

Rural Urbanization: Theoretical Reflections and Practices in the Pearl River Delta

Zhou Daming
Yunnan Normal University
Sun Yat-sen University

Based on the concept of rural urbanization, this article reflects on the theories related to rural urbanization. Combining the historical development of rural areas at Chinese and international levels, it argues that rural urbanization is, like elsewhere in the world, an indispensable path for China's rural development. This is mainly based on two problems that China has faced during its development process: first, overcrowding, disruption of market networks, and restrictions on population migration; second, the lack of synchronization between industrialization and urbanization. This article takes the Pearl River Delta as a case study to explore the different stages of rural urbanization there since China's reform and opening-up and proposes questions and directions for further research into rural urbanization in the Pearl River Delta. Research in this area needs to be combined with rural revitalization and Chinese-style modernization in order to conduct more targeted academic research in the future.

Keywords: rural urbanization, rural revitalization, Chinese-style modernization, Pearl River Delta

INTRODUCTION TO CONCEPTS

There have been many academic studies on the changes in rural non-agriculturalization, urban-rural labor mobility, and the rise of small towns since China's reform and opening up in China. In this article, I use the term “rural urbanization” to summarize and analyze these changes. It represents a review of and a reflection on my 30 years of research on rural urbanization. Based on an analysis of the theoretical origins of the concept of rural urbanization and the practical processes involved in the Pearl River Delta, I argue that urbanization is the future development direction for China's rural areas, and rural urbanization, rural revitalization and Chinese-style modernization are closely interconnected.

“Rural urbanization” refers to the process and state of the countryside transforming from a rural to an urban type in terms of the employment structure of the population, the industrial and economic structure, lifestyles, means of mass communication, and people's ways of thinking. This concept serves to break through the general understanding of urbanization as the perspective of the results and evolution of spatial entities, focusing instead on a dynamic process in which urban and rural areas establish close ties and form integrated urban-rural interaction. Although rural urbanization is a global phenomenon, in China, its introduction of this concept is enlightening for understanding the internal mechanism of integrated urban-rural development in the context of China's unique urban-rural system.

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China's urbanization has been proceeding rapidly in a dual urban-rural structure centered on the household registration (or the so-called “hukou”) system. The urban-

rural dual structure involves differences between urban and rural areas in many aspects such as residency, land, industry, taxation, planning, and governance, which forms as a set of underlying logic for social resource allocation, social governance, and classification of people in China. In this context, the emergence of new towns or the expansion of old towns is neither the result of top-down policy reforms or planning, nor solely the result of population and industry agglomeration and social and cultural changes in a specific space. Rather, it is the result of interactions between top-down and bottom-up forces, a process of continuous accumulation, urban-rural linkage, and comprehensive evolution. Therefore, to understand China's urbanization development, it is necessary to develop a conceptual tool that effectively adapts itself to the above research context. This concept first needs to be able to effectively connect top-down macro-level institutional changes and bottom-up micro-level social changes, and second, it needs to be able to break through the limitations of regional space and form an overall study that connects urban and rural areas, as well as connecting as well as eastern, central and western China, thereby enabling the study of urbanization development within the context of the entire social change stemming from the urban-rural binary structure.

Since the early 1990s, I have been observing the trend of urban-rural migration in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region. Urban-rural migration, as a major force driving changes in the urban-rural dichotomy from the bottom up, has built up connections between urban and rural societies centered on human beings, which has directly contributed to the transformation of urban and rural societies, and has established mobility, instead of relocation, a basic attribute of the modern Chinese society. In the course of this research, I have become deeply convinced that human urbanization and urbanization as a spatial and social entity are closely related but not entirely the same thing. On the one hand, the expansion and development of cities are realized within a huge network of urban-rural connections constructed by migrant populations, through which human urbanization continually occurs; on the other hand, the urbanization of migrants can proceed out of sync with urbanization as a spatial entity, and its mechanisms may be completely different. From this understanding, the city is not only a territorial community with a certain spatial area, population density and non-agricultural industries, but also either living center or labor center formed by the interaction with and integration between and rural civilizations.

In view of this characteristic of China's urbanization after the reform and opening up, some scholars, including me, have focused on the "urbanization of human beings" and put forward the concept of "rural urbanization", which is summarized as the process of lifestyle change, i.e., the change process from rural life to urban life. Specifically, this can be summarized in five areas. First, the demographic structure has become differentiated, that is, the number of people engaged in non-agricultural activities has increased. Whereas in the past all members of a family might have been primarily engaged in farming, many family members may now be engaged in business activities, enterprises, institutions, or may continue to work partly in agriculture, thus creating a differentiated occupational structure within the population.

