

Smaller Chinese cities are dwindling despite the country's attempt at urbanization

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City administrators stress growth while ignoring shrinking

- China's urbanization rate has climbed from 52 percent to 58 percent between 2007 and 2016, but some cities have yet to witness this growth
- During that period, 84 out of 694 Chinese cities have "shrunk" after experiencing a population decrease
- City administrators stress growth as part of their urban planning while ignoring shrinking



Unfinished houses of a deserted real estate project in Nanning, capital of South China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Photo: IC

Decision-makers in many local governments around China refuse to admit that their cities have been "shrinking" in recent years while the country itself has been going through rapid urbanization.

Long Ying, an urban planning scholar from Tsinghua University in Beijing, never expected that his hometown, a township named Shiling in Northeast China's Jilin Province, would have entered his research of shrinking cities.

He found that Shiling has become less populated and more dilapidated.

His findings were echoed by a report by Wu Kang, an associate professor from Capital University of Economics and Business, which shows that between 2007 and 2016, 84 out of 694 Chinese cities have "shrunk" after experiencing a decrease in their population for at least three consecutive years.

In the past five years, China's urbanization rate has climbed from 52.6 percent to 58.5 percent, according to the 2018 Government Work Report delivered by Premier Li Keqiang during the two sessions, meaning that over 80 million farmers have become urban residents during the period.

Against this background, when it comes to urban planning, all city administrators stress "growing," as Long revealed to China Youth Daily, which he interpreted as "in line with the trend."

Therefore it is hard for some of these cities to accept the fact that they are "shrinking." Long found that many cities in Wu Kang's report have undergone overall urban planning that aims to meet an anticipated population increase within 10 or 20 years.

While most Chinese cities are experiencing economic restructuring, scholars believe that shrinking cities are part of the overall urbanization phenomenon taking place in the country, which "is not necessarily bad, but might be an opportunity for changes to take place."

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Long Ying

An urban planning scholar from Beijing's Tsinghua University said local governments base their financing on city expansion and land sales

Stop growing

Even though Long has visited many cities as an urban planning designer, he has fond memories about Shiling, where he spent his teenage years. The town was booming in the mid-1990s, with complete public facilities, bustling crowds on the

streets and sufficient jobs. At that time, the town was one of the top 10 townships of Jilin Province.

Revisiting the town this year, Long found that the number of students at local middle schools had been halved, which he saw as direct indicator of a shrinking and aging population. Public facilities and even shops were dilapidated and roads blocked with garbage.

"The shrinking of a city is one of the reasons behind the shattered public space," Long explained to China Youth Daily. "Broken windows, slanting telegraph poles and stripping walls all reflect broken public space in cities."

In 2013, Long happened to discover "shrinking" cities by comparing the 2000 and 2010 demographic censuses of 50,000 townships and communities across China. Together with Wu and another scholar, they found that over 10,000 townships and communities had been suffering from population density decline over the past decade.

Wu then selected 694 cities as a sample and found that 84 of them experienced population shrinking between 2007 and 2016.

According to international standards, "shrinking cities" refer to cities with a population over 10,000 that have been decreasing for at least two years in a row while experiencing economic restructuring.

Two years ago, Long visited a city that relies on the iron and steel industry in Northeast China, where the owner of a clothing shop told him that there were so few people in the iron factory that there was almost no business.

When Long's team visited the city again this past winter, they found that the most famous hotel in the city with 200 rooms, which was built two years before, was so unused that they were the only guests.

That city, Wu later discovered, suffered from negative growth after China started to forbid felling natural forests in 2015.

"People will flow elsewhere when there is lack of jobs," said Wu.

Deeply rooted mind-set

Long and Wu regard shrinking as a development phase of a city that "happens naturally." In the south of China, there is also a city that used to attract millions of workers from every corner of the country, but which now is experiencing shrinking under the impact of industrial structuring.

As the two scholars observed, faced with such changes, every city that is shrinking needs to re-examine their planning and paint a brand new blueprint for the city.

But such voices are rarely heard in a country that has gotten used to growing. In Long's experiences with urban planning, every time decision-makers would ask him to make a plan according to a rising population and expanding city size, making a plan for "shrinking" was not only unacceptable for the local government but also rejected by urban planners.

"They all pursue 'growth' and regard 'shrinking' as a negative thing," sighed Long.

Long also found that the dozens of shrinking cities they studied have plans actively expecting the city's population to grow in the next 10 or 20 years.

"Every city has a plan taking population growth into consideration, so the size of the city expands as a result," said Long.

The expected increase in population is a good excuse for local governments to increase land development projects. "It is related to the land finance of local governments; only when they get permission to use land could they sell it and increase investment for infrastructure," Long said.

For example, the population of Yichun in Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province started to dwindle in the late 1980s, but urban planning (2001-20) for the city expected its population would reach 1.33 million in 2005 and 1.4 million by 2020. According to the 20-year plan for Yichun, the size of the city would also expand along with the expected population increase. The fact is, in 2010 its population was only 1.15 million.

"Domestically, city planning is mostly based on a pattern of growing, which indeed fits the development trend at that time," Long explained to China Youth Daily. Even at the architecture college in Tsinghua University, as Long revealed, students have limited access to knowledge about "shrinking cities."

"There is a lack of methodology targeting designing for shrinking cities in China," said Long. "In other words, even though a city admits it is shrinking, there is slim chance for colleges to figure out a suitable solution, because we lack education and policy support in this regard."

Quality matters

Fortunately, a number of Chinese scholars like Long and Wu are calling for more attention to shrinking cities and have started research in this regard, analyzing the reasons behind it in an attempt to learn from developed countries and explore solution for Chinese cities.

Many Western nations have also witnessed shrinking cities in the past. For example, in the American northeast, cities including Detroit and Pittsburgh that once depended on iron and steel manufacturing and developed rapidly in the mid-20th Century became highly industrialized. But after the US ended its economic restructuring led by the tertiary industry, factories in these cities all closed.

It was a much more rapid shrinking process than what Chinese cities are currently experiencing, as Long observes. He used to visit Buffalo and found the center district of the city rather shattered, with many houses deserted.

Facing this dilemma, the US used two different strategies. One solution lies in increasing the population. Detroit adopted this solution in the 1980s and 1990s to curb shrinking, launching big programs, building stadiums, museums and office buildings.

This helped the city look much busier than before. But the living quality of its local residents was not raised. This increased the local government's fiscal burden, which ended up going bankrupt in 2013.

The other solution adopted in the US is "smart shrinking." Like in Youngstown, Ohio, the local government admitted that, even though it was once one of the four big American iron and steel cities, after Youngstown's population was halved between 1960 and 2010, a new plan had to be enacted.

In the new plan, the previous watercourse for industrial use was adapted for public entertainment and abandoned land was turned into a greenbelt. The city also put forward a series of commercial plans to increase investment in education and attract technology enterprises to local colleges. After being redesigned, the city's residential land dwindled by 30 percent.

"But the shrinking in quantity doesn't mean shrinking in quality. Instead, the urban planning for a shrinking city should pay more attention to raising the living quality of locals and the quality of the city," Long said, showing favor for the case in Youngstown.

To make real changes to shrinking cities, the first hurdle to overcome is the current mind-set, noted Long.

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Newspaper headline: Shrinking towns

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