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The urban transition and beyond: Facing new challenges of the mobility and settlement transitions in Asia

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1. Rural-urban migration and the urban transition in Asia

With a total population of 4.2 billion, Asia is the most populous continent in the world, hosting more than three-fifths of the human population. It has experienced fast socioeconomic development in recent decades, and is the largest continental economy by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms. Some of the longest economic booms in the world since the 1950s, notably those in Japan, the four Asian tigers of South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the Mainland China, have taken places here, leading to profound socioeconomic transformation in the society. Such economic development and social transformation have in turn led to enormous migration flows from rural to urban areas, especially large cities, and nowadays about half of the Asian population live in the cities (UN, 2014).

The tremendous development in China since the late 1970s, especially that in some of its coastal mega cities, vividly demonstrates how economic development in the cities attract massive inflows of the so called “floating population” into the cities, which in turn serve as a major driving force for urban growth and urban development in these cities. According to the most recent 2010 census, 87% of China’s floating population moved to cities and towns; during the period of 2000 to 2010, 57% to 65% of China’s urban population growth could be attributed to rural-urban migration (Zou, 2011; Wang, 2014). Everyone coming to Shanghai, China’s largest city with a population of 24 million, would be impressed by its skyline dominated by the newly emergent skyscrapers; in fact, the emergence of these skyscrapers has been accompanied by the inflow of nearly 10 million migrants, who account for 41% of Shanghai’s total population. Likewise, Shenzhen, the first special economic zone and one of the most vibrant cities in China, was only a small rural county in 1979; but it is now a megacity with a population of more than 10 million.

Migrants not only are the main labour source for labour intensive manufacturing and service industries in these cities, but also play an increasingly important role in the industries relating to information technology and cultural development. In Beijing for instance, migrants accounted for half to three fourths of the labour force in the industries ranging from service to households to construction and manufacturing; and nearly half of the labour force in the industries ranging from information transmission, computer services and software to real estate, culture, sport and entertainment, according to the 2010 census (Ma, Hu & Yin, 2014:340-342). Furthermore, the inflow of these migrants makes the age structure of major migrant destination cities much younger than it would otherwise be the case, reducing the proportion of the population aged 60 and above from 22.69% of the total population, which would be the case if there had been without migrants, to 14.94% in Shanghai at the time of the 2010 census (Zhang, 2015).

Clearly, the economic booms and agglomeration economies have been the underlying driving force for the inflows of migrants to the cities; at the same time, it is these energetic and hard-working migrants who constitute the backbone of these cities, and it is no exaggeration to say that without migrants, many cites in China would cease to operate. Therefore, it is no wonder that much of the academic research and policy making concerning migration and urbanization in Asia has been conducted under the paradigm of the urban transition featuring rural-urban migration, especially migration to large cities in the recent decades.

2. Beyond rural-urban migration and the urban transition: New challenges of the mobility and settlement transitions in Asia

However, it is important to note that the urban transition dominated by rural-urban migration has not been the full story in relation to internal migration and urbanization in Asia, and this has become increasingly the case in recent times, as an increasing number of countries in Asia have gone through developmental trajectories, which cannot be captured by the urban transition paradigm focusing on rural-urban migration.

2.1 The settlement transition and *in situ* urbanization in Asia

This is firstly evidenced by the fact that as early as in the early 1980s, McGee and Ginsburg already provided evidence of a “settlement transition”, which involved “the urbanization of the countryside without massive rural-urban migration”, in “the extended metropolises” in Asia (Ginsburg, 1991). They argued that in the Asian context, the conventional conceptualization of

the urban transition, which assumed persistence of the widely accepted rural-urban distinction in the urbanization process, needs to be re-evaluated (McGee, 1991).

