

Study on administrative division reform of China's small and medium-sized cities in the urbanization process

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Throughout the world, urbanization has been basically understood to refer to the process of increasing population flow from rural to urban areas. To adapt to this irreversible process, besides eradicating the urban-rural dual household system, China needs to accelerate the building of administrative system in small and medium-sized cities, which will enable them to absorb more migrants from rural areas, and thereby help ease the burden on large cities, and forge a sensible urban system. According to the statistics in this paper, by 2050, China's urbanization rate will reach around 80%. This calls for as many as 1,050 small and medium-sized cities, i.e., those capable of accommodating less than 500,000 residents. Currently, however, there are only 383 cities of that scale in China. Therefore, we need to think hard and clearly about how counties and towns are best developed under the urbanization drive, how to achieve optimal administrative structure through reclassification and adjustment of different administrative units, and how, in general, to enhance the quality of urbanization in China.

Keywords: urbanization, small and medium-sized cities, administrative division

Joseph Eugene Stiglitz, Nobel Economics Prize winner and famed economist, once said that America's new technological revolution and China's urbanization are the two major events that will affect the course of human history in the 21st century. The urbanization process in China started in the 1980s and so far has been going on for over 30 years. During this time, China's urbanization rate has grown from 10% in 1978 to 54.77% in 2014, with an urban permanent population increasing from 170 million to 750 million correspondingly. Compared with developed countries, China is currently still in the developing stage of urbanization and still has at least 20% room for the rate to increase in the future. Urbanization and the corresponding industrialization have largely transformed the visage of China, as well as production capacity and the lifestyle of Chinese people. However, while the population is increasingly moving to urban areas, urbanization in the administrative system has not been moving forward at the same speed, but rather lagging behind for various reasons. In a sense, that is a key reason why rural migrants continue to gravitate toward mega- and large cities

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and small and medium-sized cities and towns tend to lag behind in terms of social management and public services.

1. China's current urban-rural dual system ill-suites the development needs under the new-type of urbanization

Since China's reform and opening up more than 30 years, China has gone through the historical test of industrialization and urbanization, and profound and irreversible changes have taken place in China's social presence. In 1978, the urban population in China was 172.45 million and the rural population was 790.14 million with the urbanization rate standing at around 10%. after reform and opening up, the rural population has continued to move to urban areas, and by 2011, the total urban population in China reached 690.7863 million, while the total rural population in China has declined to 656.5637 million, with the rate of urbanization standing at 51%—this marked the first time the urban population had surpassed the rural population. By 2014, the population of urban residents reached upwards of about 750 million, and the urbanization rate increased to 54.77%. Generally speaking, China is now in the intermediate stage of urbanization.

Ever since China's reform and opening up, as more and more people migrate to cities, cities of different levels in China have expanded to a different extent. The total number of cities has increased from 193 in 1978 to 658 in 2010. The number of cities with a population of over 10 million increased to 6; the number of cities with a population of 5 to 10 million increased from 2 to 10; the number of cities with a population of 3 to 5 million increased from 2 to 21; the number of cities with a population of 1 to 3 million increased from 25 to 103; the number of cities with a population of 0.5 to 1 million increased from 35 to 138; the number of cities with a population of less than 0.5 million increased from 129 to 380 and the number of organic towns increased from 2173 to 19410, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Changes of number and scale of cities in China between 1978 and 2010

Year \ Category	1978	2010
City		
City with a population of over 10 million	0	6
Cities with a population of 5 to 10 million	2	10
Cities with a population of 3 to 5 million	2	21
Cities with a population of 1 to 3 million	25	103
Cities with a population of 0.5 to 1 million	25	138
Cities with a population of less than 0.5 million people	129	380
Total Number of Cities	193	658
Organic Towns	2173	19410

Note: The data of 2010 is from the 6th national census.

Source: *National Planning on New-type Urbanization (2012-2020)*.

Nonetheless, since reform and opening up, the number of cities added up according to organizational systems has not increased synchronously in China. For example, there were 218 prefecture-level cities in 1996 when urbanization began to accelerate in China. The number increased to 282 by 2010, but has changed little since then, standing at 283 for years. As for county-level cities, after crude development between 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, China slammed the brakes on the reclassification of counties as cities in 1996. Since then, strict control has been imposed on the reclassification and the number of county-level cities was 376 in 2010, changing little in subsequent years (see Table 1). As for the township level, in the southeastern coastal areas, though some towns are already home to hundreds of thousands in non-agricultural populations and non-agricultural industries, they are still officially “towns” according to the categories in the administrative system, with adverse impact on local public services and social management, whose chronic underdevelopment causes many problems.

