

# The Evolution of Thoughts on Urban and Rural Planning in China Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949

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**Abstract:** This article employs one contextual framework and two main threads while unraveling the evolution of China's urban and rural planning thoughts since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The development of China's urban planning thoughts in the past seventy years can be divided into five stages, namely: urban planning as the tool for the spatial deployment of industries; urban planning under an ultra-leftist ideology; urban planning amidst the science-based rationalistic methodology; urban planning in a growth-dictates-all environment; and urban planning in the circumstance of the national governance restructuring. The past seventy years saw urban planning thought in China evolved with many changes and certain constants: what changed is the role of urban-rural planning and the conception of its value, as well as the theories and techniques in urban-rural planning; whereas the pragmatic path remained a constant.

**Keywords:** Urban and Rural Planning, Social Thought, State Governance, Historical Evolution, The People's Republic of China

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## Introduction

As an important policy instrument in directing and intervening social development, urban and rural planning invariably institutionalises and represents the thoughts of a society at certain times, in the forms of values, theories, methodology, and practices. The social "thought" was defined as: (1) the ideological tendency that represents the interests or demands of a certain class or group of people at certain times; (2) spontaneous sentiments <sup>[1]</sup>. Hong Xiaonan defined the thought of a society as "the prevalent trend of thoughts in a society, directed by a theory that fits the mentality and demands of a major proportion of people, and that reflects the political, economic, ideological, and

cultural status of a society at a certain time”<sup>[2]</sup>. Fang Ning noted that social thought had its root in the society; it came from realities, fed back to social practices, and in turn materialised in the realities<sup>[3]</sup>. Accordingly, thoughts on urban and rural planning can refer to the widely influential theories and trends in planning, born from societal evolutions at specific times in both urban and rural areas. It can be found in academic discussions, social evaluation of planning, planning practices, etc., and is representative of planning values, theories, and methodologies<sup>[4]</sup>. The thoughts then have significant impacts on the physical urban and rural development. It is worth noting that in any given period, planning theories should be diverse, including conventional theories, emerging theories, and mainstream theories. At any given time, the planning thoughts are projected by the mainstream planning theories, thus they are always highly relevant with each other. The planning thoughts evolve as emerging theories become the mainstream, and the previous mainstream ones become the conventional. Reflected by mainstream planning theories, planning thoughts direct and impact planning practices, and is finally engrained in the physical urban-rural environment at particular times. The dialectical relationship between ideology or thought, spatial construction theories, and physical social spaces is a real-world example of Henri Lefebvre’s “Spatial Triad.” A thorough review of the evolution of planning thoughts in China can foster our understanding of its history and current urban-rural planning situation, which leads to a better prediction of its future.

## **1 Perspectives on the evolution of planning thoughts in China**

Studies of urban-rural planning history show that the academia generally has a consensus about the development before China’s reform and opening up, as it contains two stages: (1) the starting period in the 1950s, during which the USSR institutions essentially shaped the ideology, theories, and techniques of urban-rural planning in China; (2) the back-and-forth period in the 1960s and 1970s, when urban-rural planning in China was hampered by political movements and ultra-leftism, hence a stagnation in its evolution<sup>[6-12]</sup>. As for the interpretation of planning thought development after the reform and opening up, there are quite some debates, mainly between the following three perspectives:

Firstly, the institutional transformation. Studies from this perspective hold that the evolution of urban-rural planning is an organic component of the overall institutional transformation. Theories, techniques, and practices in China’s urban-rural planning has increasingly embodied the characteristics of a market economy. Zou Deci argues that as market economy takes shape, urban land would see its commercial and economic value increasing; in response, the planning process will actively involve more and more land use management<sup>[13]</sup>. Wang Kai points out that with the changing development environment and

economy, urban planning theories cast a spotlight on “development”, “land value”, “city competitiveness”, “coordination of urban and rural”, “sustainable development”, “public policy”, etc.<sup>[14]</sup>

Secondly, the interaction between China and the rest of the world. Zou Deci maintains that despite the first three decades where China learnt planning theories and methodology from the USSR, since the reform and opening up, China drew from many countries (particularly the Western countries) in all aspects<sup>[13]</sup>. Wang Guangtao divides the interaction between China’s planning community with that of the world as follows: In the early period after the reform, China learnt from the West on advanced planning concepts and theories; later during the 1990s, the international consensus on sustainable development brought about profound impacts on China’s urban-rural planning; since the turn of the 21st century, China has been exploring urban-rural planning regarding to its own national characteristics<sup>[15]</sup>.

Thirdly, the shifts in national governance. As an example, Huang Luxin, Xie Pengfei, et al. sought to break China’s planning history into six periods after its reformation<sup>[16]</sup>: (1) a restoration period aiming to free from restraints of a planned economy (1978-1986); (2) an exploration period where the country shifted to a market economy and learnt by unique practices (1986-1992); (3) an acceleration period driven by massive market capital and reformed land policy (1992-1996); (4) an adjustment period when the macro-regulation and guided construction planning started to pay off (1996-2000); (5) a reflection period to adapt with variable situations and diverse development demands (2000-2004); (6) a renewal period that strives towards the vision of harmonious society and scientific development (2004-2008). Considering the shifts in both inter-governmental and government-market-society relationships, Zhang Jingxiang et al. identifies four features throughout the forty years after the reform and opening up: spatial planning is ascending from a marginal to a central position in the national governance system; planning’s mission is changing from serving a single purpose to meeting multi-dimensional demands; planning’s role is being increasingly better defined; and planning’s function has diverted from stimulating growth into executing strategic guidance and mandatory regulation<sup>[17]</sup>.

