Urbanization in China in the 1990s: New Definition, Different Series, and Revised Trends*

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Abstract
This paper tackles new problems concerning China’s urban population figures and the annual urban population series arising from the use of a new Census 2000 urban definition. The paper extends existing research and incorporates crucial findings not available or previously overlooked. The paper assesses major competing urban annual series for the 1990s, including the latest released in the Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2002 and checks empirically the different series of urban population estimates, by

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decomposing them and comparing the trends to those derived from migration and employment data from other sources. Based on the examination of several sets of data, revised urbanization and migration trends in the 1990s are presented. The paper also provides guidance on the use of the current urban population data and helps to establish a critical baseline for studying urbanization and migration in the 1990s, which was an important decade of urban change in China.

Introduction

Few would dispute that a rapid urban transformation has been under way in mainland China since the early 1980s. Indeed, China is probably one of the fastest urbanizing countries in the world. Understanding the Chinese urban definitions and figuring out the urban population size will have many important implications for social science research. Obviously, China’s huge population weight means that any reasonable continental or global forecast of urban growth cannot treat China lightly. To the scholarly community involved in research on China, many studies of Chinese society and economy rely instrumentally on being able to measure and classify meaningfully the urban and rural populations, on which other rural/urban variables (such as rural and urban employment and consumption) are based. To urbanists studying China, its urban growth and migration are also an important part of understanding this allegedly unique case of urban development.

However, the task of figuring out China’s urban growth and its trends does not seem to be an easy one. For more than two decades, students of Chinese urbanization have laboured diligently, and at times struggled, to deal with China’s complex urban definitions, its urban population sizes and trends.3 While scholars have already made tremendous progress in tackling this issue as far as previous data are concerned, mostly at the national level pertaining to the pre-1996 era, new developments in China and the accompanying changes in urban definition have again required us to revisit this subject and do further work on it.

In March 2001, in its first news release of the Census 2000 results, China’s National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported that the urban population (excluding servicemen) in mainland China had reached 455.94 million, or 36.09% of the total population, on 1 November 2000. This set of figures, based on a new urban definition, reports a much larger urban population than we were aware of for the previous year, 1999 (year-end): 388.92 million, or only 30.89% of the total population (see Table 1,