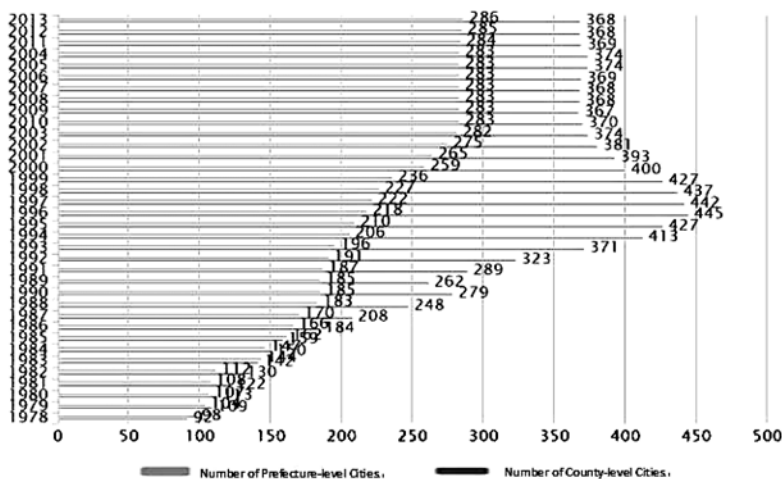


Figure 1. Changes of number of prefecture-level cities and county-level cities in China between 1978 and 2013

Source: The data come from National Bureau of Statistics and have been processed by the author.

Above all, in China's urbanization process, it should be regarded as an essential part of industrialization and urbanization to have the populations moving rapidly to large cities in the eastern regions. But due to the lagging reform of organizational systems in cities and towns, the imbalance between city and town systems has brought about serious social problems. On one hand, with a large number of migrants gravitating toward them, many mega- or large cities are suffering from urban diseases such as air pollution, traffic congestion traffic, undersupply of public services and facilities and a low quality of life. On the other hand, population net loss has left rural areas desolated, with dilapidated infrastructure and hollowing populations. Though these problems has

something to do with problems such as imbalanced urban and rural planning, industrial distribution and public services, there are still institutional causes that should not be ignored, including the lagging reform of administrative systems, slow transition from rural administrative division to urban administrative division, and a shortage of small and medium-sized cities that can accommodate large numbers of rural migrants.

2. Forecast of urbanization rate and number of small and medium-sized cities in China from 2015 to 2050

Experts generally agree that urbanization will continue in China until 2050. According to our research, there exists a positive correlation and co-adaptive relationship between the urbanization rate and the number of small and medium-sized cities. By how much will China's urbanization rate increase between 2015 and 2050? And how many small and medium-sized cities should be built to accommodate the rural migrants? In this section, a quantitative forecast is shown.

2.1. Forecast of China's urbanization rate between 2015 and 2049

The UN population division issues a biennially analysis report of population development trends and the urban and rural composition of all countries across the world. According to the report, by around 2020, China's urbanization rate will be around 60%, and will be close to 80% by 2049, as shown in Figure 2.

