

Make a better city life

Lu Hanlong

World Expo 2010 Shanghai China is the first in the World Expo history that has employed a “city” theme. Its English expression, “Better City, Better Life”, when rendered back into Chinese, holds the same meaning. This leads us to fathom on the Shanghai World Expo’s another underlying theme: “life.” Apparently, “Better City, Better Life” is a phrasing in aligned symmetry, a neutral expression; it expects a better city, which begets a better life. However, the current Chinese theme of Shanghai World Expo is stated as “City Makes Life Better”, which conveys a meaning somewhat different from its English version. Since, as shown, “City Makes Life Better” is an overtly judgmental sentence, which delivers a message that city will necessarily bring about a better, enriched life, the semantic background of which would have aroused a feeling of what is called “urban preference”. This statement does not truthfully reflect the urbanization process we had undergone since the commencement of 20th century. The fact is, “city” and “good life” are not necessarily associated. As early as the beginning of 2002, I have brought up the issue to the visiting officials of International Exhibition Bureau as an a member of the expert support team of the Shanghai municipal government, in hoping that an “urban preference” mentality be avoided while the theme is being presented, especially since the Expo is held in Shanghai, a metropolis which is experiencing enormous economic blossom; the situation requires us to view the role of city objectively as to how it functions in the social life of human being and what we could garner through the urban development experience in the 20th century; to develop the city-themed World Expo into a show of century, we ought to reveal a broad vision of urban life and demonstrate new notions and concepts on urban development. I believe that, most of the countries whose representatives voted in favor of China’s hosting of the World Expo, had come to understand the World Expo 2010 theme through its English meaning, instead that of its Chinese version phrased as “City Makes Life Better”. World Expo 2010 Shanghai China should be more committed in raising people’s

awareness of the relationship between city and the progress of human civilization, demonstrating to them how to build a fine city and improve quality of urban life, which will be a joint effort of the human being, a fruit of civilization.

City is a product of human civilization. The past 20th century has been one of global industrialization, consumerization and urbanization. In 1900, the commencement of the 20th century, Britain had been the only nation whose urban population exceeded its rural counterpart. At the time, there were only 150 million urban dwellers, accounting for less than 10% of the world population.¹ Nevertheless, by the end of the 20th century, the world's urban population had reached 30 million, a 20 times increase in absolute number. Cities with a population of over one million totaled 143, among them 23 are metropolitan cities with a population of over 8 million, of which Asia accounted for 13.² As of the present, the 3.5 billion world urban population has exceeded the half of the global population, of which a rural population accounts for 3.4 billion. With the advancement of urbanization, the rural population will continue to decrease.

However, throughout the 20th century, three trends in urban development are worth noting:

First, in developed countries, many cities have witnessed a dwindled population. Especially since the 80s, big metropolises of these countries are experiencing, as compared to the past, drastically slowed population growth. Large cities, especially super large cities, cursed by poor quality of life, are deemed as places unsuitable for living. Presently, 52% of the global urban population is living in small towns of less than 500,000 inhabitants; the future trend is to scatter more of the urban population into living in small towns.

Second, as shown by recently disclosed materials, this world is not, as thought, dominated by a number of “big apples”, that is to say, the influence wielded by the leading-role mega cities upon the world, or regions, is less significant than we had thought. Only less than 5% of the population lives in

¹ Department of Theme Interpretation, Shanghai World Expo Bureau, eds. *City Makes Better Life - Interpretation on the theme of Shanghai World Expo*, p. 41, Oriental Publishing Center, 2009. Joe Hicks & Grahame Allen: *Century of Change: Trends in UK statistics since 1900*. Social and general Statistics section, house of common library. Pao Zonghao, *Introduction to International Cultural Metropolis*, p. 3. Xuelin Press, March 2010.

² Hania Zlotnik, Director of Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, published his *World Urbanization Prospects, the 2009 Revision*, on March 25, 2009 in New York .

those mega cities. A population congregation of over 30-40 million in cities like Calcutta and Mexico City, as previously predicted, had not come into being. What had happened is more of the emergence of interconnected city belts and regional “nations” that can be referred to as regional communities.

