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2009 : May 2009 - Fast Moving Fronts : Kam Wing Chan

FAST MOVING FRONTS - 2009

May 2009



Kam Wing Chan talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's Fast Moving Front in the field of Social Sciences general.



Article: Misconceptions and complexities in the study of China's cities: Definitions, statistics, and implications

Authors: Chan, KW

Journal: EURASIAN GEOGR ECON, 48 (4): 383-412 JUL-AUG 2007

Addresses: Univ Washington, Dept Geog, Seattle, WA 98195 USA.

Univ Washington, Dept Geog, Seattle, WA 98195 USA.

SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

It has examined, in a comprehensive way, some fundamental issues about measuring city populations in China. Due to China's heavy weight in the world's urban population, these are also important issues in studying global urbanization trends. China's urban/city definitions and statistics may be the world's most complicated and confusing; their peculiarities continue to plague the field as the country experiences further significant social and economic changes.

Moreover, China's growing economic and political importance has attracted increasing attention from scholars. This paper is also highly cited because it appeared in a prominent journal, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, which has the highest "impact factor" (based on citations in 2007) in the field of area studies.

SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?

The paper provides methodological guidance to the proper use of the present suite of Chinese city population statistics. In doing so, it has solved several major puzzles by deciphering China's recent city population statistics correctly. Also included is a critique of selected writings found in the literature, to highlight misstatements and areas of misunderstanding resulting from inappropriate use of the published data. Thus, the paper synthesizes a significant range of information to generate a new understanding of China's urban population.

"In my doctoral work on Chinese urbanization, I was able to straighten out a number of complicated statistical and methodological problems in the

SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

The paper aims to make sense of the array of available city population statistics for China, which are notoriously complicated and confusing. It helps alleviate confusion and misunderstanding in this area of research, particularly in studies pertaining to China's cities in recent years.

then-Chinese systems of defining urban population and measuring migration."

In addition, the paper points to a little-used source of useful statistical information from the census conducted by China's National Bureau of Statistics in November, 2000, and also answers basic questions such as the population sizes of China's 200 or so largest cities. Understanding and applying these statistics properly is essential for producing an accurate analysis of China's society and economy at each individual city level. One example is the calculation of per capita GDP indicators, which are used to estimate the level of development of individual cities and the consumer purchasing power in each city.

SW: How did you become involved in this research and were any particular problems encountered along the way?

I was born in China, although I have lived in the USA for almost two decades now. I developed a strong interest in studying Asian cities while I was in college at the University of Hong Kong, where I received a B.A. in Geography and Statistics (1980), followed by an M.S. in Urban Planning (1983). I started working on this topic in the mid-1980s when pursuing a Ph.D. degree in Geography at the University of Toronto.

In my doctoral work on Chinese urbanization, I was able to straighten out a number of complicated statistical and methodological problems in the then-Chinese systems of defining urban population and measuring migration.

I got involved in analyzing the Chinese 2000 Census data when it became available a few years ago. I became even more interested because I was also advising the United Nations Population and Development Section about Chinese city population statistics, as well as consulting for the McKinsey Global Institute on its project entitled "Preparing for China's Urban Billion."

As for problems, like many other scholars doing research in this area, I have not found it easy to keep up with China's rather frequent changes of urban definitions and city boundaries. Furthermore, the Chinese city population data are often not well-publicized or clearly explained.

SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?

This research has helped me produce significantly more usable and systematic city population data for China. I am currently exploring this data to analyze salient features of China's recent urban expansion, along with the structure and dynamics of its urban settlement systems.

SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?

My research has demonstrated that there is an enormous misunderstanding in the existing Chinese and Western literature on Chinese urban and city population statistics, upon which many findings and policy prescriptions are based. The research shows that there is an urgent need to reassess many previous findings and the policy prescriptions drawn or implied from them. China now accounts for about one-fifth of the world's entire urban population. Managing urbanization is an important policy issue not only for China but also for the world.

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Web

KEYWORDS: URBAN-POPULATION; GDP STATISTICS; CENSUS; SYSTEM; PRODUCTIVITY; URBANIZATION; EXPANSION; MIGRATION; GROWTH; SIZE.



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