

A Rural-Urban Metamorphosis in China: The Real Great Leap Forward?¹

LUCIO VALERIO BARBERA, ANNA IRENE DEL MONACO²

Abstract: After the first three decades of rapid urbanization, the Chinese government seems determined to amend the fifty-year old hukou system in order to achieve the ultimate goal of the National plan of urbanization, i.e. 900 million people living in urban areas by 2025. The *hukou* system would be abolished completely in “small” cities and more gradually in cities referred to as “medium”. A comparison between the physiographic situation of the Chinese territory of the late Nineteenth century and the situation of the current urban and rural areas strengthens the hypothesis of a complete restoration of macro historical regions to recover the structural constants capable of providing a solution to the massive problems of contemporary China and giving a meaning to its modernity.

Keywords: rural-urban migrations, New Urbanization Plan in China, Chinese macro-regions.

For some two thousand years the history of China has been characterised by a model of society, manufacturing and politics that the Chinese themselves, adapting the historic Marxist model, now define rural-federal. In the wake of China’s disorganised and tumultuous entrance into the modern era at the end of the last imperial dynasty, the Maoist regime constricted urban development within rigid confines to avoid dramatically accentuating the growing prevalence of large industrialised cities with respect to agricultural territories. However, the macroscopic phenomena of the past thirty-five years, under the impulse of the economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping, have produced

1. This paper was published in Italian on June 2014 in the issue n.154 of "Mondo Cinese" with the title *Metamorfosi rurale-urbana in Cina: il vero Grande Balzo in avanti?* So this version is its first release in English.

2. Lucio Valerio Barbera, Chair-holder of the UNESCO Chair in "Sustainable Urban Quality and Urban Culture, notably in Africa" at Sapienza University of Rome, Full professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Sapienza; lucio.barbera@uniroma1.it. Anna Irene Del Monaco, Tenured Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Sapienza; email: anna.delmonaco@uniroma1.it.

a productive and social metamorphosis that opened the floodgates and gave rise to a spectacle of Urbanization of dimensions and speed “unprecedented” in human history, in line with the shared convictions of the world’s observers.

Against this backdrop, on 31 December 2013 an article by Gao Yinan and Yao Chun entitled «Three big concerns around China’s new urbanization plan», published in the *People’s Daily Online*, detailed the important decisions regarding the development of relationships between the city and the rural sector assumed by the Central Government during a session of the Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC) of the Politburo Standing Committee, convened to discuss economic priorities and impose a governing agenda from 2014 onward. An analogous note was presented on 17 December 2013 by *The Diplomat* in an article by Shannon Tiezzi: her source, the *Xinhua*³, refers to a note from 14 December 2013 and defines the encounter «the most high-level meeting the Chinese leadership has ever convened on urbanization».

The Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party decided to promote a “human-centred” type of urbanization «that is (...) to balance urban-rural development and encourage domestic demand (...). Urbanization is the road China must take in its modernization drive». Pursuing the achievement of a social and productive equilibrium through integrated rural-urban development centred on human development has, for some time, appeared to Chinese scholars and politicians as the sole strategy suitable for facing up to the country’s enormous problems. After being carefully investigated both scientifically and politically, this strategy and perspective now appears to have obtained maximum and official recognition in virtue of its very recent adoption as a fundamental strategic approach by central political structures – in particular the Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China adopted in October 2007.

It is known in fact that over recent decades – at least until the end of the 1970s – China’s most advanced academic contexts, with constancy and an ever increasing degree of competence – and concern – conducted important studies on the future of its territory and cities.

3. TIEZZI 2013.

These studies are often rooted in a strong regionalist and contextualised tradition typical of the Chinese culture of settlement – as we will see further on – supported and driven precisely by the growing conviction of methodologically and operatively permitting the achievement of an integrated balance between the ‘rural’ environment and the ‘urban’ environment. It is within this structure that we find the distinguished – and imposing – work of Wu Liangyong, a professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and his well grounded team of researchers. It is thus no accident that, among other things, the University instituted a specific PhD course entitled “City and Rural Planning”. The course demonstrates the now rooted sensibility of this academic context with respect to the necessity to train students in the skills necessary to operate at all technical and managerial levels linked to the pursuit of the new objectives of rebalancing and integrating territorial development.

Wu Liangyong’s investigation of this theme began some time ago, though it could be said to have reached maximum public recognition in recent years. In China this often indicates the work of a scientific figure as being especially functional to the decisions taken by the country’s complex political and governmental structures; well into his nineties, in 2011 Wu Liangyong was awarded the *State Preeminent Science and Technology Award* by Chinese President Hu Jintao. Furthermore, the government also instated the *Wu Liangyong Foundation for Sciences of Human Settlements* in his name. He is a precursor: already in 1989, twenty-five years ago, exactly on the threshold of the unstoppable growth of the Chinese metropolis, he published a book entitled *A General Theory of Architecture*, in which the question of China’s urbanization, its risks and the necessity of confronting it with profound conceptual and methodological innovations, was raised with maximum lucidity, intellectual strength and an openness toward innovative ideas (the book was recently translated and published in Italy under the title *Integrated Architecture*⁴). From this moment, his interdisciplinary studies have constituted an itinerary of research of increasing richness