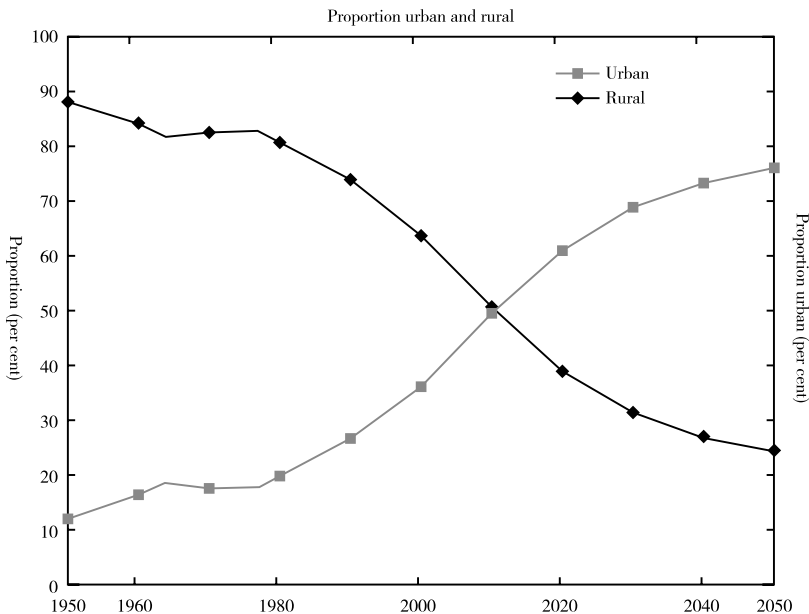


Figure 2. Forecast of China's urbanization rate between 1950 and 2050 by UN population division
Source: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/>

Furthermore, the UN population division also traced the changes in rural and urban populations in China between 1950 and 2050, as shown in Figure 3. It is very clear to us that between now and 2049, China will go through a process of urban population increase and rural population decrease. By 2050, there will be more than 1 billion people residing in urban areas in China, as can be seen in Figure 3.

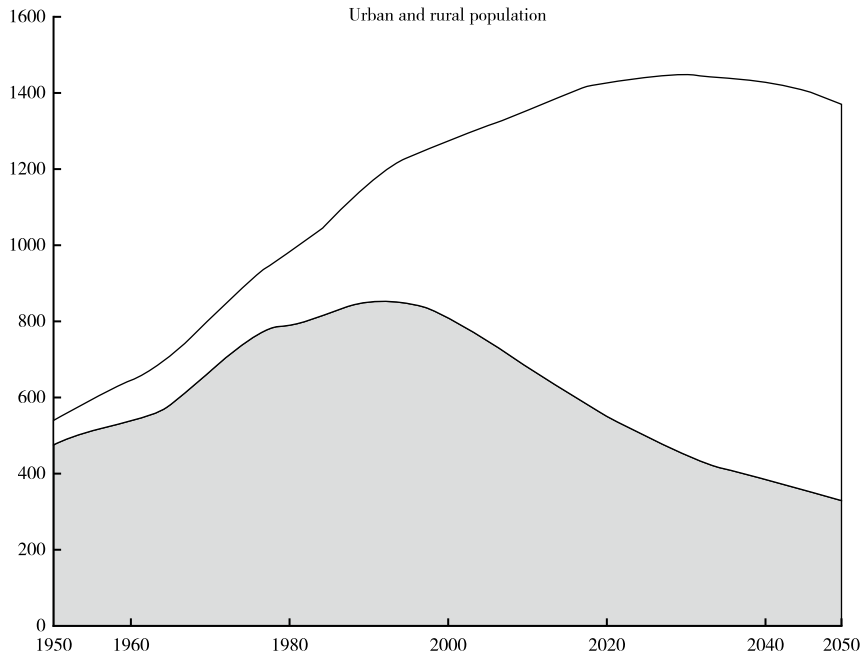


Figure 3. Diagram of China's urban and rural population change between 1950 and 2050 by UN population division

Source: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/>

2.2. Quantitative forecast of China's small and medium-sized cities between 2015 and 2049

On November 20, 2014, the State Council of China issued the *Announcement of Adjusting Classification Criteria for City Scales* in which the original classification criteria for city scales were replaced by a new one. The newly established criteria, based on the urban resident population as the statistical specification, divide cities into 5 classes and 7 types. Small cities are those with no more than 500,000 inhabitants, in which cities with a population between 200,000 to 500,000 residents are Type I small cities and cities with a population of no more than 200,000 residents are Type II small cities. Medium-sized cities are those with an urban population between 500,000 and 1 million residents. Large Cities are those with a population

between 1 and 5 million residents, and cities with a population between 3 and 5 million residents are Type I large cities and cities with a population between 1 and 3 million residents are Type II large cities. Extra large cities are those with a population between 5 to 10 million. Megacities are those with a population of more than 10 million. According to the forecast of China's population (median) by the *Future Trend of World Population* released by the UN Population Division, as well as its forecast of China's urbanization rate, we estimate the number of small cities that can accommodate a population of no more than 500,000 that will be needed in China from 2015 to 2049.

