

SOCIETY

Inkstone index: China's shrinking cities

Photo: Simon Song

by **Sidney Leng** and **Qin Chen**

| 5 SHARES

In the [Inkstone index](#), we break down China into the simplest possible chunk: a single number. What can one number tell us about China? Quite a lot.

938: the number of cities shrinking in China – almost a third of all Chinese cities.

Between 2013 and 2016, researchers from Tsinghua University used satellite imagery to monitor the intensity of night lights in more than 3,300 cities in China.

In 28% of the places tracked, the lights had dimmed by at least 10%, the researchers found.

This finding underscores the shifting face of China's economy and the complex reality of its breakneck urbanization.

As of 2017, about 58% of Chinese people lived in cities. That's more than three times 18% of China classified as urban in the late 1970s when the country began a policy of [economic reform and opening up](#). That number is expected to grow to 70% by 2030, according to the United Nations' World Urbanization Prospects.

But while the Chinese population as a whole is expected to urbanize further, some regions have contracted, according to the Tsinghua University study.



Tech-focused cities like Shenzhen are exploding in population, but farther-flung communities are contracting. Photo: Sam Tsang

Cities that have come under pressure are often dependent on natural resources and traditional industry. For example in Harbin, the capital city of Heilongjiang province and a major industrial base, the population declined by close to 4% between 2010 and 2017.

In that same period, the population in the technology-focused city of Shenzhen exploded by an estimated 30%.

“Although shrinking cities in the US and China are different on many levels, many landscapes in the US Rust Belt could be the future of some of China’s shrinking cities,” said Long Ying, lead researcher of the Tsinghua University study and also the founder of research lab Beijing City Lab, in a seminar in Shanghai in March.



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- Long Ying, researcher and founder, Beijing City Lab

But Long worried those key shifts are going unnoticed by the country's city planners.

They are still drawing up plans based upon the assumption that China's urban areas will grow indefinitely, Long said.

"It's like you've been losing weight for over a decade, but still make nutrition plans assuming that you are gaining weight," said Long.

On top of shifting growth patterns across China, the country's planners are also struggling to prepare for a demographic shift in the Chinese population.

The country is experiencing [low birth rates](#) and an [aging population](#). All adds to China's urgency to transform itself from a labor-intensive export-driven economy to one that focuses more on service and technology.



SIDNEY LENG



Sidney Leng is a contributor to Inkstone. He covers the Chinese economy for the South China Morning Post.



QIN CHEN



Qin is a multimedia producer at Inkstone. Most recently, she was a senior video producer for The New Yorker's video team. Prior to that she was at CNBC, making short documentaries and writing about how technology shapes lives.



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