Progress of China's new-type urbanization construction since 2014: A preliminary assessment

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Abstract

The demand to measure the progress of China's new-type urbanization construction appears to be increasing due to its profound impact on both China and global sustainable urbanization. However, there is a lack of knowledge about the progress since the issuance of the National New-type Urbanization Plan (NUP) in March 2014, and it is unclear how to assess the comprehensive new-type urbanization construction, which has multiple dimensions and various themes. To close this gap, a new three-stage framework is proposed. This article outlines and classifies the up-to-date policies and actions since the release of the NUP and provides a preliminary assessment of China's new-type urbanization construction from the aspects of population urbanization, land urbanization, economic urbanization and comprehensiveness. The results show that China unfolded a very comprehensive top-down campaign of new-type urbanization construction. The strict urban-rural dual household registration system has started to be changed into a residence permit system. However, the implementation of the NUP is also facing many challenges. The most important thing is that the bottom-up factors should be more emphasized and combined with top-down factors in future plan implementations. This is to say, peasant-workers will need to be taken into proper consideration. People-oriented new-type urbanization should position peasant-workers at the center. Also, China's transformation of new-type urbanization is comprehensive, complex, dynamic, and long term. It should not be expected that this transformation will be completed during the short six-year planning period.

1. Introduction

In March 2014, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council of China jointly released the National New-type Urbanization Plan (NUP), which marked a shift from land-centered urbanization to people-centered urbanization and also set new developmental goals for China's vigorous urbanization process. The NUP has attracted widespread international attention. Several studies followed its announcement, attempting to explain its contents fully and link the plan to China's new blueprint (Chan, 2014), urban dream (Bai, Shi, & Waley, 2016; Wu, 2016). Urbanization is an important part of the Chinese dream, even a key part (Taylor, 2015). China will provide 100 million farmers with urban household registration, and another 200 million farmers without urban household registration will be given equal access to public services by 2020. It is estimated that China will have > 580 million people living in rural areas and 870 million living in cities by 2020 (Li, Chen, & Hu, 2016).

New emerging urban spaces reflect the complicated and mixed effect of physical, social, economic, and political factors, and the roles of and interactions between the central government and local governments in the era of globalization, neo-liberalization, and gentrification (He, Kong, & Lin, 2016; Lin, 2015; Liu, Yin, & Ma, 2012; Waley, 2016; Wu, 2016). Urbanization is an important part of the Chinese dream, even a key part (Taylor, 2015). China will provide 100 million farmers with urban household registration, and another 200 million farmers without urban household registration will be given equal access to public services by 2020. It is estimated that China will have > 580 million people living in rural areas and 870 million living in cities by 2020 (Li, Chen, & Hu, 2016).

The most brilliant achievement of urbanization in China is that thousands of years' agriculture-dominated country has ended and a new urbanized country has formed, which only consumed several decades (Guan, Wei, Lu, et al., 2018). The new urbanization has brought a lot of economic contributions and social benefits to our country, such as the
rapid growth of GDP, the improvement of the transportation system, medical and healthcare services and education system (Shen, Ren, Xiong, et al., 2018; Shen, Shuai, Jiao, et al., 2016). Moreover, the urban agglomerations are the current foci and the ultimate urban spatial form of China’s New Urbanization (Fang & Yu, 2017).

However, in implementing the plan and chasing the urban dream, China faces many challenges relating to land, people, and the environment (Bai et al., 2014). The country should not be too optimistic about the effects of the NUP. A number of questions still have not been answered. They concern the hukou system, rural land urbanization, city efficiency, and local government finance. First of all, the problem of semi-urbanization is becoming more and more serious; migrant workers cannot be integrated into cities. Large cities are particularly strict about releasing household registrations, and they are gathering places for most immigrants. Attracted by the resources, public services, and employment opportunities, the new generation of immigrants born after 1980 wishes to settle in large cities. It can be seen that the more restrictive immigration policies of large cities may be ineffective and counterproductive in terms of both economic and environmental aspects (Chan, 2014; Kim, 2015; Li et al., 2016). Moreover, the loss of high-quality arable land, the growing phenomenon of “ghost cities,” and the increasing influence of urban expansion are three main challenges for land-centered urbanization (Chen, Liu, & Lu, 2016). In addition, the tax revenues of most local governments have not covered local spending since the reform of the tax system. As a result, land financing has become the main source of income, but it is considered unsustainable. It is estimated that local governments can only afford one-fifth of the average cost of urbanization (Wang, Hui, Chogull, et al., 2015). Besides, the level or degree of public participation will make or break the government’s plan implementation and fulfillment of the new-type urbanization dream. Furthermore, industrialization, urban growth, and higher income levels mean using more ecological resources in production and consumption process that ultimately result in waste, reduction of biodiversity and, all types of environmental pollution and resource degradation (Vergragt, Dendler, de Jong, et al., 2016). Many cities lack of local characteristics and ignore cultural heritage in the process of urban construction (Guan et al., 2018).

