



Urbanization in China: Its Present Status, Challenges, and Future

Cindy Xiaoning Chen, stormc008@hotmail.com/cxchen11@uw.edu

Developments and Characteristics

China have been experiencing rapid urbanization over the last several decades. The rate of urbanization in China increased from 17.9% in 1978 to 51.3% in 2011. From 1949 to 1978, the average annual growth rate of urbanization was 0.25%. From 1979 to 1995, the average growth rate was 0.65% annually. From 1996 to 2011, the urban population increased 21.19 million annually on average, with an average annual growth rate of 1.39%. Urbanization is no doubt one of the most significant signs of social development, providing higher living standards for former rural residents and enhanced public services including medical services, social security, education, etc.

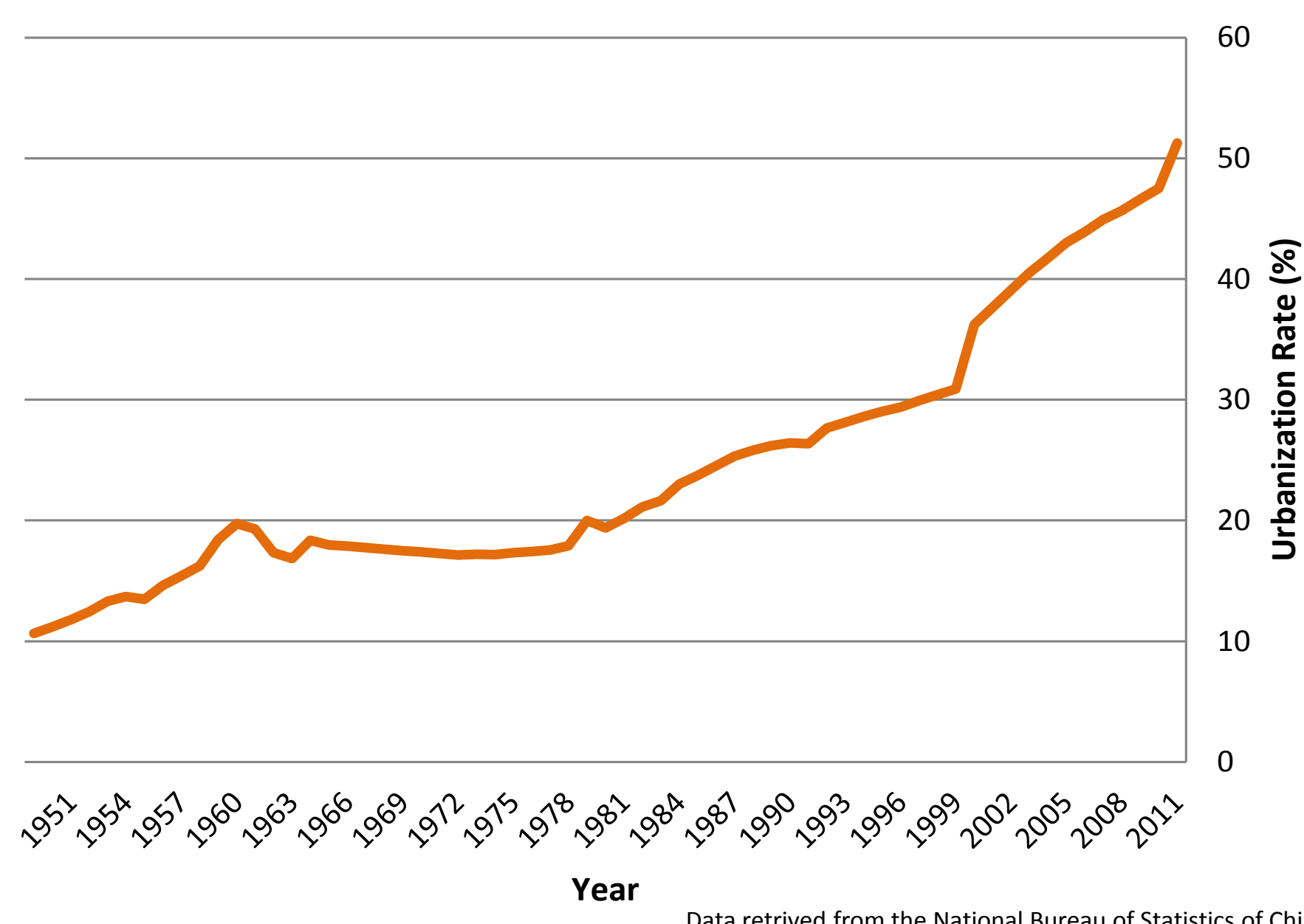
Some of the **characteristics** of China's urbanization can be summarized as below:

- 1. Late start.** Compare to other countries, China's urbanization started late.
- 2. Significant regional differences.** Due to factors such as environmental conditions and socioeconomic status, the urbanization rate varies largely depending on regions.
- 3. Unbalanced between the east and west.** Eastern China has accounted for over 40% of urban population, but the rate of urbanization in western China has increased gradually during recent years.
- 4. Large migrant population.** Migrant workers account for a large proportion of the urban population.
- 5. Change in promotion factors.** Urbanization no longer depends solely on central governmental promotion, but depends on diversified factors (i.e. public and private businesses, communities, and individuals).