The second area is the diversification of the economic structure. At present, many rural areas are no longer predominantly agricultural. The vigorous development of a market-oriented commodity economy and rural industrialization, represented by township enterprises, has led to a substantial increase in the proportion of non-agricultural industries, and the mode of agricultural operation has changed from traditional agriculture to export-oriented, modernized, and commoditized agriculture.

The third aspect is the urbanization of lifestyles, that is, the transformation of farmers' clothing, food, housing, transportation, and leisure lifestyles towards urban norms. For example, in terms of clothing, where home-made textiles used to be the mainstay in rural areas, there has been a shift to purchasing them in the market; and in terms of construction, where most of the old-fashioned brick and tile houses in rural areas in the developed regions of eastern and central China have been replaced by reinforced concrete buildings. Among these lifestyle changes, one of the more significant is that of toilets. Since the nationwide "toilet revolution" was launched in 2018, the situation of dry toilets in rural areas has been greatly reduced (Zhou 2019). The urbanization of these seemingly ordinary lifestyles is actually a very fundamental and profound transformation.

The fourth aspect is the emergence of integrated media. With the improvement of living standards in the countryside, modernized mass communication methods have increasingly penetrated into rural society

and become one of the driving forces behind social changes there. Before the reform and opening up, the media channels and content in the lives of the Chinese people were very limited, consisting mainly of national newspapers such as People's Daily, Guangming Daily, and Liberation Daily. A newspaper had at most four pages, and the information it could carry and disseminate was very limited. After the reform and opening up, the influx of overseas television broadcasting and print media from Hong Kong and Macao continuously stimulated and propelled the birth and development of new media in China. The Pearl River Delta, which was the first to be exposed to this influence, became the most advanced media center in China at that time, with Guangzhou hosting three of the five largest newspaper groups in the country (the Nanfang Daily Group, the Guangzhou Daily Group, and the Yangcheng Evening News Group). From Guangzhou, to the Pearl River Delta, to the whole country, the media played a significant role in the historical changes and transformation of the rural society.

In the fifth area, there has been a modernization of ideological concepts, with people's mindsets shifting from conservative, backward, and conformist to open, advanced, and enterprising. Apart from the "four modernizations" (modern national defense, modern agriculture, modern industry, and modern science and technology), in 1986, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) proposed the Resolution on the Guiding Principles for Building a Socialist Society Advanced in Ethics and Culture as a means of advancing the modernization of human beings.

URBANIZATION PRACTICES IN CHINA

Theoretical Applications Grounded in National Conditions

Currently, many Western scholars have begun to re-examine traditional Western urbanization theory. For example, geographer T. G. McGee argues that the traditional Western urbanization theory is not suitable for the actual situation of urbanization in developing countries, and proposes a theory comparable to China's rural urbanization. He points out that in many parts of Asia, regions have arisen that are neither urban nor rural, but exhibit both urban and rural characteristics (McGee 2017). McGee calls this type of area a "Desakota". This is an Indonesian term, where "desa" means village and "kota" means city. I render it as "urban-rural integration area". This type of urban-rural integration area is composed of several distinct types of areas: one or more growing urban centers; an expanding urban-rural belt that maintains a certain distance of the city by commuting; a corridor area formed along a major transportation route; and an expanding area with a mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural activities.

According to McGee, there are three types of urban-rural integration zones in Asia. The first type exists in countries with a strong government that can enact effective land and agricultural protection policies. In these countries, it is mainly the rural population that moves to the cities, while the agricultural land remains largely unchanged. Examples of this type include the Tokyo-Osaka area in Japan and the Seoul-Busan area in South Korea. The second type is more common in the areas surrounding densely populated megacities and is characterized by a shift from agriculture to non-agricultural. It features rapid industrialization, a decline in the proportion of the population working in agriculture, and a reduction in the cultivation of food crops. At the same time, however, there is an increase in household income, improved transport links and better infrastructure. Examples of this type include the Taipei-Kaohsiung corridor, the Bangkok-Central Plains in Thailand, the Kolkata region in India, the Jakarta region in Indonesia and the four major coastal regions of China. The third type occurs in areas with a slow economic growth and high population density, characterized by sustained and rapid population growth, labor surplus, declining incomes, and low productivity levels in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The Sichuan Basin (Chengdu-Chongqing area) in China is a good example. The total population has doubled over the past 40 years, while employment in the non-agricultural sector has changed little, and the structural transformation of the labor force has been too slow. Other examples of this type include the Yogyakarta (Jogjakarta) area in Indonesia, the state of Kerala in southern India, and Bangladesh, where some characteristics of the other types may be found at the same time, resulting in a highly dualistic economic structure (McGee 1991:334).