Hypothesis 1: Currently, modern urbanization is continuing in China, and both the domestic and international situation remains unchanged.

Hypothesis 2: At least 50% of China's population resides in small cities or towns with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants.

Calculation formula: the number of cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants=urban population $\times$ 50%/50

Calculation results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Forecast of urbanization rate, urban population and number of small cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants in China(In 1000 people)

Year (1)	Total Population (2)	Urban Population (3)	Population of Small Cities and Towns (supposing 50% of China's population resides in small cities or towns) (4)	Number of Small Cities and Towns Needed (setting 500,000 people as the national criterion) (5)	Stage Target
2015	1401587	779479	389739.5	779	380
2020	1432868	874427	437213.5	874	480
2025	1448984	947540	473370	947	—
2030	1453297	998925	499462.5	999	680
2035	1448589	1030048	515024	1030	—
2040	1435499	1044395	522197.5	1044	—
2045	1414089	1050838	525419	1051	—
2050	1384977	1049948	524974	1050	980

Source: The data of total population and urban population are from the UN website of <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/>. Item (1) and (5) are calculations from related data. The data for 2049 is replaced by forecast data of 2050.

In short, according to the UN forecast, assuming that 50% of the urban population resides in small cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, China will need 779 cities of that scale by 2015, 874 by 2020, 999 by 2030, 1050 by 2050 and so forth.

In reality, however, there were only 380 small cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants in 2010, and there has been only a slight increase in recent years. This means there is a huge gap between reality and what will be needed according to the forecast. According to some studies, small cities and towns with fewer than 200,000 residents have absorbed 51% of the total urban population, of which 54.3% is concentrated in county-level cities. In other words, it remains an arduous task to register the huge number of people migrating from rural areas and develop cities near the source of migrants, so we must first strengthen the building of small and medium-sized cities and improve their administrative systems.

3. Adapting to the development requirements of new-type urbanization and accelerating reform of administrative division of small and medium-sized cities and towns

According to our research, currently the most prominent problem with China's urbanization process is how to enable a large number of counties to provide appropriate public services and job opportunities, absorb rural migrants, relieve large cities' population pressure and establish a reasonable system of urban services. In other words, the question is how the original rural administrative divisions and counties with rural management functions are transformed into urban administrative divisions and provide the appropriate urban management and public services. Historically, there are two main reasons why it has been so difficult to transform counties from rural administrative divisions to urban administrative divisions. On one hand, there exists some orthodox and dogmatic understanding of the relationship between urban and rural areas. It has been widely realized that the development strategy implemented after the founding of the People Republic of China to develop urban areas and industry first before rural areas and agriculture has hampered social development in China, especially in rural areas. The shared understanding has been made to drive development of rural areas by urban areas and nurture agricultural development by industry, which in recent years has been highlighted in a number of No.1 Central Documents devoted to agricultural matters released by the CPC Central Committee to stress the importance of rural issues. However, opinions vary in terms of how to promote rural development and agriculture when it comes to implementation. Generally speaking, there are mainly two opinions. One is that if problems related to land, employment, and social security cannot be resolved, in order to prevent social turbulence in China, policy makers should protect the rural areas in the first place. Specifically speaking, it is to separate the rural areas from urban areas, which can be specifically reflected from the current rural land policies and some restricted provisions for urban capital and the population "going to the countryside." This is considered as the mainstream understanding on the policy

level at the present time. The other opinion is that rural development should move forward simultaneously with the urbanization process and there should be bi-directional movement between urban areas and rural areas in land, population, and capital based on the laws of market, and the government should mainly undertake the “underpinning” role in supporting education, employment, housing, and social security. Of these two opinions, the latter one takes an upper hand at the theoretical level and the former one has more advantages on the policy level. On the other hand, when it comes down to the specific issue of rural administrative division that mostly involves counties in the urbanization process, we tend to discuss county by the country-level and rural areas by rural areas, rather than include them into the whole of urbanization as a historical process. So in some sense urbanization should be understood as the orderly transformative process whereby of rural administrative divisions such as represented by countyships, are replaced by urban administrative divisions.