These perspectives demonstrate various facets of the logic underlying the evolution of urban-rural development in China since its reform and opening up. However, these facets are not mutually exclusive, rather they are like mosaics to the whole picture of urban-rural planning thoughts. How can these perspectives be integrated and extrapolated to the entire seventy years since the founding of the PRC; how to best understand the disruptions and continuations in planning thoughts before and after the reform and opening

up; and how to interpret the innovations and reforms since the 18th CPC Congress in a historical context... Those questions are crucial for summarizing the history of planning thought evolution in China.

Based on previous research outcomes, this paper attempts to establish a more systematic and in-depth framework, called “one contextual framework with two threads”. (Figure 1) The “one contextual framework” means that the and international realities and their interactions should be the context of which the social trends of thoughts and governance philosophy can be understood properly. Apparently, the interaction of domestic and international academia led to drastic revolutions in thoughts of urban-rural planning after the reform and opening up. The first “thread”—the relationship between the central and local governments—influenced urban-rural planning in terms of its function in the country’s governance system and the guiding directions (e.g. whether to prioritise growth and efficiency or to maintain social order stability). The second “thread”—the relationship between the government, the market, and the society—determines the role of urban-rural planning in the national governance system (e.g. whether it serves as a technical tool for plan implementation, or as a pulic policy) as well as its academic and practical value.

Based on the above, this paper proposes a five-stage classification of the evolution of urban-rural planning thought in China over the past seventy years (Tab. 1), namely: urban planning as the tool for the spatial deployment of industries; urban planning under an ultra-leftist ideology; urban planning

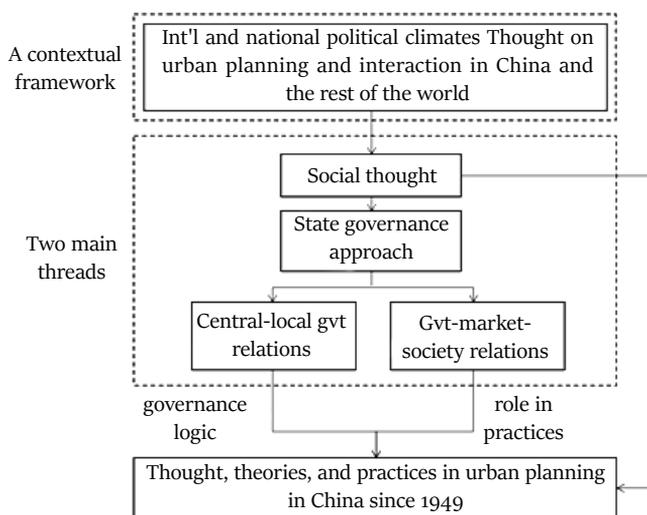


Figure 1. The analysis framework for the evolution of urban-rural planning thought in China over the past seventy years

Table 1. A schematic summary of the evolution of urban-rural planning thought in China since 1949