After understanding and summarizing the specific conditions of these places, we can easily find that they share many similarities with China. First, their population density is high, and smallholder farming is the predominant form of farming, with intensive rice cultivation as the dominant practice. On the one hand, there is a high population density over a large area, and on the other hand, the demand for labor for rice cultivation fluctuates with the seasons. As a result, there is a large surplus of labor during the agricultural off-season, which can engage in non-agricultural employment. The development of Asian cities is often geographically co-located with the existing population settlements. City residents and rural villagers maintain various kinship ties, which inevitably leads to a high degree of mixed agricultural and non-agricultural activities and close links between urban and rural areas, in stark contrast to the urban-rural dichotomy prevalent in Europe and the United States.

Secondly, urban-rural integration areas are formed gradually through the redistribution or decentralization of industries from the original urban center and the growth of non-agricultural industries in rural areas themselves. This is very different from a Western metropolitan belt, where the main trend is a continuous outward migration of city-center residents. In countries such as Japan, South Korea, and China, policies to guide industrial decentralization and establishment of export processing zones have provided employment opportunities for surplus rural labor around large cities. These countries have also increased rural incomes by boosting agricultural production, implementing price supports, encouraging the cultivation of cash crops and diversification, and developing rural industries. As a result, these countries have shifted from a predominantly agricultural economy to one dominated by non-agricultural activities. The livelihood basis for residents in these countries, no matter whether in villages or market towns, is no longer agriculture, but income from commerce, transportation, industry and other non-agricultural activities. The occupations of family members diversify, with some working in non-agricultural sectors, some farming, and some running businesses. In this way, the rural economic ties within the entire region acquire equal importance to the economic ties among the cities within the region.

Thirdly, the land use pattern in the urban-rural integration zone is characterized by a diverse mix of agriculture, cottage industries, industrial zones, suburbs and other land uses. This mixed land use has both positive and negative implications. Positively, if agricultural products are used as industrial raw materials, then there is a ready market. Negatively, industrial wastes pollute and degrade agricultural land. Compared with the United States, the metropolitan hinterland there is dotted with settlements. These areas have fresh air and a comfortable environment, making them the first choice for middle-class people.

Fourthly, the number of women engaged in non-agricultural activities has increased, driven by a high demand for female labor in labor-intensive industries. Although the study of China's rural urbanization does not directly stem from McGee's theory, his framework has significant explanatory power for China's rural urbanization and can offer valuable insights. Therefore, the proposal of the "urban-rural integration zone" theory is highly helpful for the study of rural urbanization, demonstrating that China's urbanization follows a different path from that of Western countries.

Historical Perspective: Urbanization of Densely Populated Areas

It is quite common for China's vast rural areas to be densely populated (with many people and little land). This density determines the uniqueness of China's rural economic development, and this economic uniqueness in turn affects the social structure of China's villages (Zhou 1999). To better examine the issue of rural urbanization in China, a historical perspective is essential. Many people attribute the crux of contemporary problems to overpopulation, believing that high population density is solely a modern issue.

Historically, there have been several ways to deal with a high population density: one is to migration, i.e., moving some of the population to places with vast land and sparse population; the second is land reclamation; the third is increasing the yield per unit area of existing land. These methods are often used in combination. In reality, migration is subject to certain conditions and restrictions, and is prone to conflict with indigenous populations, even causing large-scale conflicts. Modern migration is even more restricted by national laws and regulations. In this context, land reclamation is an effective way to address the problem of overpopulation and high population density. However, wasteland is ultimately limited, so it is necessary to further increase yields on existing land, which has been the most common

method used in Chinese history. Since it is necessary to continuously improve agricultural technology in order to increase yields, intensive farming is an important feature of Chinese agricultural production, which has been closely linked to social, political and cultural factors.

One important characteristic of Chinese agriculture is intensive cultivation. Intensive cultivation aims to maximize yield from a given piece of land. This method demands more intensive labor input than extensive agriculture. Since the Neolithic Age, Chinese agriculture has favored intensive over extensive methods. For example, the density of Neolithic cultural settlements found in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River is quite high, which is unique across the world. Many scholars have conducted in-depth research on China's intensive agriculture and its relationship to population density. Among them, Xu Zhuoyun and Huang Zongzhi are prominent.

