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The changing rural-urban divide in China's megacities

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Rural-urban divide
Megacity
Coordinated urban-rural development
Dual economy
Driving force

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the rural-urban divide in China's 14 megacities and how they have changed between 1990 and 2015. Many contemporary plans and policies to manage the rural-urban divide in developing countries are still based on experience and theory developed by Western scholars before China began to urbanize rapidly in the 1980s at a scale and pace unique in human history. New empirical research and theory investigating the changing rural-urban divide are essential for China and other developing countries. This article analyzes the urban-rural income gap and changing size of their urban and rural workforces, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), agricultural productivity, and rural income sources based on analysis of secondary data and interviews with local government officials, university researchers, local urban planners, and residents. Conditions in the rural areas of the megacities have improved greatly on every dimension studied. Absolute incomes have increased, the rural-urban income divide has shrunk, the agricultural workforce has decreased, agricultural productivity has increased and rural residents' sources of income have become more diversified. Processes for coordinating urban and rural development and the integration of urban-rural areas in China has been driven by four major forces: the economic development and urbanization level, bottom-up rural development, national government policy, and local human developmental state practices. However, China's dual economy still persists even in these most advanced areas. The article discusses the significance of our findings and what further research can do to help contribute to understanding of the relationship between urban and rural development in less developed areas of China and other developing countries.

1. Introduction

An important policy priority since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 has been managing the relationship between urban and rural areas (Zhu, 1999; Zhang, LeGates, & Zhao, 2016). China has been late to urbanize, but since 1990s the percentage of the population living in urban areas has more than doubled from 26.4% in 1990 to 56% in 2015 (PRC NBS, 2016). More than 280 million people have migrated from rural areas of China to urban areas since 1978—the largest migration in human history (PRC NBS, 2017).

Despite its recent rapid economic development and urbanization, China still has a dual economy as first described by Nobel Prize winning economist Arthur O. Lewis more than fifty years ago (1954). Accompanying rapid economic development in the 1980s, 90s, and the first two decades of the 21st century, gaps in income, infrastructure and government services between urban and rural areas in China grew

significantly rather than diminishing contrary to what Lewis predicted would occur as the urban economy of a developing country grew and the relative importance of its rural economy shrank. The ratio of urban to rural income was 1.86:1 in 1985, it peaked in 2009 at 3.33:1 and is now 2.7 (PRC NBS, 2016). Large disparities in infrastructure, social services, and the quality of life between rural and urban areas remain.

Concerned by growing income inequality and disparities between urban and rural areas, China's national government declared “coordinated urban-rural development” a national priority in 2002 (Jiang, 2002). Since then, the national government has supported pilot projects to experiment with top-down “coordinated urban-rural development” planning and policies and encouraged local governments to launch initiatives tailored to local conditions to close the gaps in rural-urban income, infrastructure, services and quality of life (Ye & LeGates, 2013; Ye, LeGates, & Qin, 2013). Moving towards an “integrated” urban-rural economy is now a national development goal (PRC NNSUP, 2014; Chen,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.03.017>

Received 12 March 2017; Received in revised form 25 February 2018; Accepted 26 March 2018
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LeGates, & Fang, 2018). Governments at every level in China are experimenting with ways to coordinate urban and rural development and integrate rural and urban areas into a unitary economy.

Urban-rural development in China's megacities¹ is of particular importance because of their huge populations, continuing rapid development, and millions of long-term rural migrants without urban *hukou* (resident status). Because their development level is higher than other areas of China, their development trajectories and current status suggest how other cities in China will likely develop in the future. Understanding how the rural areas of the megacities have developed and how conditions there now compare with the urban areas is important for urban planning and policy in China at every level and instructive for other developing countries.

Despite the importance of understanding to what extent China's megacities have achieved economic and spatial integration between their urban and rural areas, there is little empirical research or grounded theory about the changing rural-urban divide in the megacities. To fill this gap, this article investigates the rural-urban divide in China's 14 megacities, how patterns changed between 1990 and 2015, and the forces driving integration of urban-rural development.

Many contemporary practices to manage the rural-urban divide in China and other developing countries are based on theories and experiences developed in the West before China's rapid urbanization began in mid-1980s.² China has urbanized on a scale and at a pace unlike other developing countries, requiring new empirical research on the changing relationship between urban and rural areas and new theory about the nature of the rural-urban divide and policies to narrow the income, service, and quality of life gap between city and countryside. New evidence from China and new theory is of value to other developing countries.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews economic and spatial rural-urban development coordination theory. Section 3 describes our research methods, study areas and data sources. Section 4 describes changing rural-urban patterns in China's megacities. Section 5 discusses the forces driving integration of urban-rural development in China's megacities. The conclusion summarizes our findings, their policy implications and suggest what further research can do to help contribute to understanding of the relationship between urban and rural development in less developed areas of China and other developing countries.

