and medium-sized cities became free, and in addition relocation to large cities also increased.

According to empirical analysis using the rank-size rule, for China's cities which had felt the impact of past policy the urban system is one which is centered on small and medium-sized cities. In the long term, if the urban system is made to conform with the rank-size rule, it can be said that for China a further expansion is necessary of large cities, and in particular those with a population over 3 million.

Even if China adheres to its policy of constraining large cities, what will be workable in urbanization policy conforming with the rank-size rule will be the construction of city clusters and metropolitan regions. Even if population restrictions are carried out individually for large cities with a population over 10 million, creating yet larger city clusters via the development of transportation will be possible.

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