

# Urban Geography

## Chéngshì dìlǐ 城市地理

**Urban geography addresses the development of cities—from their origins and organizational principles to their evolving infrastructures and policies. China's urban development has been most dramatically affected by shifts in its economic strategies, from a focus on national self-sufficiency to an increasingly active participation in the free market.**

China boasts the largest urban population in the world (516.57 million in 2005) and a long history of urban development; its earliest city can be traced back at least 4,000 years. China also has more officially designated urban centers than any other country: 661 cities and close to 20,000 towns in 2005.

### Cities in the Pre-Socialist Era

The earliest Chinese cities were built as administrative centers and were hierarchical in nature, with the national capital at the top, then several province/prefecture-level administrative centers at the next level down, followed by many local centers, and then, finally, by outposts such as county towns. After a period of significant commercialization of agriculture and coastal trade in South China in the tenth and eleventh century, commerce-based urban centers emerged and grew rapidly, adding another layer of cities to the preexisting administrative cities. In the vast countryside of the more developed regions, large

numbers of market towns, either permanent or periodic, came into being as a result of the rise in agricultural productivity. These cities were organized based on the economics of trade.

Some of world's largest cities of the time, such as today's Hangzhou, emerged in China in the thirteenth century. Most preindustrial Chinese cities, however, were smaller in size and population and were set up largely as extensions of the rural economy. Unlike medieval cities in Europe, traditional Chinese cities never developed into autonomous political entities but remained seats of the centralized imperial power. Chinese cities were where government officials, wealthy landlords, merchants, and their families and servants lived. The cities also housed other service personnel such as artisans, sojourning traders, and entertainers. In general, different social groups lived in segregated quarters of the city.

A different genre of cities and towns (about 100 in total), called treaty ports, came into existence or grew rapidly in size in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to a new set of political and economic imperatives. These port cities (including Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shantou, Xiamen, and Hankou) were forced open for international trade under various unequal treaties whose terms were dictated by Western powers and Japan in this era of imperialism and colonialism. Hong Kong had a different political fate as a ceded territory to Britain, but the nature of its growth was very similar to many other treaty ports.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these cities also became the locus of modern China's industrialization and Westernization. Extraterritorial

concessions controlled by Western countries were set up in many of them—a reflection of foreign dominance. The concessions were totally outside China's legal and often administrative control. With a large foreign and domestic migrant population and a greater diversity of economic activities, the spatial social structure of the treaty ports was quite different from that of the “indigenous” cities.

## Urbanization from 1949 to 1978

The industrialization strategy China adopted following the Communist victory in China's civil war had tremendous impact on the urban geography of the country. The new government pursued an autarkic development strategy (one geared at national economic self-sufficiency) that put emphasis on promoting domestic industry—especially heavy industry—at the expense of agriculture; it also gave priority to production over consumption in an attempt to build a strong defense industry and catch up with the West in modernization. Achievement was often measured in terms of the physical output of steel and other industrial and military products. As part of this strategy, urbanization was curtailed in the 1960s and 1970s through the household registration (*hukou*) system, and other mechanisms tied to employment

and housing. As a consequence, while China had a high industrial growth rate from 1950 to 1980, the rate of urban growth was comparatively low. Similarly, relative to China's level of industrialization, its percentage of urban population was low by world standards.

This approach substantially curtailed the development of the service sector in cities and turned many cities into “producer cities,” cities heavily skewed toward manufacturing. The approach also fostered the emergence or growth of a large number of mining- and manufacturing-based cities, many of which were located in interior regions. The Third Front industrialization program in the period between 1965 and 1975 also pushed industrialization and the associated urbanization further inland. Inevitably, these producer cities became highly polluted. China's command economy also reinforced the hierarchical nature of its cities. For example, provincial capital cities, as the centers of regional administration and economies, increased their dominance and became “primate cities” in the regional economy.

During this period, many elements of the urban landscape were designed to serve a specific political purpose and/or to showcase the grandeur of socialism. In almost all large and medium-sized cities, government buildings dominated the city center, large public squares were designed mainly for political gatherings, and statues of Mao were erected in the middle of traffic roundabouts in the

**A worker at a Heavy Machinery Plant in Beijing. Although China's industrial production increased rapidly during the beginning of the Communist era, China's Urban centers remained relatively small. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**





**View of Suzhou Creek, Shanghai, 1979. Crowded public housing and older housing built in the foreign concession areas are visible. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**

city center. Chinese city centers during this period usually had a low residential population density.