Xu Zhuoyun (1982) argued that intensive agricultural production methods were already established in the Central Plains of China during the Western Han Dynasty due to a large population and limited arable land. Zhao Guo's "Substitute Field Method" was promoted at the end of Emperor Wu's reign, a development linked to the demographic pressures of the time. Intensive agriculture enabled the utilization of women and children for less physically demanding work, such as weeding, pest control, and fertilizing. At the same time, intensive agriculture reduced the seasonal idleness of the workforce and allowed secondary laborers to be engaged in production. The practice of growing multiple crops per year also shortened the fallow period needed for land rest. The Han Dynasty's central plains had long winters, and the growing season was shortened by cold weather (frost periods prevented agricultural production). Consequently, there was inevitably an uneven seasonal demand for labor throughout the year, with the busiest time being spring plowing and autumn harvesting, while winter was a slack season, during which both the primary labor force and the secondary labor force had considerable time to engage in other non-agricultural work. This work indirectly served agriculture or produced marketable goods, i.e., cottage industries. The production of cottage industries, in turn, gradually fostered a trading market network starting from nearby village trade, a network sufficient to connect several scattered settlements, thereby enabling local transactions to form a market-oriented agricultural economy. This trading network was linked to large and small cities and markets, and with increased trade, a certain degree of specialization became inevitable.

This specialization had two effects: it led to commercial activities motivated by profit rather than solely for consumption, and it led to the specialization of the production of certain crops. Some local products in the Han Dynasty could be distributed throughout the country by commercial networks. The market trading network integrated individual members of the agricultural society into a huge economic network. Therefore, China's agricultural society was not as simple as previously believed, i.e., a combination of self-sufficient small farming households. On the contrary, during the Han Dynasty, there were approximately 20 to 30 sizable cities throughout the country, located at the transportation hubs connecting various regions. Such a trading network enabled the productive capacity of the Han Dynasty to foster a prosperous industry and commerce industrial and commercial sector. However, the Han Dynasty's policy of valuing agriculture while suppressing commerce caused this vibrant sector to decline under the pressure of the powerful state authorities as soon as it emerged (Xu 1982). Therefore, not only the responsibility for producing food was placed on the shoulders of the rural population but the production of other goods that could have been managed by industry and commerce was also forced into the countryside, which in turn led to an increase in seasonal surplus labor in rural areas. Specifically, the combination of intensive farming and family handicrafts turned the surplus labor during the agricultural off-season into a workforce for handicrafts. In other words, the producers of agriculture were also the producers of handicrafts, and their products became commodities in the market. Thus, market networks emerged. The above situation propelled similar market exchange networks not only in China, but also in southern France and the Polish Plains. However, the sale of handicraft products was only possible under certain conditions, such as when a workshop-based industry never developed or was destroyed by other forces. Workshop-based industry flourished in the city, and the handicraft industry associated with intensive agriculture was incompatible with urbanization. The historical background of intensive agriculture in China was that the power of the state during the Han Dynasty was so strong that it suppressed the merchant class and curtailed the private economy, thus creating

opportunities for the development of the cottage industry and the growth of market networks (Xu 1998:114-119).

As an extension of intensive farming, smallholder practice had been the main rural economic model in Chinese history. In his research, Huang Zongzhi (1985) questioned the arguments put forward by Adam Smith and Karl Marx that commercialization inevitably leads to modernization or capitalism. He argued that both Adam Smith and Karl Marx premised their arguments on the British case, without distinguishing between output and labor productivity or between growth and development. These distinctions are very important for understanding the history of the Chinese rural economy. He also drew on anthropological research on peasants and Geertz's concept of "involution" to analyze the issue of commercialization in China. He contended that the core problem in rural China is population pressure on the land. The decreasing per capita arable land area has led to the gradual involution of agriculture—that is, the continuously increase labor input per unit of land for limited gains in crop yields. In economic terms, this reflects diminishing marginal returns per labor day. The intensification in the Yangtze River Delta was mainly achieved by expanding the cultivation of cash crops and diversifying operations, especially through cotton and the development of the cotton-spinning handicraft industry. This represented a livelihood-sustaining strategy in response to population pressure, rather than a profit-maximizing capitalist business strategy, and thus failed to generate capital accumulation. Therefore, this form of intensification driven by population pressure is fundamentally distinct from the commercialization that accompanied the rise of modern capitalism

Accordingly, traditional Chinese intensive farming gave rise to cottage industries, which led to the establishment of market networks, with large and small cities and market towns at different levels becoming the hubs of these networks. In this way, the city and the countryside interacted with each other, though suppression of urban industry and commerce in ancient times slowed down urban development. However, since the invasion of foreign powers in modern times, the establishment of modern industrial and commercial cities along the coast of China has had a considerable impact on rural cottage industries, turning surplus rural labor into employees of urban industry and commerce. Therefore, when there was no wasteland to be reclaimed or land to be migrated to, urbanization and industrialization offered a solution to the problem of overcrowding in rural areas. For example, after China's reform and opening up, the Pearl in 1978, the Pearl River Delta absorbed the local surplus labor force and millions of migrant workers. The export-oriented economy promoted the comprehensive development of small towns, accelerated the process of rural urbanization, and rapidly escalated high-level urbanization, thus bringing profound changes to people's lifestyles and the environment.