Challenges

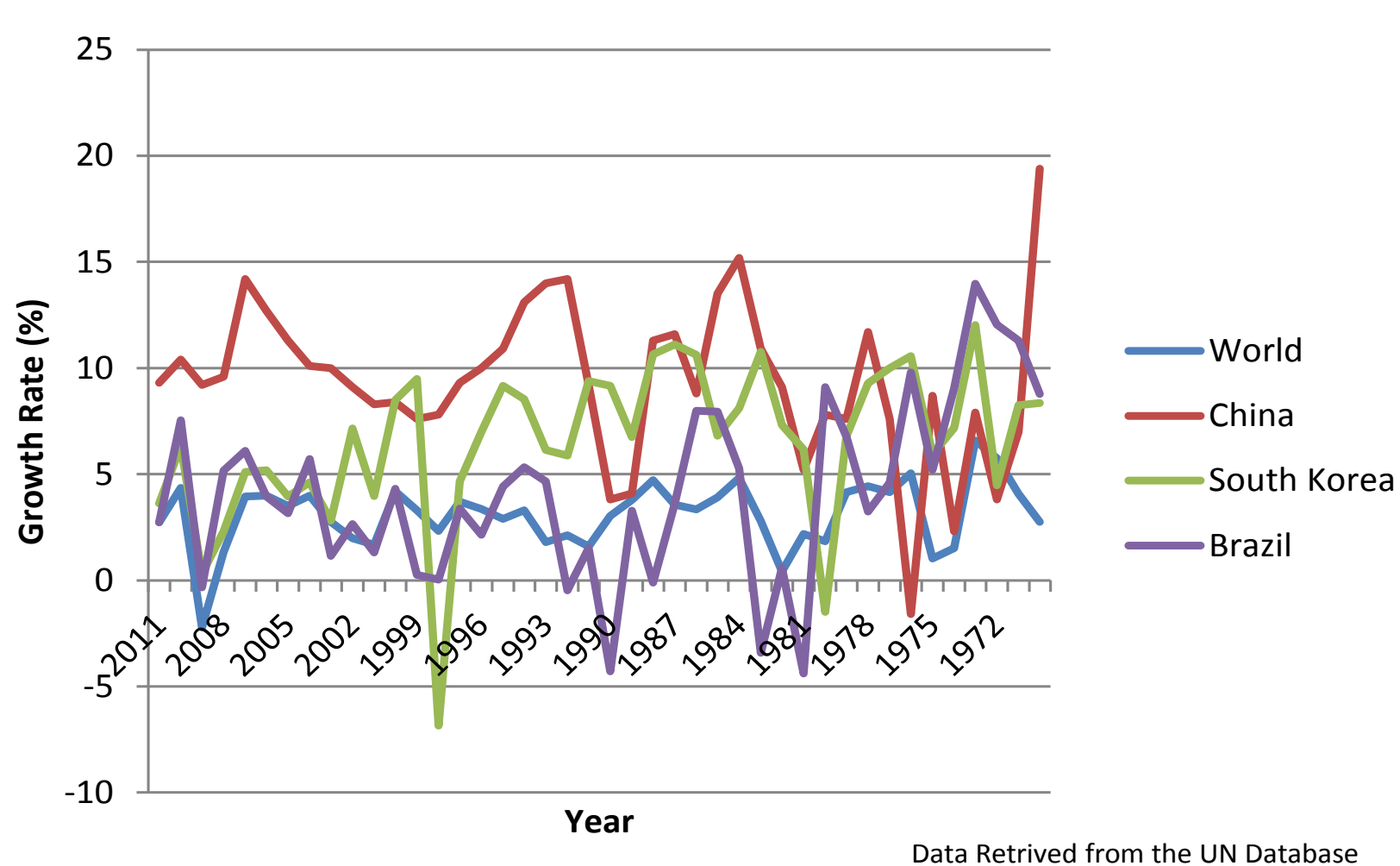
1. The development of urbanization is relatively later than many other countries, which led to lower urbanization rate compare to other countries during similar development phases.
2. Although the migrant worker population accounts for a large proportion of the urban population, they cannot receive the same social benefits due to certain policies.
3. The development of public services and infrastructures do not match the speed of urbanization, leading to issues including traffic congestion, inadequate health care system, the lack of disaster control measures, etc.
4. Environmental pollution is related to various factors. Large population density in mega cities and the lack of regulation in smaller cities are one of the factors.
5. Extremely high population density in several mega cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Many cities do not possess the ability to attract people due to slower economic development and inappropriate land use, leading to low population in supposedly "large cities".