Stage	Social and economic context			The two threads		Public conception of urban planning	Prevalent planning theories and methodology	Representative planning practices and cases
	International and national political and economic climates	Social and economic situation in China	Central-local relationship	Relationship between government, market, and society				
1949—the late 1950s	Int'l: USA-USSR Cold War National: Learn from the USSR; nationalism and class struggle	Planned economy; heavy industry is prioritised; binary urban-rural structure	Power is highly concentrated in the hands of the central government; a vertical control system links the central and local governments	Government regulates all aspects of the economy through unified plans; public ownership is the sole form of economic entitlement; all public services are run by the government	Urban planning is an extension of national economic plans, and a technical tool to materialise the urban space development ideas and the deployment of key industrial projects	A distinctive feature of top-down planning, target-guiding, and engineering-oriented; the major technique is to give orders on population and production and to define the physical morphology of spaces	A total of 156 industrial projects and corresponding urban planning projects are built with aid from the USSR	
The early 1970s—the end of Cultural Revolution	Int'l: Global economy is being modernise; more diverse ideologies emerge National: China-Russia relations turns sour; ultra-leftism starts to rise	China cuts itself off from the outside world; economy is in stagnation and society is in chaos	Highly centralised top-down regulation	Rigid and inflexible planned economy; resources are allocated by administrative orders	Urban planning is blamed as the culprit for many economic crises thus is suspended altogether	The "counter-urban" thought and scattered construction pattern is the norm	Development of the "Third Front"; master planning of post-quake Tangshan City, etc.	
The late 1960s—the early 1990s	Int'l: Social contradictions are rife in Western societies; Neo-liberalism gains popularity. National: Reform and opening up; economy is being restored; development potential is unlocked	Pilot reforms on new increments; opening up; dual-track economy is put in place; rural economy emerges	From top-down centralisation of power to delegation of power to local governments	Governments cut bureaucracy and allow businesses to make profit; resources are allocated by a "dual-track" system; state ownership remains predominant while private ownership makes a complement	Urban planning gradually becomes an active tool in guiding growth and regulating development environment	Planning thought emphasises rational analysis; Western theories, numeric models, metrics and computer sciences are introduced to China's academia and practitioners	Nationwide urban system Planning; "Detailed Planning for Hongqiao Development Zone in Shanghai"; "Master Planning for Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (1985-2000)"; etc.	
The early 1990s—2012	Int'l: A multi-polar world is formed; globalisation takes place at a fast rate; Asia financial crisis breaks out National: China opens up fully, enters WTO, and shifts to a trade-oriented economy	Market economy is set as a vision explicitly; growth-dictates-all development kicks in; scientific development concepts" is proposed to facilitate the upgrading of economy	The central and local governments sway between power centralisation and delegation: central government grants certain resources to local governments' disposal, along with on growth rate	Government and market pushes each other ahead; market has a greater role to play; social stakeholders takes the stage; a multi-stakeholder society is formed	Urban planning is a passive tool to drive local economic growth, a means for the government to do macro-regulation and guide development, and an instrument used by governments at central and local levels to grasp power	"Instrumental reason" and pragmatism are prevalent; focus is expanded from just on cities to both cities and the countryside; values of ecological conservation and sustainability are introduced to planning	Strategic Planning for Guangzhou City; "Master Planning for Shenzhen City (2010-2020)"; "Master Planning for Singapore Tianjin Eco-City (2008-2020)"; "Beautiful Countryside Development" in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, etc.	
Since the 18th CPC Congress in 2012	Int'l: post-financial crisis fundamental restructuring of international political and economic order National: end of growth-dictates-all development; development mode is transformed	Social and economic development enters a "new normal"; "principal contradictions" in the society is redefined; Xi Thought on State Governance is institutionalised	The central government tightens centralised governance, its authority reinforced through top-down administrative control	The role of market in allocating resources is given full play to; government power is contained; social justice is emphasised	Urban planning is an important public policy to realise coordinated development of multiple stakeholders, an integral part of modern state governance, and a vital instrument for the government in allocating resources and deploying regulations	Ecology and environment are prioritised; regulation is tightened; urban planning facilitates intensive, organic, high-quality development and boosts national confidence in Chinese culture and ways; "Chinese solutions" are developed	"Master Planning for Beijing City (2016-2035)"; "Master Planning for Shanghai City (2017-2035)"; planning for the coordinated development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei; reforms on the "integration of multiple planning into one" in Hainan; planning for Hebei Xiongan New Area; etc.	

admit the science-based rationalistic methodology; urban planning in a growth-dictates-all environment; and urban planning in the circumstance of the national governance restructuring. It should be noted that such method does not depict all the thoughts and their modifications, because in any given stage there has always been continuation, convolution, integration, and derivatives of all kinds of planning thoughts.

## **2 The evolution of urban-rural planning thought in China since 1949**

### **2.1 Period I (1949—the late 1950s): Urban planning as the tool for spatial deployment of industries**

For a period immediately after the founding of the PRC, China's national economy was on the verge of collapse due to protracted warfare. Confronted with the isolation and embargo imposed by Western capitalist powers, the new republic opted to side with the USSR to survive the hardships both from within and outside. At the same time, Western countries were in the post-war restoration period when their economy and employment both were rapidly growing and people's livelihood was significantly improving. Along with that came a golden age for urban planning theories and practices to develop <sup>[18]</sup>. Subject to the influence of utopian planning theories in the 19th century, planning theories and practices were dominated by a rational overall planning approach that stresses physical space planning with a sort of ultimate blueprint <sup>[19]</sup>. In face of the post-war problems caused by population explosion and rapid urban expansion, theories and solutions like building satellite towns (or new cities), "organic decentraliation", etc. were widely applied, e.g. in the spatial and functional restructuring of metropolitan London and metropolitan Paris.

Given the decline of traditional culture in China in recent centuries, planning of some trade entrepot cities was deeply influenced by the Western planning thought. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, China took "siding with the USSR" as a state policy, stopped introducing planning theories from the West and started to learn wholesale the Russian theories and models. In all fields of politics, economy and social governance, a top-down operation system with highly centralized power was established, through which the central government regulated national economic and social development with a unified plan. Urban planning was used as a way to allocate resources for construction at a local level. During this time cities functioned as the media for industrial development, as it was required that "consumption-driven cities should be changed into industry-based cities".

The result was the living space for the general public was reduced to a minimum and public service facilities was fitted in the most simplistic and economical way <sup>[3]</sup> to save the cost of industrialization and urbanization as much as possible. Urban planning was taken as a tool for executing national economic plans and key projects into certain spatial patterns. As its main purpose was to serve the needs of industries and ideology, the planning thought had strong top-down, planned, target-guided, and technical traits.