“Rural Urbanization”: the Only Way forward for China's Rural Development

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, rural urbanization has been driven by the unique China's rural development, with both historical and structural theoretical factors playing behind it. Under the current urban-rural dualistic system in China, the inevitability of rural areas embarking on the path of urbanization through endogenous development stems from the following factors:

1. The restrictions of overcrowding, fragmented market networks, and population migration.

First, overcrowding emerged as a new problem. The cooperative movement after 1949, on the one hand, emphasized the principle of “grain first” and bound all farmers to the land. On the other hand, it regarded family handicrafts as a vestige of capitalism to be eliminated or strictly limited, and diverted surplus labor during the agricultural off-season toward land-improving infrastructure projects such as building dikes and terraced fields. Coupled with the collective labor structure of the cooperative, farmers had little incentive to work. Therefore, although grain output was high, marginal utility was extremely low. Without the income from handicrafts as a supplement, and with limited collective distribution, the living standards of the peasants could not be improved. According to Huang Zongzhi (1990), the people's commune exacerbated a new form of “involution”.

Secondly, the traditional market network was disrupted during the planned economy period. Rural trade markets were banned and replaced by supply and marketing cooperatives, which implemented the unified purchase and sale of agricultural products and agricultural inputs. The result was a decline in rural market

towns, which in turn led to the disintegration of market networks that linked cities to different levels of market towns. Rural access to information decreased, and farmers could only live at a subsistence level, unable to achieve self-sufficiency, and worked according to the arrangements and schedules of the production team every day. In addition, the strict household registration (hukou) system restricted population mobility, especially between urban and rural areas.

2. Industrialization and urbanization not proceeding simultaneously.

In terms of urban development, during the planned economy period and under the influence of the Soviet model, China prioritized industrialization over urbanization. This model of unsynchronized industrialization and urbanization is known as the “Two-Asynchronous” model (Guo and Zhou 1995). Under this development model, in the early years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the development of urban transportation, energy, communications, and water, gas, and sanitation facilities lagged, which in turn impeded the further development of the financial industry, commerce, and other service industries, resulting in cities having limited functions. In terms of employment alone, the capital-intensive heavy industry of that era incurred very high investment and institutional costs, while its employment capacity was low. Coupled with the suppression of urban services, this reduced a large number of employment opportunities. Therefore, although urban residents tried hard to save on food and clothing and accepted low wages so that the country could accumulate more funds to invest in industry, the growth of industry and employment opportunities could not keep up with the natural growth of the urban population. Consequently, the city itself struggled to absorb its own workforce, let alone absorb the surplus rural labor force.

In summary, to grasp the essence of rural urbanization, it is necessary to understand the concept and theory of urbanization. Anthropologists define urbanization as “not simply referring to more and more people living in cities and towns, but to the process of increasing interaction and interconnection between urban and non-urban areas in society” (Guldin 1992). In other words, the mutual influence between cities and the countryside, through the contact and integration of rural and urban culture, produces an integrated social structure that incorporates elements of both rural and urban civilizations.

This process of rural urbanization leads to a narrowing of the gap between urban and rural production. The structure of rural productivity, modes of production and operation, income levels and structures, lifestyles, and ways of thinking increasingly resemble those in urban areas. Therefore, we argue that urbanization, from a demographic perspective, involves an increase both in the number of people living in cities and in the number of people adopting an urban lifestyle. From a spatial perspective, this phenomenon is characterized by two parallel trends: the outward expansion of existing metropolises and the in-situ urbanization of rural areas. From a process-oriented perspective, it progresses through distinct phases: villages evolving into market towns, towns into urbanized municipalities, county seats and small cities into metropolitan hubs, and medium/large cities into globalized urban centers—ultimately coalescing into megaregions.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF RURAL URBANIZATION — THE PEARL RIVER DELTA’S PROGRESS TOWARDS A METROPOLITAN REGION

Levels of Urbanization in the Pearl River Delta

Historically, the Pearl River Delta functioned primarily as a coastal defense frontier. Therefore, for security reasons, the construction of heavy industry and transportation infrastructure in the region was consistently delayed. It was not until after the reform and opening up of China that the Pearl River Delta region started to develop rapidly, and gradually made itself into a world-class urban belt, stretching approximately 300 kilometers east-west and 200 kilometers north-south, encompassing a total area of 47,800 square kilometers. This region includes Hong Kong, the Macao Special Administrative Region, and 26 cities and counties within the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone. As a practical example of rural urbanization and metropolitan region formation, the urbanization process of the Pearl River Delta is of great analytical value.