China's Urbanization Rate (1949 - 2011)

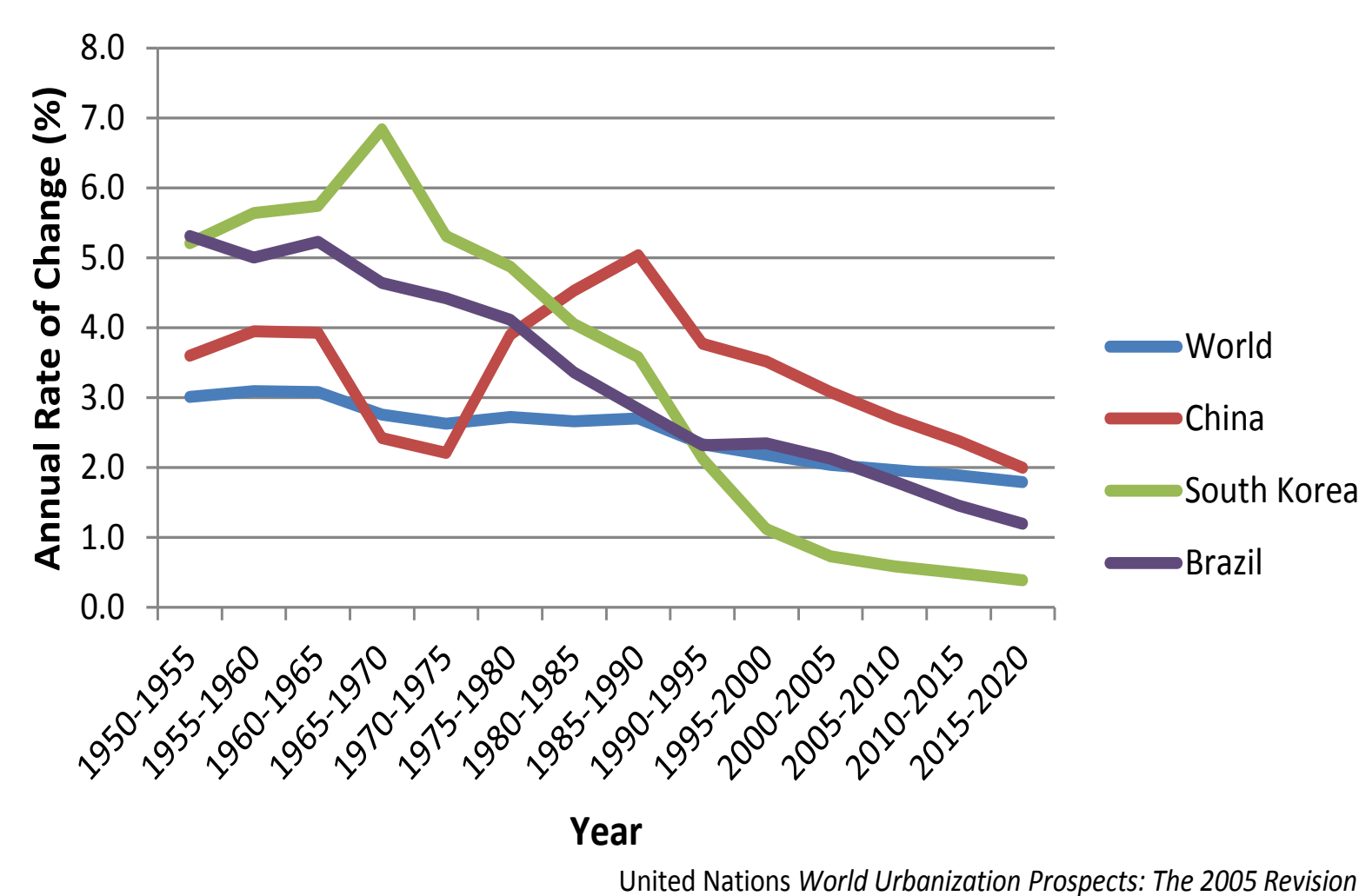


The figure on the left indicates the urbanization rate of China from the year 1949 to the year 2011. It is clear that China experienced the most rapid urbanization starting around 1978. This is relatively late compare to many other developing countries. It is also different to the regular pattern of urbanization according to Hollis B. Chenery, where industrialization rate is higher than urbanization rate.

Annual GDP Growth Rate (1970 - 2011)



Average Annual Rate of Change of the Urban Population (%)



The figure on the right indicates the rate of urbanization in China. Although China possess a relatively higher rate of economic development compare to the world's average, its urbanization rate appears to be lower and later than other countries at similar development status.

Discussion and Suggestions

Facing these challenges and finding solutions can be a long and complicated process, especially for a country with such large population and complex social structure. There are several actions to begin with:

- 1. Policy change.** This includes benefits for migrant workers and resident qualification policy changes.
- 2. Acknowledge the regional differences and gap.** Different natural and social environments require different methods of development.
- 3. Compatible public services and infrastructure,** including medical care system, disaster control measures (drainage system, emergency plans, etc.)
- 4. Appropriate land use.** Urbanization does not just mean modern buildings and urbanized landscape.
- 5. Scientific planning.**
- 6. Environmental protection.** Adequet policies and regulations are the first steps toward ecological balance. Moreover, the local government must have the pressure to enforce these regulations.



Beijing, China



City of Luzhou, Sichuan Province, China

Although extreme examples, the two pictures above indicate common gaps between urban developments in China. This is not unusual today.