4. WU 2013 (This book is the Italian and English translation of Chinese book "A General Theory of Architecture" of 1989. The translation of the book has been promoted by Lucio Barbera in 2005. The translations, Italian and English integral versions, have been edited by Anna Del Monaco, Liu Jian, Ying Jin, Michael Riddel, Roberta Tontini).

and complexity that tends to summarise all aspects of the relationship between the urban and the territorial/rural dimensions. His studies have involved more than 50 experts in China for over fifteen years. The work is well documented in a continuous sequence of publications that includes *Research on the Rural and Urban Spatial Development Planning for the Greater Beijing Region (Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei)* and the *Second Research Report on the Rural and Urban Spatial Development Planning for the Greater Beijing Region (Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei)*.⁵ This foundation of scientific understanding and skills appears to underlie the decision taken by the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party on the future of China's cities and territory; a territory intended primarily as rural space.

A New "Great Leap Forward": The New Urbanization Plan as the Maximum Driving Force behind a Social Metamorphosis

In an article⁶ published in *The New York Times* in June 2013, Ian Johnson – author of *Wild Grass: Three Portraits of Change in Modern China* – stated: «China has long been home to both some of the world's tiniest villages and its most congested, polluted examples of urban sprawl. The ultimate goal of the government's modernization plan is to fully integrate 70% of the country's population, or roughly 900 million people, into city living by 2025». *China's urban million*, Tom Miller would say. During the 1980s, taking into account not only the great metropolises, but also medium and small-sized cities, the urban population already reached half of this dimension/objective.

The political intention declared as far back as thirty years ago was thus to double the dimension of the *city living population*, the number of *city dwellers* that, at the time, did not exceed 450 million people. The economic-political strategy that stimulated the implementation of such an imposing urbanization programme, and which is now responsible for the New Urbanization Plan, taking into account the urban migrations of the past three decades, now calls for the relocation of 250

5. WU 2002/2006/2009.

6. JOHNSON 2013.

million people from the countryside to the city over the course of 12 years, at a cost to the State of approximately 600 billion dollars per year for the construction of infrastructures and services. It is necessary to remember that the acceleration the government intends to bring about in the movement of the population is impressive: from the 1980s to the present, a period of roughly thirty years, two hundred million people have abandoned rural areas and nurtured the urban development we are familiar with, already staggering in its own right. What the State intends to achieve in the next twelve years – two hundred and fifty million people moving in a much shorter period of time – is equivalent to a velocity of Urbanization more than three times greater than that of the past decades. Given this situation we must not ignore the perception that often seems to warn, in any case, that every decisive programme for Chinese development contains an inclination toward the vertiginous qualities of an “epochal” event, historically unrivalled and impossible to match, that only the superiority of Chinese culture and the country’s political structure can bring about. Thomas J. Campanella, an attentive scholar of Chinese urban phenomena, dealing with the current trend of urban development in China (thus prior to the New Urbanization Plan!) has written⁷: “Of course, speed is stunning, but it can also be stupid.

Haste makes waste and tends to come at the cost of quality, longevity and even safety. The frenetic pace with which Chinese cities are being built and rebuilt has struck many observers, foreign and Chinese, as reckless and chaotic. At least one critic, a geographer at the Chinese Academy of Science, compared the present cyclone of creative destruction to the excess of the Great Leap Forward, a period of political turmoil and misguided policy that led to, among other things, the worst famine in human history (this was reported in *Nan Feng*, July 13, 2006)”. All the same, the primary objective of this immense effort is that of radically modifying the economic structure of contemporary China, transforming vast swathes of low-cost manufacturing districts into sectors of higher wage production, and thus into “domestic” consumers of goods and services, able to substitute the “foreign” consumers currently targeted by the majority of the country’s goods. Moreover, structuring

7. CAMPANELLA 2008, p. 282.

growth on domestic consumption rather than on export has the objective of facing up to recent global economic crises, and perhaps also contributing to their solution. In any case, we are dealing with a strategy for national development that, in principle, should be favourably welcomed by the rural population; a population that for decades, above all during the 1980s, considered migration toward the city the sole effective means of achieving more advantageous conditions and, above all, prospects for a better life than those offered by the countryside.

All the same, if on the one hand migration toward the city, induced by massive propaganda and nurtured by the media in accordance with an efficacious programme of “socio-cultural urbanization”, as John Friedmann⁸ explains, guarantees growth – to date 50% of the population is now able to pay for what it consumes with personal earnings – on the other hand it determines a series of serious social imbalances and difficulties. For example, a growing unemployment rate, above all among the population over 40 – that in the countryside was at least able to provide for its own survival⁹; the Chinese manufacturing sector tends to hire very young labourers, only to replace them as they near the age of forty. New urban citizens, upon reaching their forties, often lose their jobs and, equally as often, are unable to return to the elementary security offered by life in rural villages. Migration toward the city is interwoven with the expropriation of agricultural terrains for the realisation of new high-rise buildings and infrastructures, or new more modern farms. Unemployed farmers, what is more, are rarely able to gain access to the national pension system, though the plan for national Urbanization is experimenting, with alternating results, with forms of buy-outs/permanent salaries to compensate the loss of personal and family use of agricultural lands.