In this era, the *danwei* (work unit) was the constituent unit of urban society and economy. A *danwei* is a state-owned enterprise or an institution, such as a government agency, university, hospital, or military office, but it functioned more like a comprehensive cellular economic and social unit. A large *danwei* often occupied a walled compound, with one or more normally guarded gates, and were divided into workplace and residential areas. The residential structure was typically composed of rows of functionally and visually homogeneous low-rise buildings. Basic facilities and services, such as hospitals or clinics, grocery stores, cinemas, and dining halls, were also set up near the residential area.

The *danwei* served as a mechanism through which the state provided social services such as child care, education, employment, marriage, housing, health care, and retirement benefits. The state also exercised its social and political control through the *danwei*. Even leisure activities, which consisted largely of political studies, sports, and watching movies, were organized by the *danwei*. It is not an exaggeration to say that every urban worker was tied to the *danwei* from the cradle to the grave. Urban land was owned by the state and was assigned to the *danwei* at no charge. Urban housing was considered to be a welfare benefit, which was mainly provided at a nominal rent by

work units and local housing authorities. Urban residents had few housing choices and had to wait for subsidized public housing, which they received based on a set of criteria, such as seniority, job rank, and marital status.

Without competition from a private real estate market, the state had little incentive to invest much in building new residential housing, and a severe housing shortage developed as China's population increased. The quality and maintenance of urban housing were also very poor; the average per capita living space in the late 1970s was below four square meters. Cities remained compact, and there was not much suburbanization.

Even though the official ideology was to construct a socialist society with a uniform spatial and social organization, and the physical settings might have appeared to be similar, the social space varied considerably because work-units were ranked according to status and access to resources. This social differentiation was reflected in many aspects of life, such as the quality of housing, schools, and medical benefits.

## Urban Geography in the Reform Era (1978-present)

The late 1970s saw a significant change in China's economic strategy. The autarkic approach was finally abandoned in

**Beijing city at night. The central Chinese government established economic development policies that favor coastal cities such as Beijing. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.**



favor of producing goods for export. By the end of the twentieth century, China rose to become the “world’s factory.” At the same time, measures to marketize the economy were also gradually introduced, though even today the government still plays a decisive role in running the economy. With China’s rapid economic growth, cities have also grown and changed, one major change being the higher rates of rural-urban mobility (mostly in the form of “temporary” migration). By the 1990s, many large cities became increasingly cosmopolitan and diverse socially and culturally, and marked by unbridled consumerism.

### “LETTING SOME PEOPLE AND SOME PLACES GET RICH FIRST”

Different regions and cities have fared differently in the reform era, depending on their development history and, more importantly, government policies. Under Deng Xiaoping’s principle of “letting some people and some places get rich first,” China’s development focus shifted to the coastal cities. Shortly after the beginning of the reform, four cities (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen) on the south coast were established in 1980 as special economic zones; Hainan joined this category in 1998. In

1984, fourteen cities on the east coast were designated as “coastal open cities.” The central government established economic development policies that favored these cities in an effort to attract foreign investment. Their good location and access to the international market and human resources has led to booming economic growth for these coastal cities.

### THE WESTERN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The development gap between the coastal zone and the interior has widened and become a major public and policy concern. In 1999, the government announced its Western Development Program, which was designed to channel more attention and resources to the Western provinces in order to reduce these regional gaps. At present, the core of the Chinese spatial economy is concentrated in three major regions centered on several large cities: the Pearl River Delta region (including the cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Zhuhai), the Changjiang Delta region (based on the cities of Shanghai, Kunshan, Suzhou, Wuxi, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Ningbo), and the Bohai Gulf region (Beijing, Tianjin, and Dalian). Despite the establishment of the Western Development Program, the

western region and its cities are not an economic center, and the devastation wrought by the earthquake in May 2008 has created a further setback.

## LOCAL AUTONOMY

Fiscal decentralization since the 1980s has granted local governments (cities) more economic and political autonomy, and they have played a greater role in the national economy. Indeed, some have argued that local autonomy has brought *de facto* competitive federalism to China, but that is not an accurate reading of the situation. The hierarchical system of urban administrative jurisdictions means that local governments are evaluated by their supervisory units. Because the governments directly participate in the economy and because economic growth (fairly narrowly defined) is the prime objective of the central government, the criteria by which local cities are evaluated are necessarily heavily tilted to this set of rather parochial economic indices, such as various GDP indices, budgetary revenue, and foreign investment. To reach those targets, individual local governments adopt practices and policies that often sacrifice other public goods (such as the environment and labor welfare) and the broader regional and even national interests.