Examining the towns and villages within Pearl River Delta, we found that local urbanization manifests across five distinct levels, with transformations occurring to varying degrees. These levels encompass: the residential transformation of natural villages, the commercial transformation of administrative villages, the urbanization of market towns, the metropolitan transformation of county seats, and the internationalization of large and medium-sized cities. These transformational levels correspond to the following developmental stages:

The First Stage: The Influx of Migrant Workers in the 1980s

In the early 1980s, the Pearl River Delta entered its first major stage of urbanization as a pioneer of reform and opening up. Triggered by the establishment of the Special Economic Zone, starting in 1978, Hong Kong enterprises specializing in processing with imported materials, sample-based production, assembly with supplied parts, and compensation trade (known as *sanlai yibu*, 三来一补) entered China by implementing the “front shop, back factory” model, setting up shops in Hong Kong and factories in the Pearl River Delta, to conduct business activities. The earliest enterprises involved in *sanlai yibu* often used public buildings such as ancestral halls as factory spaces. Initially, they primarily hired local labor. However, during the busy farming season, particularly coinciding with the peak order period before Christmas, factory labor shortages emerged. Consequently, these enterprises adapted by absorbing not only local labor but also a large number of migrant workers, creating a nationwide wave of migrant workers in the mid-1980s. At that time, I was researching rural urbanization and had visited places such as Nanhai, Shunde, and Dongguan. I observed that factories in these areas frequently started with workforces of thousands of people. For example, the Mattel toy factory in Nanhai employed thousands of migrant workers and was a major enterprise there, while some shoe factories in Dongguan had workforces reaching 100,000. The massive influx of migrant workers in these labor-intensive enterprises created a pendulum-like flow pattern: annually, migrant workers would oscillate between their hometowns and workplaces.

The Second Stage: The Urbanization Process of the 1990s with Industrial Boom

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping visited southern China and delivered an important speech, urging Guangdong to catch up with the “Four Little Dragons” of Asia within 20 years. Consequently, urbanization and industrialization of the Pearl River Delta accelerated explosively. From urban centers to rural villages, experienced pervasive industrialization, with workshops sprouting in every village and household, and businesses of all sizes and ownership types emerging everywhere. Subsequently, the government began consolidating factories into established industrial zones, systematically planning and constructing industrial parks and specialized production areas within towns and villages. Another significant change during this period was the transition of workers from a seasonal workforce to a large, stable, long-term labor force. Correspondingly, industrial parks in the Pearl River Delta expanded rapidly, and the existing urban area continued to sprawl. A large number of villages around the city became urban entities and began to be managed like communities. In my earlier research, I observed: “The peri-urban communities are the first to be connected to the city and the earliest to start urbanizing, yet they are invariably the last to complete the process of urbanization.” (Zhou 1993) During this period, the urban villages within Pearl River Delta cities also evolved into “dual communities”, characterized by a new duality between large numbers of non-local migrant workers and indigenous villagers.

The Third Stage: Rapid Development Followed China's WTO Accession at the Turn of the 21st Century

This stage of urbanization in the Pearl River Delta spans the 15 years since China's accession to the WTO in 2001. Following the Asian financial crisis, the Pearl River Delta region experienced rapid development, which was driven not by industry but by real estate. Property prices skyrocketed after 2000, reaching levels unaffordable relative to wages. A key consequence of this estate boom was a top-down urbanization pattern: the larger the city, the greater its centrality in the commercial economy, and the higher its housing prices. Amid full-scale urbanization, many villages began a new phase of transformation. Li Peilin's book *Village's End in Guangzhou*, which examines changes in Guangzhou's urban villages, focuses on this period (Li 2004). Nevertheless, up to this point, the Pearl River Delta remained the primary

destination for rural labor in China, as the booming construction industry required vast numbers of migrant workers. Indeed, the expansion of the real estate sector directly fueled demand for migrant workers.

Stage 4: The Development Stage of the Greater Bay Area (2015–Present)

The construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area represents key phase of the urbanization of the Pearl River Delta region. As currently planned, the Greater Bay Area comprises an urban agglomeration centered on the Lingdingyang area within the Pearl River Delta. It includes Guangdong Province's two sub-provincial cities (Guangzhou and Shenzhen), its seven prefecture-level cities (Zhuhai, Foshan, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, Huizhou, and Zhaoqing), and the two Special Administrative Regions (Hong Kong and Macao), covering an area of about 56,000 square kilometers. This region currently exhibits strong economic vitality and potential. For example, the Greater Bay Area generates a GDP of over 14 trillion yuan while occupying less than 0.6% of the country's land area. In terms of urban construction, the Guangdong Provincial Development and Reform Commission's "Guangdong Province's 2024 Key Construction Project Plan" outlines numerous infrastructure construction projects for the Greater Bay Area. Furthermore, the National Development and Reform Commission, in collaboration with Guangdong Province, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the Macao Special Administrative Region, is also constantly refining the "1+N+X" policy system (a tiered framework featuring 1 core plan, N supporting policies, and X localized measures). Overall, since 2015, significant national investment in the Greater Bay Area has driven substantial progress in technological innovation, finance, cultural tourism, and other sectors. For example, Shenzhen, as the technological innovation hub, has seen its GDP and innovation index rise year by year. Projections indicate that the Greater Bay Area will remain a crucial engine for economic development in China and globally for the foreseeable future.