Finally, within this structure it is possible to suppose that the serious problem of the insufficiency of agricultural production with respect to the needs of the population (problems of food security) – due to the substantial backwardness of farming methods and the constant and rapid reduction in agricultural land in favour of urban expansion – is de-

8. FRIEDMANN 2005.

9. The CCP, since the 50's, had given to the farmers to grow a small farm land.

alt with as an integral part of the National Urbanization Plan precisely through the transformation of traditional, high labour intensive farming into modern agricultural with low, or very low labour intensity. For as much as can be understood from recent decisions by the central government, the New Urbanization Plan should consider as fundamental the possibility/necessity that rural areas, lightened of their immense demographic loads, become fields for rational high intensity investments in both mechanisation and the scientific and widespread application of biotechnologies.

To fully understand the level of profound transformation that the metamorphosis underway in China produces on the social body of the city and countryside, and will continue to produce, without wishing to enter into detail, though taking into account the new proposals that emerged during the Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC), it must be remembered that the immense movements of the Chinese population from the countryside to the city have taken place, and continue to do so, under a regime of differentiated “citizenship”.

Wholly peculiar to the People’s Republic of China, this condition renders the group of phenomena of urbanization more complex and less “spontaneously governable” than in any other part of the world. Between 1958 and 1960, the number of Chinese cities grew by 42% and the urban population increased by 30 million people, passing from 14.6% to 20% of the entire population in 1960.¹⁰ Precisely in order to control this migratory flow during the forced industrialisation of the “Great Leap Forward”, 1958 also marked the resuscitation of a very ancient imperial Chinese institution: the *hukou* system of family registration. In its current formulation the *hukou*, a sort of charter of rights, prescribes in no uncertain terms that the residency of each citizen is established by his or her place of birth, fixing permanent status, or true “citizenship”.

Within this framework, holding the rights to an agricultural citizenship means being able to work in the city under a contract as an agricultural worker, while holders of non-agricultural citizenship (in other words urban) can work in the countryside as non-agricultural labourers. This limitation is not nominalist and, taking into consideration

10. CAMPANELLA *ibidem*, p. 174.

the reality of population movements – exclusively massive migrations toward the city – it weighs exclusively on those who have immigrated to the city, in other words those who are officially “agricultural”: in the city the “true” citizens, those holding a non-agricultural *hukou*, are granted rights to subsidies for food, housing, education and other social services; the others, those with an agricultural *hukou*, should they choose to move the city, must fend for themselves or return to their place of residence to take advantage of the social services to which they are entitled. Under the social system of the Maoist period, when work was assigned by the State – there was no true labour market and goods were distributed (food, lodging, consumer products), rationed and made available solely in areas where one resided – in reality the *hukou* system was a highly effective obstacle to migrations toward urban areas. Over the past twenty years migratory pressures and the need for labour in the urban industrial sector convinced the government of the necessity to attenuate the strict observance of the *hukou* regime, even if not yet to a sufficient degree. However, it produced a society composed substantially of two social categories, two diverse citizens (urban and non-urban)¹¹ that now constitutes the most cumbersome obstacle to the implementation of the New Urbanization Plan. This regime of “double internal citizenship” may also explain why only 30% of the Chinese population possesses an urban identity card – *fei nonye hukou* –, the sole condition that consents life in the city with full rights; the rest of the population working in the city lives in an urban environment while continuing to hold a rural identity card – *nonye hukou* – accompanied by a series of easily imaginable irregularities, sacrifices, adaptations and precarious situations of a socially imposing dimension. It is thus easy to comprehend why, at the end of the first thirty years of rapid urbanization, in order to produce some form of guarantee of being able to reach the objectives of the 2025 National Urbanization Plan – the “urbanization” of 900 million people – the Government decided to make the modification of the *hukou* regime a priority, what is more articulated, more than fifty years after its institution. It is to be modified in a

11. BARBERA, DEL MONACO 2012, p. 34-57.

differentiated and controlled manner¹²: total abolition in “small” cities and urban nuclei and a more gradual elimination limited to “medium” sized cities, while for large cities it will be applied with pragmatically reasonable rigour. Finally, in the country’s metropolises it will continue to be applied in all its original severity: “The Conference (CEWC) came as China’s rigid *hukou* (household registration) system has prevented migrants from gaining equal access to services in cities, posing a major barrier holding back the country’s urbanization process. (...) The document promised to gradually allow migrant workers to become more integrated in cities, fully remove *hukou* restrictions in towns and small cities, gradually ease restrictions in mid-sized cities, setting reasonable conditions for settling in big cities while strictly controlling the population in megacities”.¹³ The *hukou* reform, as it has been summarised in this text, tells us much about the territorial model the New Urbanization Plan intends to pursue. The rural population leaving the countryside will be offered incentives to move to smaller cities that maintain a closer relationship to agricultural terrains than larger urban settlements. For immigrants this may signify the possibility of not having to totally abandon their fields, an anything but irrelevant support to young immigrants and, above all, to the elderly. Next on the list of hypothetical preferences will be mid-sized cities, followed by large cities, while the “megapolitan” metropolises should remain the size they now are, already highly critical. Within this vision, the vast flows of Chinese immigration over the coming twelve years, instead of being the cause of a further dilatation of the separation between the urban and rural, should instead function as a tool for revitalising, within the space of the Chinese subcontinent, the ample network of urban centres. They are to be differentiated and hierarchically rated by size and administrative role that, prior to the dramatic cycle of modern Chinese revolutions, constituted the arterial system through which Chinese civilisation flowed and its society prospered, when allowed to.