If what McGee and Ginsburg identified as evidence of the settlement transition is limited to the vicinity of extended metropolises, Zhu and his colleagues' works on *in situ* urbanization, which refers to the process of rural settlements and their populations transforming themselves into urban or quasi-urban ones with little geographical relocation of the residents, suggest that similar phenomenon actually exists on a much wider geographical basis in China, far exceeding the scope of the vicinity of extended metropolises (eg. Zhu, 1998; 1999; Zhu et al., 2012). Zhu identified the phenomenon of *in situ* urbanization in a wide range of areas in southeastern coastal provinces in China, demonstrating that such a phenomenon has been one of the major characteristics of China's urbanization process since the late 1970s. In fact, it is "the most dramatic (and surprising) story of China's transformation in China's reform era", as John Friedmann (2005) put it. Zhu and his colleagues further identified two interrelated dimensions of the process of *in situ* urbanization, one was the creation of new urban centers, especially designated towns in rural areas, and the other was tremendous functional and physical changes of rural settlements through the development of township and village enterprises (TVEs). The development of these two dimensions of *in situ* urbanization has led to the fact that in the two decades between the late 1970s and late 1990s, reclassification played a dominant role in China's urban growth (Zhu, 2017a). Only in the recent period between the 2000 and 2010 censuses did rural-urban migration overtake reclassification as the most important source of urban growth in China; however, reclassification was still not negligible, accounting for more than one third of the total urban growth in this period. Furthermore, despite its recent declining status in China's urbanization process, *in situ* urbanization has been back on the policymaking agenda of the Chinese government, reflected in the fact that it has set a goal to guide around 100 million rural residents of the central and western regions to become urbanized near their hometowns.

Such a way to achieve rural-urban transformation exists not only in China, but also in many other developing countries in Asia, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India etc. (eg. McGee, 1991; Qadeer, 2004). It not only provides opportunities, as it is an alternative way to achieve urbanization; but also poses challenges, as it is different from the conventional urban transition dominated by rural-urban migration, and requires new approaches in planning and policy making.

2.2 The mobility transition and new forms of migration in Asia

Another important development that makes the urban transition paradigm focusing on rural-urban migration inadequate in Asia is related to the well-known mobility transition theory. In 1971, Zelinsky published his classic paper "the hypothesis of mobility transition", in which he points out that "there are definite, patterned regularities in the growth of personal mobility through space-time" (Zelinsky, 1971). Zelinsky divides human mobility into five forms, namely international migration, domestic migration to the remote areas, rural-urban migration, urban-urban migration and intra-urban migration, and circulation; and its transition into five stages, namely pre-modern traditional society (I), the early transitional society (II), the late transitional society (III), the advanced society (IV), and the future super-advanced society (V). Mainly based on the experiences of western countries, he demonstrates that different forms of mobility exhibit different trajectories in their evolution from the first to the last stage of the mobility transition. Thus while rural-urban migration starts to decline in the later period of the late transitional society after its upward trend in the earlier transition stages, urban-urban and intra-urban migration, as well as circulation are still active in this period of the mobility transition, and will keep their upward trend in the stages of advanced society and the future super-advanced society.

Examined in the context of the mobility transition theory, many countries in Asia are already in, or approaching quickly the stage of the mobility transition where urban-urban, intra-urban migration and circulation will overtake rural-urban migration and become the most important forms of migration in Asia. Not enough attention has been paid to such changes so far. As Zhu (2017b) points out, research attention in Asia as a whole has been so far mostly focused on rural-urban and cross-regional migration, especially the former; and on identifying migration streams to urban and more developed areas. In China, the urbanization level has reached 57.35% by the end of 2016; corresponding to this level of urbanization, rural-urban and long-distance regional migration has started to level-off. This leads some observers to conclude that members of the floating population have now "stabilized" in their destinations cities, and are no longer floating (Department of Services and Management of Migrant Population, National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, 2015; Duan, 2013). However, if we look at the current migration pattern in China in the context of the mobility transition theory, we could think a step further to anticipate that after the leveling off and decline of rural-urban migration, urban-urban and intra-urban migration may take over from it, and replace the dominant role of rural-urban migration in the overall migration process.