Several Forms of Urbanization in the Pearl River Delta

In summary, I believe that rural urbanization is not the endpoint of urbanization, but rather its initial phase. The urbanization process in the Pearl River Delta exhibits several distinct patterns: the "townification" of villages, the "urbanization" of market towns, the "metropolitanization" of county seats and small cities, and the "internationalization" of large and medium-sized cities. Generally, as the economy develops and the region grows wealthier, the pace of townification and urbanization accelerates: villages become more like towns, and towns more like cities, county seats and small cities more like big cities, and big and medium-sized cities becoming more international. The first two of these are part of the process of rural urbanization, and county-level cities are a direct result of rural urbanization. For example, in 1978, the cities in the Pearl River Delta region were only Guangzhou, Foshan, Jiangmen, Zhuhai, Zhaoqing and Huizhou. In 1979, Shenzhen was added, and in 1982, Zhongshan County and Dongguan County were elevated as cities. In 1985, the city-managed county system was implemented, and Qingyuan County became a city (with jurisdiction over 6 other counties). In the 1990s, some counties were successively converted into cities, with Shunde Nanhai, Taishan, Xinhui, Kaiping, Sanshui, Panyu, Huaxian, and Zengcheng successively changing from counties to cities (all with the same territory as before). Some other counties were divided into urban districts.

Currently, the Pearl River Delta is developing from a decentralized to an integrated metropolitan area. This region has developed several defining characteristics of a major metropolitan zone: (1) High Urban Concentration. The area features a dense cluster of cities—both in quantity and scale—including global metropolises like Hong Kong, first-tier cities Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Macao, and twelve medium-sized cities: Zhuhai, Foshan, Jiangmen, Zhongshan, Dongguan, Shunde, Nanhai, Xinhui, Zhaoqing, Taishan, and Sanshui. (2) Rapid Rural Urbanization with High Town Density. Since China's reform and opening-up, the Pearl River Delta has leveraged 'processing trade' enterprises (*sanlai yibu*) as the engine to drive the comprehensive development of township enterprises. The growth of these enterprises, in turn, has accelerated the construction of small towns. The area now has 383 administrative towns with a density of 100 towns per 10,000 square kilometers, and an average inter-town distance of under 10 kilometers. (3) High-level Population Urbanization and Large Scale of Floating Population. The registered non-agricultural population indicates a 70% urbanization rate. Including approximately 10 million temporary residents

(mostly de facto permanent dwellers), the actual urbanization rate exceeds 80%. (4) Coordinated Development Toward Integration. Cities are progressively merging into a unified metropolitan area through coordinated planning and development.

The urbanization process in the Pearl River Delta is one in which rural urbanization drives the urbanization of the society as a whole. In this way, the relationship between the countryside and the city is closer and more coordinated. In the past, the theme of rural urbanization was the market townification of villages. The future trend is the urbanization of towns and townships. Therefore, the path of urbanization in China can perhaps be further exhibited in the Pearl River Delta.

RE-EXAMINATION OF RURAL URBANIZATION

After 2000, I conducted new research on rural urbanization, primarily involving follow-up investigations of villages previously studied. I wrote a new book, *Re-examining Rural Urbanization in China*, which focuses on continuing research into the new and old problems that arise after urbanization has reached a certain level (Zhou 2015). Based on feedback from these rural urbanization studies, I identified several new critical questions for further exploration.

The first issue concerns fragmented urbanization and its integration challenges. In the past, the model of “every village had smoke coming up” led each rural settlement to develop its own industrial park. Now, as the society advances toward building metropolitan core areas, this fragmentation has become a critical problem to address—a point raised by urban planning scholars. Currently, many commodity housing estates and other urban developments have been constructed in isolation, lacking physical and functional connectivity. Guangzhou’s Panyu District exemplifies this fragmentation: how to integrate urban villages, town villages (Zhou and Zhou 2009), village-in-the-city (Yang 2017) and commercial and residential villages has become a major problem. In Humen Town, Dongguan, for instance, the town’s redevelopment plans frequently clash with existing village boundaries at the local level. The most difficult coordination issues arise when negotiating with village-level authorities, as Humen’s new urban plan inevitably conflicts with historically established village territories. Meanwhile, within cities and towns, there are also urban villages, village towns, village cities, and city villages, but these issues have not triggered more discussion for the time being. In Nanhai and Shunde districts of Foshan, for example, villages have urbanized into “cities within villages”, while commercial-residential villages dominated by small-property-right housing have emerged. These specific cases illustrate why the integration of fragmented urbanization remains a high-priority research topic with significant theoretical and practical implications.

