



## Study on the County-level City in China

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### Abstract

In this article, we studied the county-level city in China which was the special type in the city development of the world. Through the research about the concept and the origin of the county-level city, we found that the county-level city was different to the current “dot” city in the world, and it was a sort of town system on the “sphere” in the wider area. For China with 0.8 billion farmers, the county-level city for urban and rural certainly possesses special functions in the urbanization and the new countryside construction of China.

**Keywords:** County-level city, Urbanization, New countryside construction

US economist Joseph E Stiglitz who was the Nobel economic prize winner in 2001 said that, as the biggest developing country in the world, the urbanization of China and the high-tech development of US would be two important topics which would profoundly influence the human development in the 21st century (Xie, 2003). In the tendency of the industrialization and the urbanization, many agricultural counties in former days in China are turning into the modern cities, and the farmers in former days are changing to modern citizens. In this process, above three hundred county-level cities from counties are strong performers in Chinese about two thousand counties (cities), and they have a long lead on the developments of the economy and the society, and they are the fresh troops for the city development of China, and in 655 cities, there are 368 county-level cities. The development of the county-level city has been the special view in the historical picture that China turns into the modern urban society from the traditional rural society.

### 1. Definition of the county-level city

There is not the special concept of the county-level city in the urban geography and the urbanization research outside China. Only in the administration system of China, there are the municipality directly under the Central Government, the sub-provincial city, the prefecture-level city and the county-level city, and the “food coupon” sub-prefecture-level city. Through the analysis about many definitions of the city and the comparison researches about the foreign and domestic city classification, combining with the facts of China, we thought that the county-level city in China was the city from the county, and it was the town system integrating points and sphere which took the former county area as the city area, took the county town as the center, took the town and villages as the crunodes. This definition endows the county-level city with three layers meanings. First, the formation of the county-level city takes the administrative measures as the symbols. Second, the county-level city is not a point, and it inherits the sphere of the county area. Third, the county-level city is not an independent central city, and it is a town system containing towns and villages.

Because of the special meanings of the county-level city, the urbanization route of the county-level city is different to the general development of the large and middle sized cities, and the construction of small towns. Based on the special meanings and charms of the county-level city, we studied the urbanization of the county-level city which was researched by few scholars, ascended the evolvement of the dweller points and the production of the county-level city, estimated the urbanization process of the county-level city, searched after the economic support and the system innovation of the growth for the county-level city, and proposed the policy advices for the growth and the development of the county-level city.

### 2. Origin of the county-level city

Though China was one of the countries which first generated the cities in the world, but the occurrence of modern city system was late in China until the year of 1921. In Republican China, the city system followed the international conventions, i.e. the city was the city-type administrative unit, and it was the administrative district on the assembled “point” with dense population, and most of its denizens were citizens who engaged in the second industry and the third industry (i.e. the nonagricultural population). After 1949, the city system that New China first performed basically continued the system of the Republican China, and afterward, with the extension of the suburb, the city leded the counties, and the prefecture and the city were united, and the county was turned into the city, and the organizational city

especially the county-level city was gradually evolved into a sort of administrative organizational system on the “sphere” in the wider area.

The generation of the county-level city was the special content in the urbanization of China. The city forming from the county begun in 1979 after the reform and opening-up, and in that year, three cities such as Zhuhai, Shenzhen and Leshan was founded. To 1983, the mode forming city from county formed the first high tide, and in that year, there were 39 counties to be turned into cities. Most of these cities are county-level cities except few cities such as Shenzhen, Zhongshan and Dongguan. As the most active part in Chinese city system, the mode forming city from county was fully developed in about 30 years of the reform and opening-up, and the quantity of the county-level city increased quickly, and the meaning of the mode was continually enriched, and in 1996, the quantity achieved 445 which occupied 66.8% of the total number of the city in the whole China. Along with the situation that the city founded the district or the county-level city ascended to the prefecture-level city, the quantity of the county-level city begun to decrease, and this number is 368 now (Liang, 2008).

The standards forming the city from county in China are continually perfected with the developments of the economy and the society. At 3 Feb 1986, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs reported “the Report about Adjusting the City Establishment Standards and the Conditions that City Leads the Counties” to the Chinese State Council, and the Chinese State Council replied and tried out the report by the document of “State Council (1986) No. 46” in 19 April. The report of the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs thought that the urban and rural statuses had been changed at present, and to adapt these new statuses, not only the town which had achieved the standard should be changed to the city (i.e. the mode of “forming city from town”), but also the county which accorded with the conditions should be changed to the city (i.e. the mode of “forming city from county”). In 1993, Chinese State Council perfected the establishment standards of the county-level city, after that, tens of county-level counties were founded till to the middle and late of 1990s, but there was not one city which was formed from the town. The basic substitute of the mode of “forming city from county” from the mode of “forming city from town” indicated that the county-level city has been changed into a sort of institution in the wider area from the city-type administrative institution (Yu, 1999, P.78-79).

According to the establishment standards of Chinese State Council of 1993, there are four phases for the mode of “forming city from county”.