In the first ten years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, urban planning was incorporated into the economic planning system, representing an extension and spatial execution of the economic plans <sup>[21]</sup>. In this period, urban planning was resorted to as a technical instrument for industry deployment and urban construction. Therefore it fully matched the needs of social and economic development thus made enormous contributions to the establishment of a socialist industrial system within a short time <sup>[22]</sup>. On the flip side, many factors in this period impeded the evolution and enrichment of urban planning values in the right direction. These include the strong planned economy institution, the rush to realize utopian thoughts, and the over-simplified, partial understanding of urban modernization, etc. Although China stopped following the Russian practices as the China-Russia relations turned sour in the late 1950s, Russian planning theories and models remained profoundly influential in China's urban planning history as they had been the norm for urban planning since the People's Republic of China was founded <sup>[23]</sup>.

## **2.2 Period II (the early 1960s—the end of Cultural Revolution [1976] ): urban planning under the ultra-leftist ideology**

Since the 1960s onwards, the urban development boom cooled down, and system theory and humanism started to gain popularity. The planner community in the West began to reflect and self-criticize on the approach of physical space planning and rational overall planning. In the 1960s, as the West became modernized and well-off, diversification of various political and social thought systems was made possible <sup>[18]</sup>. In the capitalist world, Keynesism and the high-welfare social policy became dominant, the role of state administration was reinforced. With the concepts of “welfare states”, new conception emerged that treats urban planning as a political process. It was during this period that Western urban planning transformed from modern urban planning that stresses rationality of functions to “post-modern urban planning” that emphasizes social culture <sup>[24]</sup>, giving more weight to social justice, diversity, humanism, and the institutional problems behind issues in urban spaces. Consequently, new classics like “Charter of Machu Picchu” that has humanism deeply

embedded and such planning thought as urban rejuvenation, social justice, and public engagement emerged.

China in this period was caught in ultra-leftism when political movements of “combatting, criticizing, and correcting” were rampant nationwide and most economic and social causes were in stagnation. Not surprisingly, urban planning that served as an important tool for the implementation of economic plans also lost its significance. For once it was required that “no urban planning should be done within three years” due to national economic re-direction and adjustment. Going through those setbacks, in 1963 it was proposed at the Second Urban Work Conference that urban planning should be restored. However, the Cultural Revolution that followed shortly rendered urban planning stagnant again. Urban planning was criticized as “Revisionism” that “widens the disparity between cities”<sup>[25]</sup>. During the ten years of Cultural Revolution, urban development and governance all over China were in an anarchical situation, except only for limited urban planning done when the needs for key industrial projects arose. This has led to losses and repercussions that can never be remedied afterward <sup>[24]</sup>. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, urban planning was slowly restored. The master planning for post-earthquake reconstruction in Tangshan was regarded as “the prelude for urban planning in the new times”<sup>[26]</sup>, after which many cities resumed their urban planning efforts.

### **2.3 Period III (the late 1970s—the early 1990s): urban planning amidst the science-based rationalistic methodology**

China embraced a wave of reforms after the Cultural Revolution was put to an end. Special Economic Zones and Coastal Open Cities were established as windows for pilot opening projects, where the planning thought and theories from Western countries found their way into China along with foreign capital and technology. Around the same time, people began to see the limitations of Keynesianism which was prevalent in Western countries for over three decades. To fill the gap, Neo-liberalism, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as leading advocates, started to gain popularity. Against such a backdrop, most Western countries launched reshaping movements with an aim to improve government efficiency by introducing business operation models into governments <sup>[24]</sup>. New theories thus emerged, such as “regime theory”, “regulation theory”, etc. Under the influence of Neo-liberalism, urban planning in Western countries, especially at the regional level, shrunk as its significance was downplayed. Economic growth became the top priority for a state, which required the government to cut bureaucracy (including on urban planning), give

the market a greater role, and create a favorable environment for capital investors.

Coincidentally, China started its reform and opening up around the same time, including relaxing the planned economy and phasing out stringent economic regulations. While increasingly engaging with and drawing from the West, China gradually absorbed the ideas of the market economy. First, China launched a reform to decentralize administrative power and economic regulation, where “decentralize” means power being delegated from the central government to local governments, from governments to the market and the private sector. Such progressive reforms on the planned economy reduced the realm of state directive planning, and redefined, once and again, the relationship between planned and market economies. The outcome was a unique situation of “dual-track system” in which the planned economy and market economy complemented each other and formed check and balance. In the ideology and culture field, China turned to the West for learning lessons and introducing theories, giving rise to many discussions on “comparative studies on China and the West”, “critique on Chinese cultural traditions”, etc.<sup>[28]</sup> The depth and width of idea and culture exchange between China and the West in this period was so significant that it was dubbed “the New Enlightenment Movement” by many scholars<sup>[29]</sup>.