The following analyses further support the above judgment. First, the experiences of developed countries suggest that in the industrial and post-industrial period, many individuals and their families need to move between and/or within cities for many times, due to changes in either

employment status or housing needs, which in turn are caused by various life cycle events, such as marriage, child bearing, leaving home for schooling, leaving home for employment, etc. This kind of urban-urban and intra-urban mobility has been observed in many developed countries, and there is no reason to believe that countries in Asia would be exceptional when they have reached this stage of development. Second, recent findings from the IMAGE (Internal Migration Around the Globe) (Bell et al., 2015) project suggest that the aggregated crude migration intensity (ACMI) is positively correlated with GDP per capita across 61 countries in the world, and that China's ACMI in the early 2000s, calculated based on the five-year transition data, is still quite low, compared to those of many other countries. Given that China's per capita GDP is still at the upper middle level in the world and far left behind that of developed countries, there is still a great potential for China's migration intensity to increase in the future. As China' rural-urban migration has already started to decline, it can be inferred that the increase in the migration intensity in China will be mainly caused by the rise of urban-urban and intra-urban migration (Zhu et al., 2016), and I believe that many other Asian countries with similar or lower level of economic development will follow the suit. In addition, short-term, and leisure- and business-driven circular migration, which is quite different from the long-term, migrant-household-livelihood-strategy-driven circular migration commonly seen in Asia, will also increase (Zhu, 2017b). Third, China's 2010 census data suggest that 21.73 per cent of members of the floating population are urban-urban migrants (Ma, 2014); a survey of my team in Fujian Province in 2015 suggested that 61.64 per cent of rural-urban migrants had already experienced subsequent movements after their arrival in their first destinations cities, most of which were urban-urban and intra-urban ones. Such changes in the forms and intensity of human migration and their driving forces pose new challenges to, and have important policy implications for Asia.

3. Conclusions and policy implications

In summary, this paper argues that many Asian countries, including China, are facing challenges of not only urban growth dominated by rural-urban migration, but also the settlement transition characterized by *in situ* rural-urban transformation of both rural settlements and their populations, and the mobility transition increasingly driven by urban-urban and intra-urban migration. The conventional paradigm of the urban transition is increasingly inadequate in capturing these new challenges, and needs to be expanded to incorporate *in situ* urbanization in the settlement transition and new forms of migration in the mobility transition.

Such a paradigm shift caused by the new realities in the settlement transition and mobility transition has important policy implications in Asia. First, the widespread phenomenon of *in situ* urbanization mentioned earlier provides further evidence to support the long-standing UN' view expressed in ICPD Program of Action, which advocates more balanced spatial distribution of the

population and redistribution and relocation of industries and businesses from urban to rural areas; the facts that the urbanization process in China since the 2000s has been dominated by the growth of large cities, and that *in situ* urbanization is back to the policymaking agenda in response to the over-dominance of extra-large cities in China, provide a valuable case of reference for the making and implementation of relevant policies. As demonstrated above, the spatial scale of *in situ* urbanization is much larger than previously realized in the relevant fields, and more efforts should be devoted to exploring this alternative way of rural-urban transformation. Major migrants' sending areas, especially those with high population densities, improved transport conditions and increasing return migration, can draw on the experience of *in situ* urbanization in China's coastal areas to explore a new developmental approach incorporating migration and *in situ* urbanization into an integrated framework, so that people in these areas can benefit not only from the prosperity of cities but also from the resources and developmental potential of their hometowns.

Second, the widespread phenomenon of *in situ* urbanization, and the increasing importance of urban-urban and intra-urban migration, support the view expressed in the New Urban agenda adopted recently in Habitat III, which advocates "urban-rural interactions and connectivity by strengthening sustainable transport and mobility". This is also in line with the view expressed in UN's Framework of Actions for the follow-up to the Programme of Action of ICPD Beyond 2014, which advocates planning for growing cities in the context of rural-urban links. However, the analysis in this paper suggests that merely emphasizing rural-urban links and urban-rural interactions and connectivity is not enough; the rising status of urban-urban and intra-urban migration suggests that many Asian countries have entered new stages of development and mobility transition, and therefore more attention should be paid to new forms of mobility and new dimensions of spatial connectivity. Spatial links and connectivity should now be envisaged at finer spatial levels, and "a coordinated regional approach" is require to "cuts through fragmented boundaries" to facilitate the mobility of people between and within urban and rural spatial units. This also requires that more attention be paid to the portability issues of various social security programs and public services, so that migrants will not be disadvantaged due to their mobility. In this connection, UN can serve an important role to coordinate data collection of various countries, so that adequate and comparable data can be obtained to reflect the ever changing and increasingly complicated mobility patterns of the human population.

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