Third, the relationship between urban transformations and economic, social, political and cultural transitions has become one extremely complicated and perplexing. Some large and rapidly growing cities are witnessing significant improvement in management and service, yet old, dilapidated cities and small towns suffer the worst conditions under various scenarios. Therefore, a city’s size and its life quality are not necessarily associated. On the contrary, we find that almost every country is being confronted by a series of similar problems that had become a shared vexation: increased unemployment rate, urban infrastructure lagging behind urban development, serious transportation and environmental issues, and growing social conflicts.

The urban development issues now laid in front of human being calls for the accommodation of a pair of paradoxes—how to keep the material bliss brought by economic development and the pluralism of social life derived from urbanization while shunning a deteriorated life quality as ensued from metropolitan vices. In the 21st century, the global urbanization continued to accelerate, centering mainly on developing countries. Not merely an industrialization process, the urbanization subjects itself more to the impact of economic globalization. The interaction between urbanization and globalization is growing ever stronger. By increasing the globalization of goods, services, capital, technology and the flow of ideas, different countries, cities, and people are bonded together more closely. It brings about national, regional, and communal interdependence and contingency within the coexistence of integration and conflict. Meanwhile, with the arrival of an era of in-depth development of global economy and high-tech knowledge, in the 21st century, city will become a place of more freedom. Modern economy and communication will be made easy and convenient by the virtue of high-tech. Those whose works are done via Internet are freed from the constraint of region and distance, thanks to the invention of Internet, which saved the need of much face-to-face interaction. This trend is definitely to affect the living style of cities. For example, people can work from home, shop

online in front of computer, or swipe credit card for travel consumption. The development model of the urban-rural integration has broken the notion of the previous urban-rural contrast. In developing nations, although the industrialization process continues to draw labors into population-concentrated, bustling cities, it would not be merely a replica of the 19th-20th century version of urbanization. Differences in urban and rural areas, while becoming smaller, have made city more and more less a contrastive existence to rural area, but rather an independent being, which, under waves of globalization, represents its certain regional characteristics and local interests. The concept of city is being rewritten. It is becoming a common carrier and bond between globalization and its local communities. Since culture is the sum up of social life, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, which takes city and life as its theme, should become a platform of confluence, exhibiting diverse urban lives and urban cultures of the world. It shall go beyond the rural/urban contrast thesis derived from the industrialization era, and enter a discourse characteristic of contrasted humanities among different regions and societies under the context of globalization.

Therefore, as it is the first time a World Expo is ever held in a developing county, the choosing of “city and life” theme by China, the hosting country, as the Expo’s theme, and the choosing of Shanghai as its site, befit both the occasion and location choices. For China, on one hand it is undergoing dramatic transitions from an agricultural society toward an industrial one, on the other hand, it is being benefited by a global economy, picking up rapidly, and displaying Chinese culture’s integrations and conflicts with other cultures within the matrix of a strong, growing economy. The United Nations recently reported that China's urbanization speed over the past 30 years had exceeded other nations. China is going through an important transformation during its urbanization process. In 1980, only 51 Chinese cities had a urban population of over 500,000; 30 years later, 185 cities had crossed this threshold. The report predicted that by 2025, there will be another 107 cities in China joining this assemblage.³ McKinsey Global Institute had predicted that by the time of 2025, China's urban population would reach to be near 1 billion.⁴ In addition,

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Jonathan Woetzel, etc: *Preparing for Chinas Urban Billion*, McKinsey Global Institute, March 2008.

due to factors such as the improvement of transportation, universal education, advanced commercial consumption, and the mass media coverage, the rural lifestyle will increasingly catch up its urban counterpart. In terms of the future of urban development, the traditional concepts on the rural vs. industrialized cities are being rewritten in China.

Shortly before China officially launched the application to host the 2010 World Expo, in 2001, it joined the World Trade Organization, which evidently marked the integration of China's economic body into the world economy system. As a large country whose populace occupies 1/5 of the world population, China's entrance to WTO meant, in terms of the global economic entity, a near 1/4 expansion of the labors' market and a near 1/5 increase of the international market of consumers. China's urbanization is not a simply a movement of rural toward urban population concentration, but a great chapter of commencement, through which we shall, in the waves of global economic integration and cooperation, demonstrate the potency and glamour of Chinese culture and reconsolidate Chinese civilization. The establishment of a modern urban institution, which accommodates the global economy and an emerging industrial system, has become a pressing task of the reform. From the 50s, under the ideological influence of class differentiation over workers and peasants, which derived from a centralizing, planning economy, China had built up a set of management and development policies of urban/rural separation. Urban and rural areas each adopted a different setting of institutions, ranging from the quota of people's representatives, governmental framework, land property, household management, employment policy, social security, public welfare, and so forth. The urban/rural dualism restricted mobility, tethered identities, and by endowing "city" an administrative power to govern "village", it had produced a predominant urban advantage upon the rural, resulting in the former's institutional exploitation over the latter. Therefore, under the system of a planned economy, the overt urban-rural discrimination had become the most significant inequality that was underlying, and holding together a superficial egalitarianism then prevailed China.