To we architects and urban planners interested in the functions,

12. In 1958, in China was established the system of household registration *hukou*, laying down the residence in the place of birth in a restrictive way.

13. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-12/14/c_132968136.htm.

form and meanings of the human habitat, this objective speaks in the exalting tones of the great humanist utopias. For this reason, despite the illusions cultivated in the warmth of utopias, all of this is of great interest and, we believe, should concern and attract everyone, at least intellectually and scientifically, if not politically.

The Macro-Regions of Contemporary China

The body of the megalopolises of the People's Republic of China, its surprising *instant cities*¹⁴, its ancient capitals and all of its minor cities, exist, transform and grow in a highly variegated territory that extends from a semi-tropical, semi-wilderness in the south, to the hard and rarefied Mongolian north and Turcoman east. In this boundless space, we are often surprised by the sudden revelation of the fantastic and symbolic lines of the great imperial parks or gardens of the princes and the discovery of the permanent morphological strength of ancient routes visible in the density of the urban forest¹⁵ – in the north as the south.

These presences are still alive with the geomantic tradition and the permanent symbolic dream that permeated the formal culture of the Empire, and which now seems to ridicule the inhuman insignificance of geometric urban modernism. Crossing the contemporary Chinese city it is instead possible to avoid being convinced that it is a wholly modern genetically political phenomenon, the tangible result of a process of economic and social development created at the almost autocratic behest of Deng Xiaoping, who focused on the development of the city as the means of creating post-Maoist China. From this moment, China has effectively realised the highest number of skyscrapers, office buildings, shopping malls, hotels, residential complexes, infrastructures, parks and golf courses ever realised by a single nation in the world since the dawn of history. It did so using not only technologies, but also concepts imported from the West. Yet considered in this interpretation strictly limited to the present, China, with its immense scale, imposes

14. Instant Cities: the term is used here in the sense of sudden growth in the city. It was also used by the British group of radical architects "Archigram" in the mid-60s, along with the term Plug-in City and Walking and City .

15. BARBERA 2010.

a diverse language on the city and architecture, decidedly borrowing the role once held by the United States of America: the reinvention of modernism as it was proposed by the West through the dilatation of its every grammatical and syntactic construction, passing from world record to world record, stupefying us while paying the price of being overrun by the traditional tastes of the masses and a strong dose of an impossible to judge spectacularisation of public space. In this way, we soon found ourselves accepting, with much clamour and ostentation, the growth of a physical and mental space where the urban horrid and grotesque coexist with overwhelming architectural research. At the end of the 1970s there were 200 cities in China, while today there are 700.

While many are considered small cities (*towns* or *counties*) according to the standard of the “Middle Kingdom” or *Zhong Guo* – the Mandarin word for China – they are immense with respect to Western standards in Europe and above all America. Little known cities such as Guiyang and Jinan have the same number of inhabitants as Phoenix and Philadelphia; Hefei and Wuxi, considered mid-sized cities, are home to more people than Los Angeles. Approximately 102 Chinese cities exceed one million inhabitants. There are only 9 such cities in the United States of America.¹⁶

As part of this vision, the majority of international studies on the economic and territorial development of China – staggeringly numerous since end of the 1990s – frames the problem and the genesis of this extraordinary modern urban development within the conceptual model of the “transition” from a planned economy to a market economy, or better yet, toward a global market (for example Bian-Logan 1996; Logan 2002; Ma-Wu 2005; Wu-Yeh 1999; T. Zhang 2002; Jieming Zhu 2004).¹⁷ There are also many studies of the problem of housing in China structured on this type of conceptual model by both planners and sociologists (Di Cheng Li 2010; Tomba 2006). This tends to highlight prevalently, if not uniquely, the effects on the metropolitan structure of China deriving from the country’s participation in an “exogenous” system, that of the global market and the brutal and accelerated transfer of a cul-

16. CAMPANELLA 2008, pp. 15-16.

17. ABRAMSON 2006.

ture that did not belong to the historic genesis of the Middle Kingdom. On the other hand, impressed in everyone's memory is the moment of China's arrival as a member of the WTO, another key moment to which there is a tendency to attribute some of the macroscopic effects on the form and substance of Chinese development, and thus also the county's metropolitan and territorial structure, as well as the other WTO member nations. Eccentric, and to some degrees contrary with respect to this conception is instead the reading proposed by John Friedmann in his 2005 book *China's Urban Transition*¹⁸; Friedmann claims that urbanization in China is the result of an endogenous process of evolution rather than being uniquely the fruit of globalisation. Supported, in fact, by the work of the anthropologist Aiwah Ong at the University of California, Berkeley – *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*¹⁹ – and by the ideas of the historian John King Fairbank, Friedmann claims that in China it is not so simple to establish what is “inside or outside” any phenomenon. Fairbank affirms, as Friedmann reminds us: «As we always suspected, China's centre of gravity lay within, among the Chinese people, and that is where the ingredients of revolution accumulated».²⁰ Aiwah Ong and her reading of the current Asian notion of *flexible citizenship* supports Friedmann in highlighting how the so-called foreign financing that literally flooded and nurtured China's urban transformation over the past decades, originated substantially from the “Chinese Diaspora” living in Southern Asia, Australia, California and, naturally, Hong Kong and Taiwan. If we look at the Chinese Diaspora as *Greater China*, Friedmann continues, we understand how the process defined by many “global” scholars can equally be considered, at least in an initial phase, as prevalently “endogenous”.

