

The Greg Zone

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China's shrinking cities

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Hegang, China in 2012

China has almost 1,000 cities that are [losing people](#):

The perception that China's urbanisation is still in full swing is untrue for nearly one-third of Chinese cities, whose populations are shrinking, according to new findings by a Chinese university.

A research team from Tsinghua University used satellite imagery to monitor the intensity of night lights in more than 3,300 cities and towns between 2013 and 2016. In 28 per cent of cases, the lights had dimmed.

China now has 938 shrinking cities, according to Long Ying, an urban planning expert at China's Tsinghua University, who founded and led the research group, Beijing City Lab. This is more than any other nation on Earth.

The urban shrinkage is related to China's [declining population](#).

The Chinese cities under the greatest pressure of shrinking include those heavily dependent on natural resources, such as the coal mining town of Hegang in Heilongjiang province.

Also diminishing are cities “in the process of transformation”, such as Yiwu in Zhejiang province, once christened the “largest small commodity wholesale market in the world” and famous for its sprawling networks of stalls selling counterfeit goods.

More about Yiwu [here](#).

Most Chinese city planning is detached from the reality of today, Long said after his team reviewed ambitious urban development plans for more than 60 cities. The plans usually include key infrastructure projects, as well as industrial, commercial and residential developments that may diverge significantly from the demographic trends.

The best-laid plans of mice and men. Anything is possible in China, but Herculean development plans (such as the [Greater Bay Area “blueprint”](#)) need to be taken with a grain of salt.

Huge apartment buildings dominate the skylines in most Chinese urban areas. These buildings would be much more costly to tear down should they be vacant than the standard smaller houses in shrinking cities in the US, for example.

These large buildings may also be sparsely occupied – it could be difficult to survey how many homes are empty, Long said. Furthermore, no official wants to face a decision over whether to tear down a building that might just have a few occupants.

Chinese academic Gan Li calculates that some 22% of the nation's housing stock is vacant, or more than [50 million homes](#).

However, the desolation that haunts many of America's decaying post-industrial

towns could be replicated in China, if the situation is not managed properly, Long said.

“Although shrinking cities in the US and China are different on many levels, many landscapes in the US rust belt could be the future of some of China’s shrinking cities,” he warned.

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