Scholars have proposed some valuable countermeasures and suggestions. The government should encourage large cities to relax their household registration policies and accelerate the urbanization process, especially the gathering of young migrant workers (Kim, 2015). Financial reform is necessary to create a sustainable local tax to finance the expenditure of urban migrants. Rural land transfer systems should also be reformed to transform rural land into urban land more equitably (Chan, 2014). Large-scale redevelopment of urban villages to affordable housing should be considered (Tan, Xu, & Zhang, 2016). Various studies have begun to realize the important role of small towns in China in narrowing the disparity between urban and rural areas (Wang et al., 2015). In addition, the central government should strengthen the top-level design. Urbanization requires the interdisciplinary thinking and methodologies of the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. The formulation of urbanization policies needs qualitative and quantitative analyses based on demography, socio-economic, environmental, and political conditions. We must systematically assess the size and growth rate of individual cities from a global perspective. New research indicates that the new-type urbanization strategy needs new thinking and innovative ideas, such as complex-systems thinking with an interdisciplinary approach; learning from history; and consideration of the relationship between city environments and human health (Yang, Wu, & Gong, 2017).

Scholars have realized that neither the theory nor the framework of urbanization in developed and most developing countries can be directly applied to China (Gu, Wu, & Ian, 2012). Therefore, China’s urbanization research gradually formed its unique theory of urbanization based on its own national conditions. Li and Jong (2017) developed their framework of public participation fitting the Chinese administration structure to analyze whether new-type urbanization increases citizen participation in China’s eco-city development. Through a review of recent literature and government documents and semi-structured interviews, Jiang, Mao, Hou, et al. (2018) used SWOT analysis to determine the advantages and barriers of off-site construction under the backdrop of China’s new urbanization. Gu et al. (2012) systematically summarized the research progress of urbanization in China from the different approaches of demography, geography, city planning, economics and history.

Our analysis, however, is different. In the context of new-type urbanization in China, the main question to be addressed is what, what kind of effect, actions are start-up by China’s central government since the issuing of NUP.

This article examines the latest action and output that arose out of the combination of related policies and provides a preliminary assessment of the progress in plan implementation after the issuance of the NUP. The study finds that despite an initial emphasis on people-oriented new urbanization, the Chinese government has actually done massive urbanization-related work and unfolded a very comprehensive top-down campaign of new-type urbanization construction. It shows that the Chinese new-type urbanization dream is becoming an increasingly important and notable undertaking for governments and the public (Ahlers, 2015). At the same time, it also represents a risk: having too many tasks and targets bound with new-type urbanization may dilute or hinder the implementation of people-oriented urbanization. Through implementing many new policies, China’s new-type urbanization has made some progress, especially on the reform of the household registration system (HRS). However, further promotion of new-type urbanization needs to take peasant-workers’ intentions into full consideration. This is to say, bottom-up factors should be emphasized and combined with top-down factors in future plan implementation.

The article is structured as follows. In the following section, we provide some necessary background on the NUP. We then evaluate the progress of new-type urbanization in China, covering actions, patterns, and effects. In the final section, the aim is to consider ways for Chinese governmentalities to improve the quality of new-type urbanization.

2. The context of China’s new-type urbanization

Globally, between 1950 and 2014, the global urbanization level increased steadily, with the urban proportion rising from 29.6% in 1950 to 54.0% in 2015. In contrast to the steady rise of urbanization around the world, the growth curve of urbanization in China was very different, not only in the era of Mao, but also after the reform and opening up of the country. In 1949, only 1 out of every 10 people in China (57.6 million) lived in an urban area. During the subsequent 66 years, urban population growth averaged 4.0% per year; the result was that the urban population was > 13.4 times as large as it was at the start, reaching close to 771.2 million in 2015. As a result of urbanization, as of 2011, China’s population, with its long history of agriculture, became more urban than rural for the first time. The country then went on to outpace the average global urbanization level in 2013 (Fig. 1).

In the era of Mao, China’s low-level urbanization (industrialization without parallel urbanization) and socialist features attracted worldwide attention. Much literature has examined and interpreted this unique urbanization process (Chan, 1992; Ma, 2002), covering anti-urbanism (Lin, 2007; Ma, 1976), socialist ideology (Lo, 1987), the industry priority strategy (Kueh, 2006), and the urban-rural dual system (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Anti-urbanism was linked with special ideas and rules that prioritized the interests of the workers and peasant class, discriminated against merchants, and hindered the concentration of the population in cities. Specifically, this period can be divided into three stages: 1949–1957 was the beginning stage, with the founding of the PRC and the first five-year plan; 1958–1965 was the fluctuating stage, with the Great Leap Forward (Da Yue Jin), movement to form
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