This policy of urban/rural segregation, since the Reform and Opening campaign in the 80's, had gradually loosened up. During the process of the market reform, production essences in urban and rural areas were freed to

circulate, rural surplus labors, in a large quantity, came into cities to scratch out a living, yet the fundamental establishment of China's urban/rural division had not altered much. Migrant farmers continue to be branded under a "peasant" status, even government documents referring them as "peasant workers". Their political, economic, social and cultural rights are still circumscribed by the original institution.

Statistics show that China's industrialization level has surpassed its urbanization level. Non-agricultural populace has exceeded more than half of the entire employed population, yet only 47% of the people is counted as urban inhabitants under our statistics (2010). Nearly 200 non-statutory "city centers", whose population has gone beyond 100,000, some even 800,000, are not recognized as official cities by the state. According to the data of a statistical monitoring survey, released by the Bureau of Statistics on March 2009, the total number of "peasant workers" has reached 225,420,000. Among them, 62.3%, or 140,410,000 people, are working distantly from their hometowns. This has bumped the percentage of urban population to be over 56%.⁵ This also indicates that China has at least a 10% population who, though dwelling in cities over years, are not fully accepted as urban citizens. According to the latest official statistics, nowadays in China, the "peasant workers" account for 58% employment in the second industry, among them 68% in the processing and manufacturing and near 80% in construction and mining; while in the third industry such as the wholesale, retail, food and restaurant services, peasant workers account for more than 52% of the employment.⁶ "Peasant workers", who worked in cities, and who have contributed most significantly to the deeds of "Made in China" and "urban development", are nevertheless living under pitiful conditions due to their vague status. To make their lives better, a deepened reform on China's rural/urban system has to be under urgent consideration.

Shanghai, one of China's most thoroughly opened cities that undergo fastest economic growth, always characteristic of immigration tradition and foreign cultures, is a city of the foremost embodiment of globalization and ties

⁵ Portal website of Central Government, People's Republic of China, March 25, 2009.

⁶ State Council Research Office Discussion group, *Investigation Report on China's migrant workers*, Yanshi Press, China, April 2006.

of local communities. The city's population is comprised of 13 million local Shanghainese and 6 million or so immigrant residents, mostly peasant workers who come to work here. Exploiting the occasion of hosting the World Expo, Shanghai has treated itself a thorough renovation, with great improvement on urban construction and urban landscaping, to which the immigrant population had made a substantial contribution. In recent years, albeit the Shanghai Municipal Government has included the rights of immigrant residents into the consideration of their public policy-making, in the light of the unchanged, fundamental institution of urban/rural separation, many bottlenecked problems had yet been resolved. To make a city life better, it is important to address the equality issue between the new immigrant residents and the locals.

The future of China's urban development, on top of the need of coordinating urban/rural relationship and solving immigration issues, is also confronted by severe challenges with regard to the improvement of urban life quality and livability. Since city enjoys the advantage of amassing resources to make the intensive development possible, China unavoidably during its economic blossom course stepped on a route of over-urbanization, of which we might refer to as "city construction campaign." Experts point out that there are unsustainable risks involved in China's urban development: many cities are facing considerable challenges in land usage, transportation, energy, environment, etc. Some large cities are expanding their sizes immensely out of the proportion of the increases of their non-agricultural population (for example, 4.05 times more in Shanghai, and 3.69 times more in Beijing). The rapid growing of the private car ownership (a 100 times growth over the past 20 years) results in a gravely swelling, competitively escalating trend in road construction and increased rate of private cars. Energy consumptions in construction industry and city operation are rising in an appalling rate. Meanwhile, cities are suffering from a serious deterioration in air and water quality (for air quality, one-third of Chinese cities do not meet the standards; two-thirds of Chinese cities do not have sufficient water supply).⁷ China is becoming a major energy consumption state, perplexed by