The Second issue is how to handle the relationship between the individual, the collective and the state, especially how to handle the relationship between individual homesteads, collective land and state-owned property rights. Currently, China lacks comprehensive laws and regulations governing the management of collective assets. Existing legislation primarily addresses historical collective land use but does not provide unified provisions for value-added derived from collective land. If the future development of the Pearl River Delta is to restart and continue to grow, the collective assets that were once prosperous but are now declining need to be remobilized and revitalized (Zhou & Zhou 2021). These issues all require in-depth research.

The third issue concerns how to build new immigrant communities. The construction of new migrant communities has become a pressing issue not only in the Pearl River Delta but across China, as large-scale urbanization drives population inflows into cities like Guiyang, Xi’an, Changsha, and Hefei. Rapid population growth and urban expansion have reshaped demographic structures, altering relationships between locals and newcomers, as well as between original villagers and external migrants. In some areas, demographic diversity has led to the emergence of large-scale migrant communities, housing tens or even hundreds of thousands of people. Such concentrations not only increase governance complexity but also amplify public risks—security issues, for instance, can quickly escalate into major crises. These challenges demand systematic approaches to community planning, social integration, and public service provision to ensure sustainable urban development.

The fourth issue is how to continue the original culture. The influx of a large number of new immigrants is accompanied by a collision of cultures from different regions and backgrounds in the flow of social

networks. The resulting urban problems include not only the governance and adaptation of immigrants, but also the question of how to carry out intercultural interaction and management. When faced with the impact of foreign cultures, how to continue their own cultural characteristics in the interaction with the original local dialects, accents, folk beliefs, customs and cultures is also an urgent issue.

The fifth issue relates to the coordination challenges in the construction of the Greater Bay Area. Within the regional context of the Pearl River Delta, future growth must align with the broader integration of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. On the one hand, the Pearl River Delta boasts many obvious advantages, such as a common language, the same culture, same cultural roots, a history of mutual cooperation, frequent population movements, and economic complementarity. On the other hand, obstacles to in-depth collaboration do exist, which can be attributed to the “one country, two systems” principle. Specifically, there are differences in the top-level designs of “one country, three currencies”, “one country, three legal systems”, and “one country, three taxes”, which are issues to be resolved.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Currently, the process of rural urbanization similar to that of the Pearl River Delta region is taking place in rural areas of China to varying degrees. How rural urbanization and rural revitalization play a role in the process of Chinese-style modernization deserves the sustained attention of various disciplines. I believe that to understand rural revitalization from the perspective of rural urbanization, it is essential to clarify the connection and differences between the two.

Rural revitalization emphasizes agriculture and rural development as the guiding force, striving to modernize the countryside through improvements in technology, culture, ecology, governance systems, and other aspects. It, on the other hand, emphasizes an integration of urban and rural elements, and is a gradual process. Unlike the policy-oriented rural revitalization, rural urbanization currently tends to widen the gap between urban and rural areas. A large number of rural laborers have migrated to cities, leading to problems such as the hollowing out of rural industries and a sluggish development. The significance of rural revitalization lies in identifying the shortcomings of rural development during the rapid urbanization of the countryside, leveraging the radiation effect of cities, and accelerating the modernization of agriculture and the countryside so that they can keep up with the pace of urbanization.

On the question of how to understand the relationship between rural urbanization and Chinese-style modernization, the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China points out that Chinese-style modernization is one with a huge population, and it is also a modernization that aims to achieve common prosperity for all the people. Rural urbanization is precisely a process of continuously improving the living standards of rural residents, inheriting village culture, and promoting coordinated urban-rural development. Therefore, rural urbanization is actually an urbanization that internalizes the subjectivity of the people and is imbued with the concept of common prosperity.

In summary, rural urbanization, rural revitalization, and Chinese-style modernization are deeply interconnected, forming a critical framework for China's contemporary development. It must be recognized that rural revitalization and rural urbanization are not isolated concepts but integral components of China's unique modernization path. Therefore, philosophical and social science research must maintain a problem-oriented approach, rigorously examining the challenges embedded in rural urbanization. Such scholarly engagement will provide the theoretical and practical foundation necessary to advance Chinese-style modernization in a sustainable and grounded manner.

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