In order to catch up where China was left behind the Western countries during the Cultural Revolution, scientism became a prevalent thought in Chinese society then. Research and practices on urban planning also showed a strong tendency of “scientism”: Urban space was reduced to a system made up of spots, lines, and planes, on which mathematical modeling and other quantitative methods can be employed to simulate the evolution of urban spaces and identify patterns. In this period one priority in urban planning was on the study of development patterns of urban space, so many classic Western works on urban studies were translated. Theories including “central place”, “spatial interaction”, “urban space theory”, “system of cities” and “social area analysis” were introduced; an array of influential outcomes in urban planning research were produced. Particularly with the introduction of scientific disciplines like economic geography (urban geography), etc., system approach and scientific analysis methods were brought to the Chinese planner community, which opened up new areas, perspectives, and methods for urban planning research, and ushered China into a new chapter of diversified urban planning studies. However, it was a fundamentally flawed approach to replace the complex patterns in the development of a city with just purely scientific representations. Till the late 1990s, the quantitative studies “just for the sake of being quantitative” started to fade away in the Chinese planning

circle. In general, this is an important period when China saw its urban planning became more scientific, systematic, and standardized. Though a great number of Western planning theories were introduced, this was done with little regard given either to the differences between China and Western countries on their social-economic development contexts and routes, or the suitability of Western planning theories in China. Even less was there the conscious attempt to establish a localized planning framework that fits China's realities.

#### **2.4 Period IV (the early 1990s—2012): Urban planning in a growth-dictates-all environment**

In the early 1990s, the Cold War was ended as the Eastern Bloc and the USSR collapsed. A multi-polar world with the US, EU, and China as representative powers took its shape. Peace and development was the keynote for world politics and economy, and globalization was accelerating and deepening. In such a context, the global city system under the new geographic division of labor was restructured. "Competitiveness of cities" was stressed to an unprecedented degree, hence extensive studies were done in the international community on urban development. Competition in a globalized world and the emergence of civic society drove the Western governments to conduct "government reshaping campaigns" and explore "governance approaches". As a result, the urban development policy and planning strategies in Western countries bear some distinctive traits of private business <sup>[24]</sup>. Meanwhile, the concept of sustainable development that was proposed to counter the global ecological crisis has fundamentally changed mankind's perception of values thus executing profound influence on the way people live and work. New ideas with green values in planning such as "eco-city", "low-carbon city", "compact city", etc. prevailed across the world. In all, the issues in cities had become more diverse and complicated in this period. Various values in planning including globalization, coordinated governance, and sustainable development are the mainstream in the urban planning research and practices in Western countries.

As globalization is growing in depth and contents, China rode the global tide and opened itself wider to the outside world, made clear that it would embrace a socialist market economy. Foreign capital took this opportunity to flock in thus locking China tightly on the global trade chain, making it a real "World Factory". In terms of social thought, China's "Confucianist capitalism" that suits globalization and market economy demonstrates an institutional character of government guidance combined with

marketization. Such ideology also formed an underpinning pillar for the development and operation of a hybrid social and economic regime <sup>[30-31]</sup>. With such domestic and international conditions as the background, China carried out a host of significant reforms including tax decentralization, power delegation, land use policy reform, as well as commercialization of housing. Through those reforms, the central government delegated more power and allocated more resources to the local governments. Also transferred to the local level is the pressure for economic growth, essentially forging an environment of “growth-dictates-all policy framework”. City governments in pursuit of GDP growth often adopted a growth-centered governance approach, thus bearing strong traits of private businesses <sup>[3]</sup>.

As such, the philosophy of state and social governance, change in the relations between central and local governments, and the shift towards market economy all had profound impacts on the choice of theories and practices in China’s urban-rural planning. Different from the “de-regulation” approach that was widely adopted by the Western countries to facilitate the market economy, China opted for a path that was directed by the government and materialized by the private sector. So in many economic sectors, the role of governments was not pulled back but rather enhanced. Under the stimulus of “GDP championships”, governments even got onto the playfield to be the athlete, i.e. they directly partook economic activities through direct investment, investor introduction, setting up various financing platforms, etc. To a large extent, urban planning in this period functioned as an instrument for local governments to achieve their growth goals, as well as an important tool to manage city assets—primarily land, control spatial order, and create city features and landmarks. As the tool to stimulate local economic growth, on top of maintaining the general spatial order of a city and creating nice landscapes, a key task for urban planning is to improve a city’s competitiveness and boost its development. The new moves thus made in urban planning, be it the invention and popularisation of regulatory planning in the early 1990s, or the fast emergence of strategic planning for urban development in the early 2000s, all show the nature of “one coin has two sides” that characterizes the urban planning in this period.

Nevertheless, problems soon surfaced in the rapid economic growth and urbanization which had growth targets as the single driving force: disordered urban sprawl, aggravating disparities between urban and rural and among different regions, severe imbalance between economic growth and other development dimensions: the society, culture, environment, etc. In these circumstances, shortly after the 16th CPC National Congress in

2012, the central government set forth the strategic thought of “scientific development concepts” and “Five Coordinations”, sending a signal that the state would drop the GDP-centred economic growth model and take an approach that coordinate economy, society, and environment, with special attention being given to people’s livelihood, balanced regional development, and rural areas. The scope of planning was therefore expanded from “urban planning” to “urban-rural planning”. In the new “Urban and Rural Planning Law” enacted in 2008, it was clearly stated that urban-rural planning should change from “technical” to “public policy”. Karl Polanyi’s “Double Movement” laid a theoretical foundation for states to embark on initiatives to preserve the social culture and eco-environment <sup>[32-33]</sup>. Drawing from that, new ideas, theories, and techniques in urban-rural planning were introduced and widely applied in China, giving rise to extensive research and practices in related fields.