We believe that the key to adapting to urbanization and gradually registering the large number of rural migrants into the cities is to build conurbation consisting of megacities and large cities on one hand and counties and towns on the other, with a large number of small and medium-sized cities in between that function as a kind of bridge or intermediary. Given conditions on the ground, policy makers should, in the “Thirteenth Five-Year Period”, comply with the requirements of urban development and put priority on the reform of the administrative divisions of counties and towns in order to advance the transformation of a large number of qualified counties from rural identity to urban identity. In addition, policy makers should empower a few big and economically advanced towns in the southeastern coastal areas with city-level economic and social management rights by setting up township-level cities so that the role of counties and towns in absorbing residents and pushing forward local urbanization can be fully played out.

3.1. Restarting the reform of “shift from county to city”

Since China’s reform and opening up, some counties in China’s southeast coastal areas have taken the lead in development and have qualified as cities in terms of both the proportion of their non-agricultural residents and GDP according to the criteria for reclassifying a county as a city issued by the Chinese government in 1983. It is those places that first started up the wave of “reclassifying counties as cities”. Objectively speaking, the launch of this surge of administrative unit identity reclassification from county to city in those places was, to a large extent, consistent with the trends of the times, helped to advance local economic growth, and earned the approval from the government. In 1993, Ministry of Civil Affairs of China amended and issued a new criteria for upgrading counties to cities, which indicated the government’s endorsement

of something that first began as a grassroots civil initiative. Many inland provinces quickly followed suit. Besides, counties that qualified for the reclassification, there were also some which were not but fabricated their records to mislead the authorities, leading to a phenomenon called “fake-urbanization”. Other than that, newly approved cities began infrastructure construction on a large scale and took up a large portion of cultivated and fertile lands, posing a threat to food security in China. In 1997, Ministry of Civil Affairs of China halted the reclassification wave and it has not been reinstated. In the past 20 years, a large number of counties and towns have developed rapidly and have long since become *de facto* cities. But the clinging on to old ways at the policy level has effectively locked those places, in the eyes of the government, into its identity as a rural administrative system and has certainly brought about a number of problems. Policy makers should adapt to the reality that a large population is flowing into cities and rapid development has been going on in the secondary and tertiary industries, and reinstating the county-as-city reclassification move should take place as soon as possible.

The current criteria for being designated a city date back to 1993, are long outdated and have increasingly been ignored over the years. At present, to restart the reclassification, policy makers must revise the criteria for what make a city. They should introduce some quantitative criteria covering such aspects as economy, population, social development, public facilities, location, and others. They should also learn from international practices and experiences. Meanwhile, to boost urbanization in central and western China, where the urbanization rate is lower than elsewhere, the criteria may be somewhat lowered after considering regional economic and social development, population trends, and so forth. China can nurture a batch of nodal cities by proactively “building cities” in order to optimize the urban system and promote healthy development of the new wave of urbanization in China.

It must be made clear whether the quantitative criteria for city designation are meant to cover the bare basics. As for the counties that have already met those requirements, whether they can really be reclassified as cities or not should also be decided by all the circumstances including the urban system and spatial distribution of small and medium-sized cities. To meet that end, a “National Urbanization and Administrative Division Reform Commission” should be set up by the National Development and Reform Commission and Ministry of Civil Affairs to conduct the overall evaluation. Moreover, it has also come to our attention that the underlying reason for the Ministry of Civil Affairs to freeze the county-to-city reclassification policy for years is their fear for the prospect of intense push by local governments to qualify themselves for the upgrade in terms of designation, administrative power, institutional endowment, and staffing quotas. Once the reclassification policy is reinstated, China must try to do two things. First, the role of quantitative

criteria in building and designating cities should be weakened. On one hand, some requirements, such as those mentioned above, should be set as necessary conditions; while on the other hand, those cannot be the only conditions. The reason is simple: if these are also sufficient conditions, it would open the floodgate for efforts by local governments to ram through counties that may meet the necessary conditions but are otherwise ill-suited for being reclassified as cities because they ill-fit over all regional needs. Therefore, the right thing to do is not only to designate some requirements as “threshold conditions,” but also put the overall layout of regional economic and social development into comprehensive consideration and offer approval only when the timing is appropriate. Second, the tight link between government hierarchy and power should be weakened. Based on past experiences, the main motive to faking records in order to qualify for classification upgrade from county to city is to obtain the greater power, and more funding. Unless this link is broken, there will always be great uncertainty in implementation of the reclassification policy. In addition to the delinking, we must also streamline administration and decentralize government power so lower levels can do more at their disposal.

