

## Is China Already Urban?

Beijing's population could reach 21 million by 2020, well above the city's target. Chris Amico reports



The tipping point in a country's development is often marked by the moment its population goes from mostly rural to mostly urban. China is supposed to hit that critical mass of city-dwellers in 2010, but economist Guo Shuqing, chairman of China Construction Bank and a delegate to the recent national party congress, says the nation is already well past that: He believes that currently 60 to 65 percent of Chinese live in cities, around 900 million people. The government's official number is 577 million, or 44 percent of the population, according to Xinhua. Guo recently told China Daily that his number comes from the World Bank's definition of an urbanite, which counts anyone living in a city at least three months a year who is not a farmer or a migrant worker.

Beijing could see a large chunk of this growth over the coming years. As of October, the capital's population was 17.4 million, a number that includes 5.4 million migrants. A new study released by Renmin University says that migration could drive that number up to 21.4 million by 2020, well above the city's official target of 18 million. Nationwide, an estimated 19 million people – mostly men – migrate from the countryside to cities every year, according to the UN Population Fund's 2007 State of World Population report. Urbanization presents opportunities as well as problems for policy makers, according to the authors of the report: "Cities concentrate poverty, but they also represent the best hope of escaping it."

This is something that Yunnan is banking on. The southern region recently announced it

would no longer distinguish between rural and urban residence permits starting January 1. That would allow anyone born in the sparsely developed province to legally move to a city, albeit only within Yunnan. Kunming alone could see millions added to its population in the coming years, with increases coming both from those arriving and those who weren't previously counted.

Widespread urbanity is a recent phenomenon in China. The country put strict limits on who could live in cities between 1949 and 1978, and the *hukou* system still prevents many from legally moving out of the countryside. Growth in urban populations has been slower than it might have been, thanks both to China's family planning efforts and a global tendency for urban women to have fewer children.

Cai Fang, a senior researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has urged that the rest of the country follow Yunnan's lead. The time has come to scrap the *hukou* system, he told China Daily: "Basically, it has prevented a person from fully enjoying the freedom of migration." However, Guo Shuqing cautions that the countryside cannot be ignored, even as cities demand more attention. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found in a recent report that 90 percent of the villages surveyed did not have enough young and healthy labor. With little promise of a future as farmers, migrants who leave for the city may have little reason to return home. But with increasingly fewer people to collect crops, the new citygoers might start to wonder from where they'll get their food.



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