However, the inertia of growth-dictates-all approach cannot be stopped all at once. Local governments were still committed to economic growth as the top priority, deviating yet further from the development values and missions of the central government. A case in point is what happened in the real estate market. After the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, the central government took back much power in a major centralization effort. The subtle power division between the central and local governments was then clearly shown in urban-rural planning practices: local governments launched various non-obligated planning programs in a bid to break the constraints imposed by higher governments, especially those by the central government; whereas the central government reclaimed the approval power on city master planning and enhanced inspection on the implementation of master planning in order to curb the local government’s intuitive impulse for growth... Caught between serving the state’s new development concepts and meeting the local demand for growth performance, urban-rural planning lost the consistent values and practical protocols <sup>[34]</sup>, and demonstrated a feature of “divided values”.

## **2.5 Period V (Since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012): Urban-rural planning in the circumstances of state governance restructuring**

The world has been in a post-financial crisis age since 2010, when the global production and trade landscape, as well as the financial system, is undergoing profound changes. Many developed countries, the US being the most representative one, switched to trade protectionism and anti-globalization policy, leaving China in an increasingly challenging global

environment. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, in the light of the new trends within the country and in the international community, the central government made the judgment that national economy is in “the New Normal”. A host of new goals were set forth, such as deepening reforms, development for a beautiful country, innovation-driven development, etc., along with the “Five Major Concepts for Development”. These represent a fundamental change of course on the values, paradigm, and path for growth, marking an end to the twenty-or-so-years long period of growth-dictates-all development <sup>[35]</sup>.

China’s development agenda in the new era does not just focus on addressing the legacy issues of the “growth-dictates-all” time, but also has a overarching goal of resolving the contradiction of people’s aspiration for a better life versus unbalanced, insufficient development , so as to realise the Chinese dream of “revitalisation of the Chinese nation”. To achieve that, the state conducted bold and resolute reforms on its governance philosophy and strategy, primarily in the following aspects: (1) Governance mode: More attention is given to the top-level design and political order. Through a series of legislative efforts and institutional reforms, the central government managed to effectively curb the long-standing policy preference centred around economic growth. The relationship between the government, the market, and the society has become more law-based, clearly-demarcated, and rule-abiding <sup>[36]</sup>. (2) Development path: Priority has shifted from maintaining GDP growth to honoring people’s aspiration for a better life. Efforts are concentrated on revitalizing the countryside, targeted poverty-alleviation, bridging the gap between the rich and the poor, etc. Stress is placed on protecting the environment and ecosystem to build a “beautiful China”, and “Green mountains and clear waters are gold mountains” becomes the new guideline for development. Economy transformation and innovation-driven development are encouraged to boost the industrial competitiveness of China and lift its position up along the global value train. (3) Culture and ideology: The government aims to reinforce the nation’s confidence in its own “development path, ideology, institutions, and culture”. A “socialist thought with Chinese characteristics in the new era” has taken shape and China is ready to offer “Chinese solutions” to problems in global development.

Against that backdrop, the role, function, conception, and thought of urban-rural planning have all changed significantly, primarily in the following respects:

First, urban-rural planning should be understood at the level of state governance. That means, urban-rural planning is no longer a purely technical subject but more a public policy, and an important means for the

state to modernize its governance system. In the multi-layered governance system, urban-rural planning is to play a vital role in disciplining and coordinating practices, as well as a more significant role in adjusting the relations between government, market, and society. In the light of this, after several years of pilot programme on the “integration of multiple planning”, the state government decided to move all urban-rural planning responsibilities to the newly-incorporated Ministry of Natural Resources through government restructuring, with an aim to build a state-level spatial planning system and redefine the administrative power division between the central and local governments. By putting in place an integrated spatial planning and governance system, the central government strives to set up a coordinated system for spatial planning, with which the power and responsibilities for spatial planning is optimized to serve the following purposes: (1) Optimize the relations between all levels of governments to ensure top-down instructions on spatial development can be passed down faithfully to the local level. (2) Define the boundaries between government, market, and society so that spatial planning can function within the domain of public power to best regulate the market and coordinate the society. (3) Ultimately, spatial planning should be more effective in driving national development transformation, regulating territorial land use, and building the ecological civilization.

Second, the values of urban-rural planning has changed in a fundamental way. For long the stress has been, expressly or de facto, on driving economic growth or increasing urbanisation rate of cities, always with quantitative metrics; now it changed to focusing on new urbanization that put people at the center, and facilitating high-quality, regionally balanced, sustainable urban-rural development, so that social harmony and sharing, among other social goals, can be achieved. The new territorial spatial planning will certainly require governments at various levels to play a stronger role in managing resources and space so that resources can be used and conserved in a more efficient way and a better-structured territorial spatial pattern will be created.