3.2. Expanding the “township-level city” pilot program

Since China’s reform and opening up, a large group of mega-towns have emerged. Currently, there are more than 17,000 organic towns of different types in China, among which 56 have a population of more than 100,000, including several that have a population of more than 600,000. Generally, academics call small towns that have reached or exceeded the minimum population and economic requirement for being designated a city (some towns have the population size worth medium-sized cities) but continue to be under township management “super large towns”. They have the following main characteristics. First, they have a large population. According to the 6th national census, the number of towns with a population between 200,000 and 500,000 is currently 9, and the number of towns with a population between 100,000 and 200,000 is 142. The most populous town is Yanjiao Town, in Sanhe City, Hebei Province, which has a population of 800,000. Second, these super large towns have significant economic strength. In 2014, a research group with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences conducted comparative study of towns in China based on the gross regional product, per capita gross domestic product, and local fiscal revenue, and calculated the general scores of the organic towns and issued a list of the top 100 towns in China. According to the results, the economic strength of the top 100 towns largely exceeded the average county, and the economic strength of some towns is greater than those of some prefecture-level cities. Third, these towns are mainly distributed in China’s southeast coastal regions. As investigation shows, among the top 10 most

populous towns, 6 are in Dongguan, Guangdong Province—among which Humen Town is titled “the No.1 Town in China”. In a word, after years of development, those towns have entered the later stages of industrialization and have exceeded some prefecture-level cities in terms of the proportion of non-agricultural population, industry scale, or fiscal revenue. They are worthy of the label of economic “mega-towns”.

As for those super large towns, though they have large populations and no longer economically dependent on agriculture, they are still rural in terms of their administrative system. Whether it is in respect to government staffing quotas or institutional structure, everything is arranged based on the regulations of rural administration, in discordance with their actual level of urbanization. Taking Shishan Town in Guangdong Province as an example, we find that in 2013, its GDP is 80.3 billion yuan, higher than the four prefecture-level cities of Chaozhou (79.8 billion yuan), Heyuan (72.0 billion yuan), Shanwei (71.0 billion yuan), and Yunfu (62.3 billion yuan) in Guangdong Province, and is “as rich as a city”. Nonetheless, due to the restrictions of the current administrative system, these gigantic towns, super large towns, and major towns still have to maintain their institutional structure, government staffing quotas, and governance authority at the rural level. As can be described as “a pony pulling a cart” or “a big responsibility and little power” and “having something in sight while having no power to manage it”. Their responsibility and administrative power are seriously decoupled from each other, which has severely impeded the development of urban-rural integration. So reform must be carried out to address this issue.

Under China’s present development situation, policy makers should consider turning nominal towns that qualify as cities in population, economy, finance, taxation, and urban construction officially into cities. This helps reduce the distance over which rural migrants must move to arrive in cities, achieve balanced in urban and rural development, and advance the urban-rural integration. Similarly, for establishing town-level cities, policy makers should, in addition to considering quantitative criteria, also look at various other factors including economy, population, social development, market infrastructure, and location. At the same time, it should be made clear that the essence of town-level cities is the adoption of a set of criteria with regard to planning, construction, and management that befit small cities. The key is to decentralize power. So, as policies for reclassifying counties as cities, those for the reclassification of towns as cities should weaken the link with administrative level. For the current and future periods, policy makers should meet the requirements for urban construction and management, put priority on reclassifying towns that have been developing rapidly in the eastern region as cities and free them from administrative straight jacket, and promote those areas to take the lead in the development of urban-rural integration. As for the vast central and western regions, we should meet the need to nurture a group

of town-level cities based on local conditions with respect to population clustering in order to jointly advance urban-rural integration and coordinated development of regional economies.¹

3.3. Advancing “turning counties into districts” in a scientific and orderly manner and re-defining direct provincial administration of counties

As China tries to increase the number of town-level cities, it is important to realize that not all counties should be turned into independent cities and not all rural counties should be changed into urban ones. Based on China’s specific national conditions, the countryside and agricultural counties (towns) will remain in existence for the long-run and are a necessary and important part of the prospect of a “Beautiful China”. So, differentiated implementation should be made to correspond with different policies.