The history of China is not only the history of a Nation-State; it is also the history of a civilisation unified by literature, philosophy and religious traditions, separated and reunited by external forces many times it is true, but also and above all by contiguous and internal ones.

18. FRIEDMANN 2005, pp. xvi–xvii.

19. ONG 1999.

20. FRIEDMANN 2005, pp. xviii. The reference is to John K. Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985*, Harper & Row, New York 1986, p. 62.

Its confines have remained geographically stable for approximately four millennia. Its population, which now corresponds to more than 1/5 of the global population inhabits the same territory, more or less, that was home to a few hundred million people during the first century AD, roughly the same number living around the Mediterranean under the Roman Empire during the same era. What has held the Middle Kingdom together is the construction of a stable correspondence between the morphological structure of its territory and the administrative, and thus urban, construction of its society.

This is why Friedmann, founding his reading on the research gathered by William Skinner in *The City in Late Imperial China*²¹, proposes a vision of China as an archipelago whose regions – widely diverse in the speed of their development since the era of late Imperial China, 1830-1893 – are, in his opinion, only slightly connected to one another²², while from the interior they appear to be linked by dense and close-knit network of minor urban centres with a greater administrative role (Fig.1).²³ This territorial condition makes China profoundly different from Europe. In fact, Frederick Mote, the author of one of the essays found in Skinner's publication, clarifies that the cultural difference between city and countryside in China, prior to Mao, was not as evident as it was, on the other hand, in Europe where, what is more, during the decisive phases of its history it developed a special urban type, the self-governed city-state, completely absent in ancient China (the "exogenous" exception of Hong Kong, Shanghai and the other "city-concessions", precisely for their "exogenous" nature, remain an exception); the cities of Imperial China, with their high walls, were the living representation of the presence of the Empire and its government in any province²⁴, the functional and symbolic bonding agent of the presence of an overriding level of State unity, otherwise far from local realities and out of reach

21. SKINNER 1977.

22. SKINNER *ibidem*, p. 211; John K. Fairbank: «Fairly early in my research on Chinese cities it became clear that in late imperial times they formed not a single integrated urban system but several regional systems, each only tenuously connected with its neighbours. In tracing out the overlapping hinterlands of the cities in each one of these regional systems, I came to the realization that the region they jointly defined coincided with minor exceptions to a physiographic unit».

23. ABRAMSON 2006, pp. 197-215.

24. MOTE 1977, pp. 101-154.

to common mortals. This explains the emergence, also visual, as nodes in the continuous landscape of the administratively interpreted Imperial territory, of networks of local networks, an urban and territorial *continuum*²⁵ simultaneously articulated as regional macro-cells.

According to William Skinner – anthropologist-geographic-military – also during the final Imperial phase, during the nineteenth century, the territory of the Middle Kingdom was not supported by a single, vast dominant urban system, but constituted of diverse provincial systems linked to the idea of the Empire, but each corresponding, for the most part, with a well-defined “physiographic unit”.

In particular, Skinner highlights nine macro-regions (Fig.2), articulated by the presence of rivers, water networks and characteristic physical elements. In each region he identifies a subsystem of central cities that organise the territories of the regional inland as an effective “local” market (it should be noted that the adjective local in China may also correspond with a territorial entity of dimensions equal to, if not greater than, those of many European nations). Even the Chinese soon became aware that it cost much less to produce grain and rice in loco than to transport it along the Empire’s infrastructural routes on pack animals, despite the realisation of a work such as the Great Canal, realised during the Sui Dynasty and providing a direct connection between Hangzhou and Beijing, crossing the country from north to south for almost 1,800 km (the Imperial presence in the form of infrastructure).

The regional quality of traditional Chinese urban development, based on the differences in the physical landscape and the local integration of manufacturing and economic cycles, was reinforced, in the end, by overlapping it with other factors of differentiation, above all cultural, such as diverse ethnic groups, languages and so many ancestral histories.

In our times, there is thus considerable interest in being able to observe that some of the maps and illustrations presented in Skinner’s publication – describing the territorial situation in China in the mid-1800s – in reality do not illustrate a geographic or “physiographic” situation – to use the author’s terminology – that differs greatly from the current state, at the level of the macro-regional systems (Figs.1&2).

25. DEL MONACO 2012, p.116.

In figure 1 the principal Chinese national settlements, which we can refer to as metropolitan macro-regions, indicated in maps from the late 1800s are presented with the old names Peking, Sian, Kaifeng, Shanghai-Hangchow, Wuhan, Chengtu and Canton.

In four of these nine place a hypothetical curious traveller would have no trouble in recognising the four poles of the primary internal flight paths of Air China (Fig.3): Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Guangzhou (Canton), what is more agreeing that the traditional system of national centres of two centuries ago, as illustrated on maps from this period, corresponds with a geographic structure that is very similar to the macro-regional structure scientifically proposed by William Skinner.