Third, the contents and priorities of urban-rural planning have changed significantly. The long-standing priority on the development and growth of cities was changed to eco-friendliness. Stringent regulations were put in place to guide and regulate development. The old mechanism of “granting supply to meet the demand” was discarded; the new mechanism is based on the baseline study of eco-environment conservation and relies on space supply as a constraint to regulate development demands. Drawing on the planning concepts and practices of Western countries such as “growth-management” and “eco-city”, many cities have published their demarcation of ecological red-line, permanent boundary for prime

farmland, boundary for urban expansion, etc. to define the zoning and regulation on land use for various urban spaces. Meanwhile, the emphasis is given to experimenting on new practices such as “the regeneration and restoration of cities”, renewal of existing spaces, sponge city, smart city, etc. In their new version of master planning, cities like Shanghai and Beijing list “reducing new land supply for construction” as a key task.

Forth, exploration of urban-rural planning theories and practices with Chinese features is valued. China has long been drawing from the USSR and Western countries on urban-rural planning thoughts, theories, and practices. That was criticized by some scholars as “first-hand practices with second-hand planning theories”. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, with “confidence in four aspects” as the new guidelines, urban-rural planning in China changed its course to emphasise its own system of urban-rural planning theories which can boost national confidence, preserve Chinese culture, and crystallise Chinese experience, so that China can offer the world with “Chinese solutions”. This is demonstrated at least in two respects: for one, recent years saw a sharp increase in publications on the review of Chinese domestic urban-rural planning thoughts and experience; for the other, “Chinese solutions” are being developed on projects such as the planning of Xiong’an New Area and Tongzhou, the auxiliary center for Beijing.

Fifth, ensure that urban-rural planning should be technically guiding, authoritative, scientific, and sustainable. The central government and President Xi Jinping himself put urban-rural planning very high on the agenda, as demonstrated by the convocation of the Urbanisation Work Conference of the Central Government (2013), the Central Government Urban Work Conference (2015), and the publication of many guidance documents such as the “Guiding Opinions by the Central Committee of CPC and the State Council on Strengthening the Management of Urban Planning and Development” (2016), in which the central government requires planners to acknowledge and respect the rules and patterns of urban development and plan with scientific decisionmaking and procedures; the importance of urban-rural planning is highlighted, especially the master planning should play a “strategic guiding and legally binding” role. It is also established that the basic requirements of planning must be observed; development projects should be carried out with an unswerving commitment to “one blueprint”; and that planners should have the perseverance and “be happy to see achievements being made not by themselves but by future generations”.

Overall, urban-rural planning in China will be continuously reinvented

and restructured in the foreseeable future in terms of the thoughts over its function, role, and approach. To what extent and how will these new planning thoughts be implemented to reshape the planning practices? How will these contribute to the Chinese Dream of revitalizing the nation in the new era? What new challenges and issues will emerge down the way? These research questions are worth long-term investigation.

### **3 Evolution of urban-rural planning thought in China over seventy years: The changes and constants**

#### **3.1 Perception of the role of urban-rural planning has been changing**

Over the past seventy years, especially since the reforming and opening up forty years ago, the changes in the role, function, ideology, methodology, and contents of urban-rural planning took place under profound influence of the international and domestic economic and social climate, the concepts and models of state governance, as well as the interaction of planning thoughts between China and the rest of the world. The perception of the role of urban-rural planning has also undergone a process of development, improvement, and redefinition. In the period right after the founding of the PRC, China learnt from the USSR in urban planning without reservation. Urban planning served as an extension of national economic plans in the field of urban space development, as well as a medium and technique for the materialization of national development plans. With market economy gradually taking its full shape, especially with the reforms on land use regulation and the establishment of paid land use policy, urban planning changed from a “passive medium” for plan implementation to an “active tool” to guide development and manage construction. Urban planning started to play an important and practical role in the management of urban assets, primarily the land. In the early 2000s, to address the issues of profit-seeking impulse in the market, the social disparity brought by rapid industrialization and urbanization, among other, Western planning methods were introduced, such as “advocacy planning” and “public participation”. Urban-rural planning started to be regarded as an important public policy that coordinates conflicting interests like urban growth, resource depletion, environmental degradation, and social development. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, in the general context of pushing forward the modern state governance and tightening control on the development order, reforms were carried out to change urban-rural planning into spatial planning, making it a much more relevant component of the state governance system. In conclusion, over the past seventy years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the change in perception of the role of urban-rural planning reflects the zeitgeist of

each period as the society and economy evolves and academic interaction between China and the rest of the world deepens.

### **3.2 Progressive integration of planning thoughts**

A brief description of the history of planning theories and thought evolution in the post-war Western World would cover utopian overall planning, rational process planning, advocacy planning, Neo-liberalist planning, post-modernistic planning, etc.<sup>[37-38]</sup>; and new forms constantly emerge. Owing largely to the long tradition of criticism in Western countries, later thought is often built upon the criticism of earlier thoughts.