The pursuit of parochial interests within a small jurisdiction often leads to local protectionism as well as costly duplications. The hierarchical nature of the architecture of the administrative system is not congenial to horizontal cooperation. Answerable only to upper-tier governments and lacking a means to deal with neighboring jurisdictions, local governments often have to appeal to the upper-level governments to resolve interjurisdictional conflicts.

## THE TRANSFORMED LANDSCAPE

Rapid urban and economic growth has not only changed the spatial relations between regions and cities, it has also altered the internal structure of individual cities. There has been a parallel process of urban expansion and renewal. Economic growth in the urban sector has led to suburbanization and establishment of urban-type activity at the perimeter of urban zones. Cities push their administrative boundaries outward to include large amounts of

farmland and many villages. Factories are relocated to the city outskirts, and new housing estates have mushroomed, encroaching on the farmland. At the same time, every major city has undertaken large-scale inner city (city center) redevelopment, striving to become an international economic and cultural center. Land development and sales are also important to local government finance.

Housing reform and urban land-use reform initiated in the late 1980s have contributed greatly to the transformation of the urban landscape. The urban land reform and land leasing system have commercialized urban space, which has gradually morphed into more discernible commercial, industrial and different grades of residential zones. The reform has opened households to more choices in housing location and tenure type. The traditional *danwei* have gradually declined, but they have not totally disappeared. Separation of workplace and residence has become increasingly common. However, the lack of coordination and governments' and developers' pursuit of short-term monetary benefits mean that the development is often piecemeal: Urban structure in Chinese cities is fragmented and multimodal, with mixed densities.

Many large Chinese cities now have a more Western look, with high-rise office towers, suburban housing estates, large shopping centers, special economic and technical zones, science parks, and college districts. These new, "modern" capitalist-type elements are juxtaposed, at times uncomfortably, with the large socialist-style public squares and uniform apartment buildings left from the prereform era. For example, the city center often contains both dilapidated lodging for the urban poor, new high-end apartment complexes, and skyscrapers hosting financial and commercial companies. In the suburbs, "economical" housing for low-income families are often put up next to luxury villas, and new industrial zones can be adjacent to residential neighborhoods and farmland. With continuing expansion and inner-city redevelopment, living in the city center has become more and more expensive. The suburbs and outlying areas have thus become a more important area for those who need to relocate, but many of these areas still lack quality facilities such as schools and shops.

Being gradual, adaptive, and partial in nature, economic reforms have resulted in a dual system of urban land and property development involving both market

and administrative mechanisms that are still fraught with problems, including corruption and disputes between displaced residents and developers and governments. At the urban periphery one finds many “villages in the city” that are often occupied by migrant workers who can only afford this type of low-end housing (they are not eligible for low-income public housing because they are not considered as “locals” under China’s *hukou* system). Many migrants congregate in enclaves based on their place of origin. A famous example is the Zhejiang Village in south Beijing. But the ambiguity of ownership makes these “villages” a headache for city planning and management; the common problems are overcrowding and the illegal installation of utilities infrastructure.

Even though the housing reform has improved people’s living conditions and granted them tenure, not everyone has benefited from it; new housing is too expensive for many urban residents, particularly rural-urban migrants, who have no association with the formal state sectors, and those who occupy the lower rungs of the employment hierarchy, such as laid-off workers from the state-owned enterprises. Due to increasing income and housing disparities, residential segregation, a term that was once alien to Chinese society, has become more frequently used within the lexicon of recent China scholarship.

## Looking Forward: Accomplishments and Challenges

It is commonly acknowledged that China’s spatial environment and social space changed drastically after the reforms that began in 1978. Many big Chinese metropolises look much more cosmopolitan than their counterparts in other developing countries; as a whole, the national economy has grown rapidly, and many people’s living standards have been greatly improved. But these achievements have not been without costs and the improvement has not been equitably shared. In addition to the burden on the environment, there has been widening inequality among China’s population, due partly to the newly arrived market and partly to the many unreformed socialist

institutions in the country. These pose serious challenges to the long-term sustainability of China’s development and urbanization model.

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