Of greater interest to our objectives here is the fact that the nine metropolitan macro-regions identified by Skinner in the Chinese territory of the mid-1800s – a highly important and internationally recognised research contribution by the Californian scholar – were substantially confirmed with the 2007 research completed by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) examining the *Metropolitan regions of China*.²⁶ The work identified 11 from our era, as opposed to the 9 presented by Skinner from the nineteenth century; however, one was derived from the doubling of the area near Canton (originally the macro-region of Lingnan), in other words, Guangdong, witness to a particularly relevant development in recent decades with respect to other regions, the other is represented by Taiwan, which Skinner did not take into consideration (Fig.4 and Fig.5). The eleven metropolitan macro-regions now correspond with 1/10 of the country's area, 1/3 of the population and produce more than 50% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product).

At this point we have only a few terms for attempting to comprehend the reality of Chinese urbanization. Perhaps they are sufficient for imagining – and hoping – that the New Urbanization Plan contains a strong propensity toward the implementation of a territorial re-balancing, an integration between rural-urban areas – which is its objective – through the reinforcement or better yet the complete restoration of the

26. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metropolitan_regions_of_China - <http://www.amr.gov.cn/web/default.aspx>.

functioning of its historic macro-regions. Hence the plan is not only generically “contextualist”, but generated by the awareness that not only the model implanted into the territory of the historic development of China, negated, vexed and deeply attacked by the Chinese revolutions, inherently contains the structural constants capable of resolving the stupefying problems of today – urban and territorial – being faced by China and restoring meaning to its modern existence.

Postscript: The First Operative Decisions; Toward a Federalist Future?

As this text goes to print, China's New Urbanization Plan is proceeding toward its implementation at “Chinese” speed, despite no shortage of opposition. On 16 March 2014, Prime Minister Li Keqiang, the true supporter of the New Urbanization Plan, obtained initial approval of his Plan from the State Council, in other words, from the Government of the People's Republic of China. This is the first tranche covering the coming six years, from 2014 to 2020. The three months that passed since December 2013, form the political presentation of the Plan by the Politburo Standing Committee to the first government decision, were required to overcome the anything but minor resistance from provincial governments, even those most interested in the development of small, medium-small and mid-sized urban centres, at the centre of the Plan's attention. The Chinese political/administrative system now requires that decisions are made centrally, with provincial governments only required to implement them, though with a great deal of autonomy in dealing with methods and means of achieving objectives decided by others. Within this autonomy, an important role is played by the contiguity between local power and private/public entrepreneurship in the process of producing the city, often to the detriment of agricultural terrains and the rural population. Thus it is no accident that the New Urbanization Plan has been declared as being *based on the individual and respectful of the environment*. The document approved by the government includes an ambitious infrastructural project, massive investments in the rail network that affects all small and medium-small cities (of approx. 200,000 people), high speed rail lines linking cities home to 500,000 inhabitants, a rational dissemination of airports and,

finally, a widespread and important plan for social and assisted housing. This complex programmatic framework is articulated within the solid framework of the objective – fundamental to orienting China’s model of economic development toward an internal consumer market – of increasing the total urban population from the current figure of roughly 50% to approximately 60% by 2020. This means that small, medium-small and medium-sized “cities” will receive an average of 100 to 130 million new inhabitants in six years, in other words, *from 16 to 22 million new urban residents each year*. To fully evaluate the global dimension of the Plan it is necessary however to remember that it also tends to regularise agricultural workers who migrate toward the city, though they remain unable to take advantage of social services in the city. According to summary though dependable calculations, this number is in the range of 250 million. The comprehensive vision of these commitments, naturally, concerns provincial governments above all in relation to the problem of the resources required to cover the costs of this immense national effort. The government approved document speaks of the need for fiscal reform, which appears to be delegated to special measures. Today, in fact, the provincial budget covers less than half the costs of *current* urbanization works and social services; the remainder, to date, is covered by autonomous initiatives of local government. This is not the least of the reasons behind the distorted relationships between the world of business and public administration. Also for this reason it is important to consider, together with the New Urbanization Plan, the equally New Land Law that, in parallel, has followed in the wake of the development and approval of the New Urbanization Plan, from its initial launch by the Politburo to government approval. This very important reform attributes greater usage and “ownership” rights to land by farmers, who can sell or lease and, above all, use rights to agricultural lands granted as guarantees against bank loans or mortgages. This means that farmers who legally migrate toward the city in the coming years can contribute, with their small real estate capital, to facing up to the costs of moving and beginning a new urban life. It is a reform in the style of Deng Xiaoping, reminiscent of the home ownership reform that, during his time, made all urban dwellers and those employed by the country’s industries the new small owners of a pre-

cious capital of real estate necessary for moving toward the city.

Though the New Land Law has yet to be detailed in its content and scheduling, its objectives and its integration with the New Urbanization Plan appear clear. Perhaps it is precisely this functional integration between the two aspects of the new drive toward urbanization that concerns the provincial governments; local governments can no longer expropriate agricultural space at ridiculously low prices, to be given to public or private builders. It is almost as if the central government considers, as a fundamental step toward the success of China's "urban" and social reform, the passage toward a more autonomous and "virtuous" local administration, more respectful of the rights of its citizens, comparable to new immigrants, capable of managing processes of urban development utilising the approaches of a more transparent market. All of this reinforces the impression that China, based on its tradition of urban civilisation founded on specific local qualities and a tendentially balanced relationship between city and countryside, in order to make a *new Great Leap Forward*, must reconsider the positive and fixed characteristics of its history, and institute, *sooner or later*, an important process of institutional reform.