Whereas urban planning in China has been developing on the continuance of traditions. This may have to do with the “golden mean” philosophy in Chinese traditional culture and China’s gradual reform approach. For instance, after 1978 China took the “dual-track” system in economic reform, rather than a drastic turnaround towards a market economy. Through staged opening up, gradual introduction of market factors, nurturing market entities, and cultivating social consensus, the country managed to change its original planning economy and public ownership step by step. With that as the background, China introduced some Western theories on urban-rural planning as early as in the early 1980s, e.g. urban master planning, territorial planning, and studies on urban structure and morphology. However, those were essentially at the level of “techniques”, while the overarching guidelines were still a continuation of the planned economy. It was not until the early 1990s when the central government made the socialist market economy a clear vision for future development that the guiding principles for urban planning were changed away from the planned thought. A similar example is, in the early 2000s the state government had already started to advocate new values such as “scientific development concepts” and “building harmonious society”, etc. Accordingly, urban-rural planning started to give more weight to the coordination of various interest groups, meeting the needs of multiple stakeholders, and upholding social justice. However, urban-rural planning remained primarily as a tool for driving growth in the fast developing economy. It was not until after the 18th CPC National Congress that real fundamental changes in this regard were realized in the new environment for development.

To summarise, since the the reform and opening up, urban-rural planning in China has drawn from the West on many planning thoughts and theories. Once being integrated with Chinese urbanization practices, it formed a “mixed stew” system of planning thoughts, theories, and

methods. In such a system, the rational planning thinking is the basis <sup>[32]</sup>, on top of which elitist utopia, advocacy planning, free-market dogma, post-modernism, etc. are all integrated. Interestingly, these theories and thoughts are by no means mutually exclusive in China, rather they are complementary to one another. This marks a key feature of China's urban-rural planning history.

### **3.3 The pragmatic path that has been a constant in China's urban-rural planning**

Many Western countries view urban-rural planning as a public policy to discipline market behaviors and uphold social justice. Equality and justice have always been their core values <sup>[39]</sup>. However, planning theories and practices often run into conflicts in values and in interests, making urban-rural planning a highly politicalized field. From the 1980s, with the emergence of neo-liberalism, Western countries saw a trend of depoliticizing in their planning practices <sup>[39]</sup>. Planning started to be subject to neutral mechanisms that respect market rules. The previous debates with embedded political values gave way to the tasks of better serving economic growth and improving the quality of cities. Nevertheless, Western urban planning theories and practices still have a highly political dimension, serving as an outlet for social issues and contradictory interests.

But in China, urban-rural planning is generally an organic integration of idealism, rationalism, and realism. Even during the planned economy period when political movements were the keynote of society, urban planning was not very politicized. Rather it was used as a technical instrument to implement national economic and development plans. Although the spatial resources used for urban planning was highly concentrated in the hands of the state in order to accumulate capital, equality was still a theme in land supply for collective use, which was instrumental in reconciling social contradictions. Since the reform and opening up, urban planning in China has generally kept a feature of "depoliticization" <sup>[40]</sup>. In the process of establishing market economy in the 1990s, high China valued economic and technical rationality very much in urban planning. As such, planning honored its role as an economic driver, in contrast with in the West where urban planning was counter-market by nature. From the early 2000s on, the state government emphasizes the coordination of regional, social, and environmental contradictions in rapid economic growth. Accordingly, much more attention is given to the coordination of development in different regions and between urban and rural areas, as well as to eco-environment, social justice, etc... In all, urban-rural planning in China has been following the changes

in government policies. During the forty years since the reform and opening up, urban-rural planning has gone with the logic of the market (or “commercialization”) rather than against. With respect to planning theories and practices, although the public engagement was expanded, the elite-leading paradigm that balances the higher authorities with lower levels remained unchanged all through. All that said, it is fair to conclude that urban-rural planning in China is not rooted in a simple, fixed value system<sup>[34]</sup>, rather it has been in constant change with the times. Planning is never an enemy to market and growth, rather it is the glue that makes consensus among various social parties cohere. That is a remarkable feature of the pragmatic path of urban-rural planning thought in China.

Over the last seven decades, many scholars criticized that China failed to develop its own planning theories, given the unprecedented scale of urbanization going on. This is, in fact, something Chinese planners should reflect on; but we can also understand this fact from another angle, i.e. Chinese planners were not following any set values or a priori thoughts, but they were introducing and localizing foreign theories and methods in the light of China’s own realities such as the social environment, issues, and needs, by which it managed to find quick fix to the problems in a complicated environment. Therefore, whether such a pragmatic path China took in developing its thought on urban-rural planning tells the negligence of Chinese planners, or rather it is some sort of Chinese wisdom that worth mulling over? That is an interesting question open for interpretation.

## **4 Conclusions**

Over the past seventy years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, urban-rural planning in China has been on a journey full of vicissitudes. Significant achievements were made, yet daunting challenges are still ahead to be overcome. Facing the changing development environment both at home and globally, in order to meet the needs for modern state governance, the Central Government made the decision to integrate previously scattered functions of spatial planning into the newly-established Ministry of Natural Resources and forge a unified territorial spatial planning system. This is a milestone that marks a new epoch. What impact do the radical changes in the role of urban-rural planning and the administrative structure hold for the future of urban-rural planning (or “territorial spatial planning”)? How will it change the conception and thought by the state, the public, and planning professionals toward spatial planning? Of all the experience accumulated and institutions forged in urban-rural planning over the past seventy years, what should be carried

on and further developed after all these ups and downs? Standing at the doorway to a new era, we should consciously reflect upon all these questions. **UPL**

Note: All figures and tables in the article were produced by the authors.

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