2. Economic and spatial rural-urban development coordination theory

2.1. Classic theories of rural-urban development

Since the mid-1950s economists, urban planners, geographers, demographers and scholars from other social science disciplines and policy fields have developed theory describing the relationship between rural and urban areas of developing countries and planning and policy to coordinate urban and rural development. While classic development theory was developed long before China's mass rural-to-urban migration, rapid urbanization, economic transformation and integration into the world city network. Theory developed in the 1950s and 60s it is still influential throughout the developing world, including China. The two most important classic development theories bearing on the spatial-temporal integration of rural and urban areas in developing countries were advanced by Arthur O. Lewis (1954) and Walt Whitman Rostow

¹ China considers cities with populations of more than 5 million residents with city proper megacities, and there were 14 megacities in China in 2015 (refer to Section 3 research methods and data sources). All of China's megacities include peri-urban and rural land as well as developed urban land and all have large rural areas and large rural populations within the city boundaries.

² The percentage of China's population living in urban areas was 10% in 1949 and 18% when reform and opening-up was initiated in 1978 (NBS, 2016).

(1960).

In 1954, University of Manchester economist Arthur O. Lewis proposed an “urban-rural dual development model” (Lewis, 1954). Lewis argued that developing countries have dual economies consisting of a large subsistence sector with a large rural labor force working almost entirely in agriculture and a small capitalist sector working almost entirely in urban areas. Lewis argued that the rural labor force had negligible, zero, or even negative marginal productivity. In his view, it made no contribution to development. Lewis considered capital accumulation essential to development. He believed that since rural areas were unable to accumulate capital, endogenous in situ rural development was impossible. Lewis argued that as market forces drew surplus rural laborers from the (rural) subsistence sector to the (urban) capitalist sector, spontaneous bottom-up market processes would adjust relations between urban and rural areas. As the size of the able-bodied rural workforce shrank, rural wages would go up because of the law of supply and demand. Differentials between urban and rural areas should diminish and eventually disappear altogether. Despite his free market orientation, Lewis argued that governments in developing countries should pursue top-down policies to speed up the absorption of surplus rural labor. Lewis's concepts of a subsistence sector, the traditional/capitalist sector dichotomy, the dual economy, capital accumulation, and absorption of surplus rural labor gave birth to the field of development economics. Lewis posed fundamental questions that merit continuous re-examination, but many of his assumptions have been questioned (Gollin, 2014).

In 1960, Harvard economist Walt Whitman Rostow proposed a “stages of development” model (Rostow, 1960). Rostow argued that countries pass through five stages of economic development, which he called traditional society, preconditions for takeoff, takeoff, drive to maturity, and the age of high mass consumption. In Rostow's model, transformation of the countryside occurs primarily during the last two stages. In the age of mass consumption, the quality of life in rural and urban areas should converge. The Rostow model is still influential throughout the developing world, but its applicability to China has been questioned in light of non-Western social and political structures and postindustrial and informational activities, globalization, and other changes that occurred after his classic work.

These classic theories were developed long before China's development since reform and opening up in the late 1970s. They are largely based on conditions in very poor developing countries with weak governments whose connection to the world economy were based almost exclusively on export of raw materials. In contrast, China today is a strong developmental state, at a mid-level of development, well connected to the world economy, with a great deal of capital-intensive development and high tech manufacturing.

2.2. New practices and theories towards integrated rural-urban development in China's megacities

Since 2003 China been experimenting with “coordinated urban–rural development” policies (*cheng xiang tong chou*) (CURD), which aim to narrow the urban-rural development gap and create a more equitable urbanization that benefits both urban and rural areas (Ye and LeGates, 2013; Shen, Jiang, & Yuan, 2012; Ye et al., 2013; Liu, Lu, & Chen, 2013; Liu, Dunford, Song, & Chen, 2016; Chen, Wang, Ren, & Du, 2016; Chen et al., 2018). China is a decentralized developmental state (Knight, 2014; Xu, 2011). The national government announced policy in general terms, and left it to lower levels of government to develop policies and programs to achieve the desired ends.

Coordinated urban–rural development is much more than a physical design program. It is intended to fundamentally restructure economic and social relations between city and countryside to produce a more equitable and harmonious society. In 2007, the central government designated Chongqing and Chengdu national pilot regions for coordinated urban–rural development. Following these pilot cities, many

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