A reform unlike any other, profoundly Chinese, but in any case able to fully valorise the differences that form the inaccessible qualities of the historic, social and cultural context of the Middle Kingdom. Five days prior to the approval by the Central Chinese Government of the first tranche of the New Urbanization Plan, exactly on the 11 March 2014, The New York Times published an editorial that received vast consensus. Its now famous title is *The United States of China*.²⁷ Its author is Scott Moore, a young researcher at Harvard, and holder of the Giorgio Ruffolo Postdoctoral Research Fellowship. We thus felt it appropriate to conclude our text with his clear, final sentence: «If China's leaders want to ensure their country's peace and prosperity over the long run, they would do well to chart a course toward a federal future».

27. MOORE 2014.



Fig. 1. Cities of China in 1894; in evidence: National Capitals, Provincial Capitals, Capital of prefecture (fu), Capital of independent department (chih-li chou), County-level capital of unexceptional economic importance, County-level capital of exceptional economic importance, Nonadministrative city. County-level capitals consist of capitals of counties (hsien), dependent departments (chou), and subprefectures (t'ing and chih-li t'ing).

Source: William Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University, 1977 (backcover)

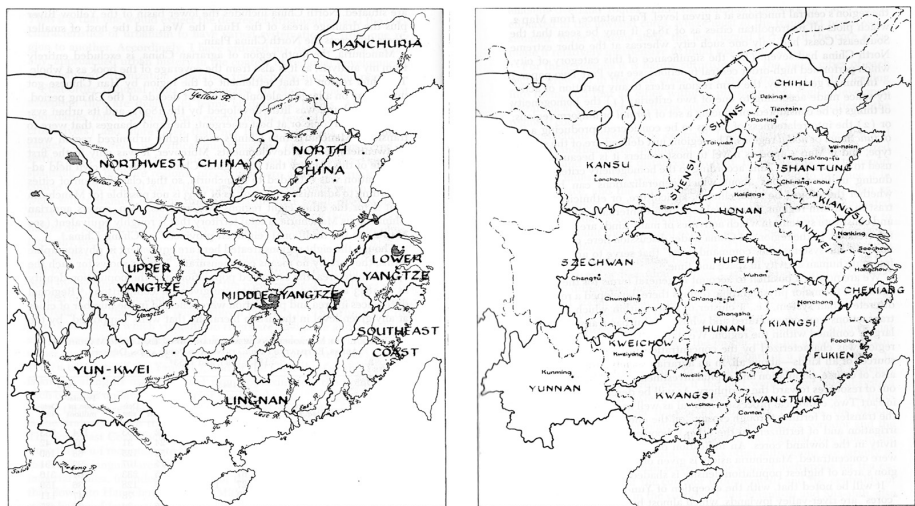


Fig. 2. Physiographic macroregions of the Agrarian China in 1894; in relation with the major rivers, with regional cores (indicated by shading) and relation to Provinces and Metropolitan cities.
Source: William Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University, 1977 (p.214)