(1) The proposition of the mode of “forming city from county”. The proposition is generally from the development layout of the county government or the county party committee, and it is also from civilian voice, especially from the members of the National Committee of CPPCC.

(2) The report program. Once the county party committee and the county government complete the self-measurement, and they think the conditions have been basically possessed, the work of “forming city from county” enters into the report program. First, ask for instructions to the county government. The county bureau of civil affairs draws up relative documents (including three affixes, i.e. the county administrative map, the town administrative map in the station of the county government, and the town layout map in the station of the county government), and asks for instructions of “forming city from county” by the name of the county government to the superior government, and makes a copy for the superior bureau of civil affairs. Second, ask for instructions to the prefecture-level city. Third, ask for instructions to the provincial government. Fourth, ask for instructions to the Ministry of Civil Affairs. When the Ministry of Civil Affairs receipts the documents and the conditions accords with the requirements, the Ministry of Civil Affairs asks for the reply to the State Council. Taking Jintan County in Jiangsu Province as the example, the article of the Ministry of Civil Affairs was “the article about replying to establish Jintan City and remove Jintan County for Jiangsu Province (Ministry of Civil Affairs [1993] No.83)”, and the article included “Report the sketch reply and ask for examining and approving”. Thus, the report program ends.

(3) The reply program. After the State Council examines and approves the examination opinions and sketch reply proposed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and makes the decision of “forming city from county”, and the concrete relay is wrote by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The reply of the Ministry of Civil Affairs to the Jiangsu Province Government was that “The Ministry has received the “the another requirement for forming Jintan City and removing Jintan County”. After the State Council authorized, the Ministry agreed to remove Jintan County and establish the Jintan City (county-level city), and the former administrative region of Jintan county was the administrative region of Jintan City”. Jiangsu provincial government replied the Changzhou City which replied Jintan county government.

Three replies were little different, and the Ministry only administrated the regional and administrative organizational system, and the provincial government increased the contents about management and confirmed the management directly under the jurisdiction of the province, didn't increase the organization of the institutions and the personnel, and emphasized to dominate by the prefecture-level city temporarily, and avoided the problem that the law reference was not sufficient, and the replay of Changzhou City obviously avoided many sensitive factors such as direct jurisdiction and the special designation in the state plan.

(4) Subrogation of city and county. Generally, the subrogation of city and county needs a ceremonious ceremony, and it includes institution name change, leaders' title change, seal usage and special designation in the state plan. Because of the selfish departmentalism of the prefecture-level city, the special designation in the state plan is halfway, and it is the result of the haggle between the county-level city and the prefecture-level city to some extents.

Thus, a county administrative district leaves the county system and enters into the city system.

### **3. Urban and rural characteristics of the county-level city**

Generally speaking, the county with higher urbanization level can apply for establishing the city and removing the county, and the urbanization development of the county-level city still has certain bases. After establishing the city and removing the county, in virtue of the powerful drive of urbanization by the government and the powerful drive of the flourish developments of the second industry and the third industry, the urbanization of the county-level city developed very quickly, especially the county-level cities in Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta.

In 2000, the urbanization level of Jiangsu Province was 41.5%, and the urbanization level of the counties in the province was 19%, and the urbanization level of the county-level cities was 24.3%. Through three years' developments, up to 2003, the urbanization level of Jiangsu province achieved 46.8%, and the urbanization level of the counties in the province was 22.3%, and the urbanization level of the county-level cities was 28.6%. In these three years, the urbanization level of the county-level city enhanced 4.3% which was close to the urbanization level of the whole province, i.e. 5.3%, and the number was higher 3.3% than the urbanization level of the county-level city. Up to 2005, there were many county-level cities such as Zhangjiagang City in Jiangsu Province which have achieved or exceeded the provincial urbanization level of 50.5%. The comprehensive development levels of the economy and the society of the county-level city were continually enhancing, and in 2005, there were 17 national top 100 counties including 16 county-level cities. Though the county-level city administrated the wider rural regions, but the power to drive the urbanization development was large, and in the urbanization strategy that China developed the large, middle and small cities at the same time, the develop of the county-level city developed very quickly.

However, the establishment standard of the county-level city decides that the county-level city possesses dense rural characters. According to the document of "State Council [1983] No.38", the standards (seen in Table 1) include following aspects (Department of Urban and Rural Construction Economy of Chinese Social Science School Graduate College, 1999, P.28).

The standards included two parts. The first part was the station of the county government, i.e. the county region which was called as the county town, and it was one point of the core. The second part was the whole county which included wider villages and towns, and it was one sphere of the wider region. We call the county town and the towns with developed economy as the town, but the area of the town is still small, and the area of the villages still occupies above 90%. The population in the town is not sufficient, and the agricultural population occupies 60% or 70%, and even in the developed county-level city, the agricultural population still occupies 40% or 50%. Of course, the economic gross of the town is large, and it almost occupies 80% or 90%, but the agriculture is still coarse and original, which is the special "dualistic structure" in China. From county to city, the administration organizational system transforms, but the attributes of the rural economy and the rural society through several thousands years are still extending, and the habit of the small agriculture economy still goes round. Therefore, from three main factors such as the village, the agriculture and the farmer, the rural characters of the county-level city are still obvious, and which is one of factors to drive the new socialist country construction in China from 2006.