3.3.1. Turning a county into a district

Given the healthy development of regional economy, for some counties that are geographically close to and closely linked with central cities in economic and social development, their development orientation is not to become cities, but to be changed into districts. Market economies have a natural tendency toward expansion, and they do so by drawing in factors or space from surrounding areas into some spontaneous order, thereby facilitating regional integration and economies of scale. This is amply illustrated in areas such as the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta. So, rather than violating the natural law of regional economic development, we should follow it instead of forcibly turning those counties that should develop in coordination with nearby cities into cities simply to score political points for local officials. The reason is very simple. Under China’s current system, one more city means one more administrative fence that impedes the mobility of factors of production like an invisible wall. For those counties that are close to and have actually integrated with central cities, this is nothing if not bad news. Operationally, we can measure the degree of linkage between a county and nearby central cities using a set of indicators. For all those counties that are geographically close to and have strong industrial links and frequent communication and exchange in funds, human resources, and information with nearby central cities, they are far better reclassified as a district of the latter than as an independent city. This would preserve economic ties that have

¹ In the *National Comprehensive Pilot Program of New-type Urbanization* approved in February, 2015, Longgang Town in Cangnan County, Zhejiang Province and Erdaobaihe Town in Antu County, Jilin Province are listed in the pilot program of new-type urbanization, which means that the reform of township has been put on the national strategic agenda.

already developed within a regional economic system and facilitate regional economic integration.

3.3.2. Placing counties under direct management by provincial government

Apart from the counties that can be reclassified as cities or districts, there are still a large number of rural areas in China. For many of the counties in these areas, we can place them under the direct management by provincial government in order to make sure they enjoy the level of basic public services, rural construction and governance that are comparable to those available in cities. To that end, the policy target of direct provincial administration of counties should be re-defined to focus on underpinning rural development and stability. The market economy and the process of urbanization are double-edge swords: they can both increase economic efficiency and, as is inevitable, put some areas, industries and populations in a position of weakness. Compared with cities, rural areas are undoubtedly at a disadvantage, so the government must support rural development and prevent the roaring train of urbanization from channeling all the care and attention to urban areas while leaving rural areas behind. It will be a big project—on the administrative level, it can be realized by conducting direct provincial administration of counties. Specifically speaking, first, a fiscal transfer payment system can be utilized to ensure that needs are met in aspects such as economic operation, people's livelihood, and basic public services of rural counties. The county-level basic fiscal guarantee mechanisms that have been implemented by departments of finance can play that role and, while its standards and guarantees should be further improved. Second, the development of modern and large-scale agriculture should be advanced. By improving such systems and mechanisms, urban industrial, commercial, and human capital can be channeled into rural areas and agricultural developments according to market mechanisms in a reasonable and orderly manner to promote modern and large-scale development in the agricultural industry. Third, the rural land system reform should be deepened and a mechanism should be set up to ensure equal exchange and free mobility of factors between urban and rural areas so that shared growth and prosperity can be achieved.

In a word, to protect and stabilize the rural areas does not mean to isolate them from urban areas, but to, on one hand, link them with market and urban areas, and on the other hand, have the government play its role to underpin the rural areas against possible hidden risks so as to ensure there is shared growth and prosperity between urban and rural areas. As for the under-developed areas in China's central and western regions, initiation should be implemented to nurture some nodal cities for future urban systems. In the short term, the method of direct provincial administration of counties can be used to bring in resources and opportunities

to those areas, and when they grow to a certain level in terms of city scale, non-agricultural industry, and non-agricultural population, and has acquired the essential properties of a city, those counties should be turned into cities in a timely manner or assimilated into a larger development area. The same logic is true of counties where agriculture has long been the major industry because as long as they can have qualification in the future, they will have the opportunity to successfully turn into urban administrative divisions.

Above all, urbanization is a most profound part of the historical background of our times and at its core is an increasing population shift from rural areas to urban areas. How to address this grand historical transformation is not only an economic issue, but also a test of various social aspects including administrative systems and social governance. As far as administrative division is concerned, how to prepare for the arrival of large numbers of city-bound rural migrants remains a grand topic yet to be fully interpreted. This paper is intended to start a serious and honest discussion of this issue among policy makers and scholars.