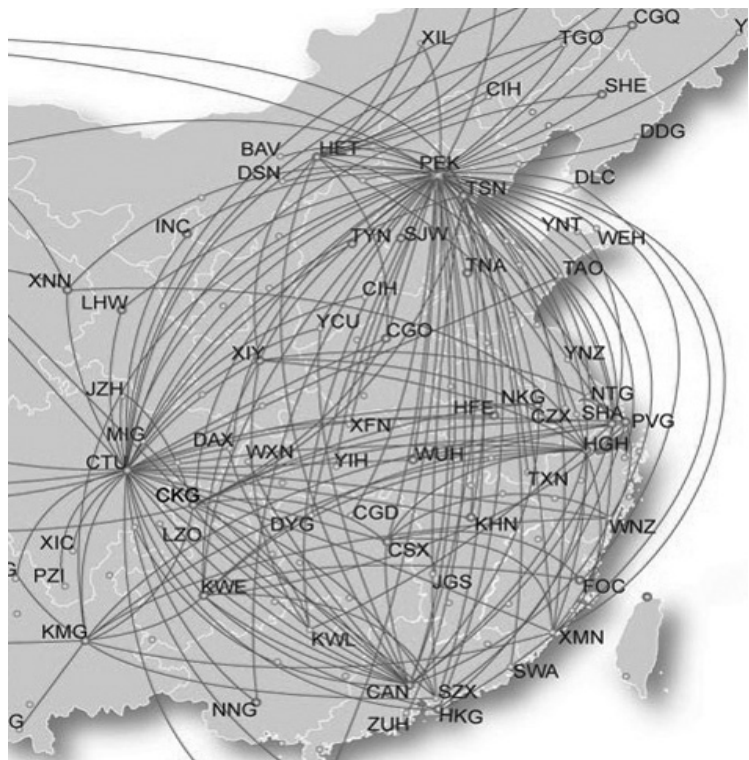


Fig. 3. Air China air routes; From Air China Web site

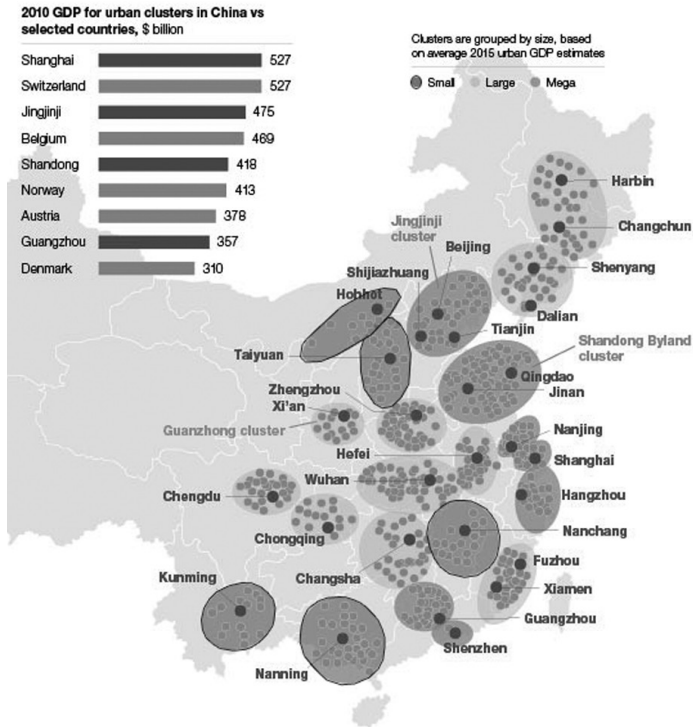


Fig. 5. Urban Clusters in China. Source: http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/growth/is_your_emerging-market_strategy_local_enough.

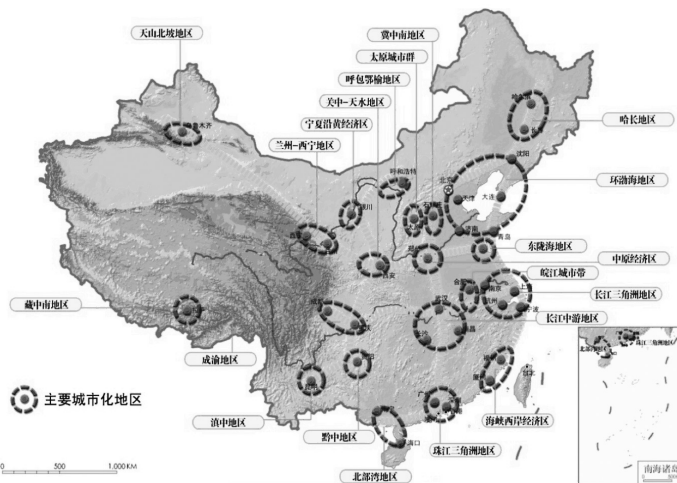


Fig. 6. Distribution Map of Two-horizontal Three-vertical Urbanization Strategy (12th Five-year Plan). Source: http://www.mlit.go.jp/kokudokeikaku/international/spw/general/china/index_e.html.

Bibliography

ABRAMSON 2006

Daniel Abramson, *Urban Planning in China: Continuity and Change: What the future holds may surprise you*, "Journal of the American Planning Association", 72:2, 197-215; 2006

BARBERA 2010

Lucio Valerio Barbera, *Shanghai Siena*, Pisa, ETS, 2010

BARBERA, DEL MONACO 2012

Lucio Valerio Barbera, Anna Irene Del Monaco, *La metamorfosi urbana nella Cina Contemporanea*", in Antonelli. (edited by) *Metamorfosi. La cultura della metropoli*, Ed. Viella, 2012

CAMPANELLA 2008

Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon, China's Urban Revolution and what it means for the world*, Princeton Architectural Press 2008

DEL MONACO 2012

Anna Irene Del Monaco, *Città e limes. Roma-Beijing-New York*, Nuova Cultura, 2012

FRIEDMANN 2005

John Friedmann, *China's Urban Transition*, University of Minnesota Press 2005

JOHNSON 2013

Ian Johnson, *China Plans Vast Urbanization*, "The New York Times, International Weekly", June 24th 2013

MOORE 2014

Scott Moore, *The United States of China*, The New York Times, March 11 2014

MOTE 1977

F.W. Mote, *The Transformation of Nanking, 1350-1400*, in William Skinner (edited by), *The City in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1977

ONG 1999

Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Duke University Press 1999

SKINNER 1977

William Skinner (edited by), *The City in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1977

WU 2013

Wu Liangyong, *Integrated Architecture*, Edizione Nuova Cultura, Rome 2013. Monograph Series #1. "L'architettura delle città. The Journal of Scientific Society Ludovico Quaroni"

WU 2002/2006/2009

Wu Liangyong et al. *Research Report on the Rural and Urban Spatial Development Planning for the Greater Beijing Region (Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei)*, Tsinghua University Press, 2002;

Wu Liangyong et al. *Second Research Report on the Rural and Urban Spatial Development Planning for the Greater Beijing Region (Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei)*, Tsinghua University Press, 2006;

Wu Liangyong. *Thoughts on Urban and Rural Development Transformation of China*. Tsinghua University Press, 2009

Sitography

SHANNON TIEZZI 2014

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-12/14/c_132968136.htm.

SCOTT MOORE 2014

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/12/opinion/the-united-states-of-china.html?_r=0

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metropolitan_regions_of_China - <http://www.amr.gov.cn/web/default.aspx>