### **4. The construction of new countryside and the development of county-level city**

As viewed from the backgrounds of Chinese urbanization process and the regional economic development, the urbanization of the county-level city and the new countryside construction are an interactive process between the urban and the rural region, and they are two aspects of one problem. The new countryside construction will enhance the modernization level of the village in the whole county, and realize the rural and urban integration. The urbanization is the main route to transfer farmers, and it is the final attribute of the new countryside construction, and it is the meaning of "forming city from county". From the development course of the county-level city, we can understand it from following aspects.

First, the new socialist countryside construction is the significant advance of the urbanization of the county-level city. It is the important supplement for the urbanization of the county-level city. Because China was restricted by the rural and urban dualistic structure for a long time, large numbers of agricultural population and surplus labor force stayed in the villages, and the urbanization is the necessary tendency of the modernization in China. The mode of "forming city from county" is a sort of urbanization push in China. Because it takes the former county region as the city region, there are large numbers of villages, which is the focus in the theoretical dispute about the urbanization. Chinese Communist Party Central Committee proposed the policy to construct the new socialist countryside (CPC Central Committee, 2006, P.2), which faced the weak aspect, i.e. the villages in the county-level city, more comprehensively drive the urbanization

process of the county-level city from bottom to top through the whole village modernization construction. However, the new countryside construction strategy makes up the deficiencies of the urbanization theory of the county-level city. The new socialist countryside construction is the former training of the urbanization of the county-level city. From the rule and the tendency of the world urbanization, the final object of the urbanization is that the agricultural population is transferred and centralized to the city. Up to 2020, about 0.3 billion of agricultural population will transfer to the city in China. If there are not enough employment supports and proper civilization edification, the “city illness” formed by large numbers of farmers who enter into the city will be hard to avoid. In the urbanization process of the county-level city, there are farmers to transfer to the city. Through the new countryside construction, we can gradually train farmers’ labor skills and cultural qualities, ensure the agriculture population after training will gradually enters into the city and enhance the population quality of the city, reduce the social costs of the urbanization and increase the humanism concern for farmers. The new socialist countryside construction extends the urban function of the county-level city. Under the drives developing cities with villages, developing industry with agriculture and developing city and villages, the new countryside construction develops continually, and the urban function is increasingly perfect, and the urban and rural integration will gradually be realized. The new countryside construction could further enhance the development space, resident condition and natural views for the city. The modern agriculture forms beautiful ecological view, adds economic and convenient leisure locales, and enriches denizens’ tables.

Second, the urbanization is the necessary attribute of the new countryside construction for the county-level city. The development history of modern civilization is the development history of the urbanization. In modern world, more and more population enters into the city, and implements the economic activity with higher efficiency, and enjoys the civilization of modern city. The new socialist countryside construction is impossible to breach this historical tide. Chinese Communist Party Central Committee proposed the mode of whole plan to drive the rural and urban development, which indicated the urbanization direction of the new socialist countryside construction. The new countryside construction practice driving the villages by the urbanization, enhancing the agriculture by the industrialization, and enriching farmers by the industrialization all includes the contents of the urbanization. Because the measures of the new countryside construction in the county-level city are more skilful and efficient, the process of the urbanization is more obvious. Therefore, the new countryside in the county-level city constructs better, the urbanization process develops too quicker.

There are many expressions for the relationship between the new countryside construction and the urbanization development, but the attribute of the urbanization is certain. The thirty years’ development of the reform and opening up proved the active effect of the development of the county-level city. The improvement of the new countryside construction will further prove the predominant advantage in Chinese urban and rural development. For the harmonious development of Chinese urbanization and the new socialist countryside construction, we must highly emphasize the city group of the county-level city, and fully develop the special function of the county-level city in the industrialization, urbanization and modernization of the city.

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Table 1. Standards of the county-level city in China

	Population density (per sq. km.)	>400	100~400	<100	
In the station of the county government	Nonagricultural population (ten thousands)	12	10	8	
	The nonagricultural population with nonagricultural registered permanent residence (ten thousands)	8	7	6	
	Tap water dissemination rate (%)	65	60	55	
	Paved rate (%)	60	55	50	
	The basic establishments in the city zone are perfect and the drainage system is normal				
In the whole county	Nonagricultural population (ten thousands)	15	12	10	
	The proportion of the nonagricultural population in the total population (%)	30	25	20	
	Industrial production value above villages and towns (0.1 billion Yuan)	15	12	8	
	The proportion of the industrial production value above villages and towns in the total industrial production value (%)	80	70	60	
	GDP (0.1 billion Yuan)	10	8	6	
	The proportion of the third industrial production value in GDP (%)	20	20	20	
	Local budget	Total value (ten thousands Yuan)	6000	5000	4000
		Per capita (Yuan)	100	80	60
Financial revenue	Assume certain obligation to turn over budgetary revenues				