⁷ Qian Jingjing, China area president of sustainable urban projects, Natural Resources Defense Council, "On Livable City and Sustainable Development", published by *World Environment*, issue 5, 2007.

serious environmental issues, to the appearance of which the "urbanization" process has been a "pushing hand". Local governments, driven by the needs to create and display "achievements", as well as their own interests, caused most of the issues of over-urbanization. Since, according to Chinese law, urban lands are owned by the state, but rural lands, collectively by villagers; this means that local governments enjoy greater rights in the disposition and remise of city lands. Therefore, propelled by the waves of commercialization, they had strived to expand their urban territories, in a way called "Nidificating for Phoenix and the Gold Come from the Land". As we have seen, large and small cities alike all engage themselves in massive construction projects; the building of edifices, central squares, circled technological development zones, central commercial districts, university campuses and high-end residential areas is everywhere on the rise throughout the nation. A government-involved "urban management" not only infringes the interests of rural areas and peasants, but also begets vicious competitions among parallel industrial structures and regional economic bodies.

Over-urbanization, while wasting resources and exacerbating environment, also fails to give adequate attention to the protection and renovation of old towns. Much of the legacy in historic buildings and city scenes were ruined in the "making of a city" process; the cutting off a city's cultural context renders it difficult to retain its cherished memories. A famous example had been the "pedestrian street" of the East Nanjing Road, Shanghai. The celebrated China's "First Street" used to enjoy a reputation in the Far East as the "Shanghai Broadway", representing an elite metropolitan ethos of Shanghai in 30s and 40s. In the early 60s, the tram tracks on this road leading to the Bund were removed overnight (in fact the tram tracks were a classic "rail transportation", which could environment-friendly differentiate people and vehicles, causing no direct emissions at all), but at least, the street's bustling commercial outlook was kept intact. In the 90s, while Shanghai was experiencing an urban construction boom, phrased as "each year a new outlook, three years a thorough change," the East Nanjing Road was converted into a "pedestrian street": all the sidewalks were removed, and trees alongside uprooted; the road was repaved by expensive granite marble. The original Four Great Department Stores were preserved to some extent, yet

many featured storefronts and shops were removed to give way to the construction of buildings utterly devoid of characteristics. A greater blunder was made in the middle segment of the pedestrian street (on the east side of the Yong'an company) when a variety of shop constructions were flattened to have the space repaved and transformed into a public square. Thus, the celebrated "Broadway" was converted into a characterless, unremarkable plaza. A bustling avenue that mirrored the unparalleled Asian commercial model in the 1930s to 1940s, internationally branded, hence was forced to fade out of the memory of the city. At present, many Chinese cities lack the refinement of urban planning, their outlooks bearing too much similarity and too little personality. Souvenirs that one purchases from tourism towns are of scarce local distinctiveness. All these give us reasons to worry that once local cultures are obliterated, our creativities might be gone too, inundated in the deluge of globalization; a city, when lost its value as a cultural hub connecting its communities to the globe, would be demeaned to be a vassal municipality to other civilizations and a terminal of other institutions. The loss of spiritual and cultural content reduces a city to prosaic everydayness, with but mundane beings living inside.

Therefore, immigration, marketing and globalization are to become three major concerns of China's future urban planning. Over the past 30 years, China, gripping on the opportunities of commercialization and global economy, had progressively enhanced its urban development, but now it must face the ills generated from a market economy under China's unique urban/rural institution, utterly unfavorable to the development of a healthy life. Globalization has presented higher, perhaps brand new, requirements on the continuity of China's urban development, in which low-carbon and harmony are to become the two leading concepts of new urban standards. Material wealth, as well as the richness of social spirits and humanities, will both be used to assess the strength of a city's development notions and measures. We very much look forward to displaying to the nation the new concepts and methods in urban development through the much cherished ""Expo" and "Showcase" opportunities of the World Expo in Shanghai, China, not only in the facets of material technology, but also in the ultimate care of the welfare of human being—we will strive to make a better city life!

Lu Hanlong is currently a sociology researcher of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences; he is also employed by the People's Government in Shanghai as a counselor. He used to work as president of the Social Development Research Institute and dean of Institute of Sociology in Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (1994-2009). He is now a vice president of China's Social Sciences Association and an executive director of the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences.