

Glimpsing China's future urbanisation from the geography of a floating population

The 'floating population' in China refers to those migrants who are denied the local household registration at destination. This denial restricts their access to the full benefits of citizenship, puts them into the status of second-class citizens, and thus creates a social inequality that is peculiar to China (Chan, 2010). Unsurprisingly, the inequality between those with and without local household registration has caused many social problems, retarded economic growth, and led to low quality urbanisation in China, especially when the number of the floating population has already reached 247 million in 2015 (Knight, 2013; Liang et al., 2014). Confronted with these consequences, China proposed a National New-type Urbanisation Plan, in which the citizenisation of the floating population is set as a core mission. Accordingly, to know the geographical distribution of this population and of its representation in the total local population is a prerequisite for addressing the social inequality and materialising the new-type urbanisation plan in China.

Unlike much of the previous research that depicted the pattern of the floating population at the provincial level, this study is conducted at county level. For one thing, differences within provinces are no less than those between them (Liu et al., 2015). For another, although the urbanisation blueprint was released by the central government, the executive policies are carried out and the fiscal responsibilities are undertaken by city- and county-level authorities who have their own particular development priorities.

Therefore, this study tries to map the floating population and their proportion in the total population at county level. Using the technique of cartogram, these two aspects are combined in one graph such that their relationship can also be discerned. The vector GIS data were obtained from <http://geodata.pku.edu.cn> and the population data were from the 2010 census of China.

The floating population and their share in total population were used respectively to resize and colour counties in Figure 1. It shows that the floating population in 2010 were concentrated predominantly in three key coastal regions and moderately in inland provincial capitals, with great variation both within and across the key regions and provinces. The biggest concentration was in the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) where Shanghai took the lead in attracting ‘floaters’, followed by sub-centres Hangzhou and Nanjing and then by many vibrant counties along the Z-shaped axes of Nanjing-Shanghai-Hangzhou-Ningbo. The floating population of the Pearl River Delta (PRD) were fewer in number than that of the YRD and were approximately equally distributed in a handful of adjacent counties. The Jing-Jin-Ji region (JJJ) was much less attractive than the PRD in the eyes of ‘floaters’, who considered only Beijing, and to a lesser extent Tianjin desirable destinations. Megaregions like the coastal three were absent elsewhere in the cartogram, although several inland provincial capitals have emerged as isolated concentrations. Therefore, the responsibility of the new-type urbanisation still lies primarily in the three coastal regions and secondarily in inland provincial capitals.

Consistent with their distribution, the floating population constituted over a quarter of the total population in most counties in the three coastal regions and inland provincial capitals. In particular, this share was over 50% in four counties in the PRD (Shenzhen, Dongguan, Zhongshan and Huizhou) and in one neighbour county of Shanghai (Kunshan). But inconsistent with the floating population distribution, this share in many coastal counties outside the three megaregions and in most inland border counties was not low but reached above 10%, with a few of them even above 25%. These counties, just like those in the three coastal regions, had a very visible portion of residents being deprived of local benefits. This high visibility thus increases the potential for social instability, which requires central and local authorities to get prepared beforehand.

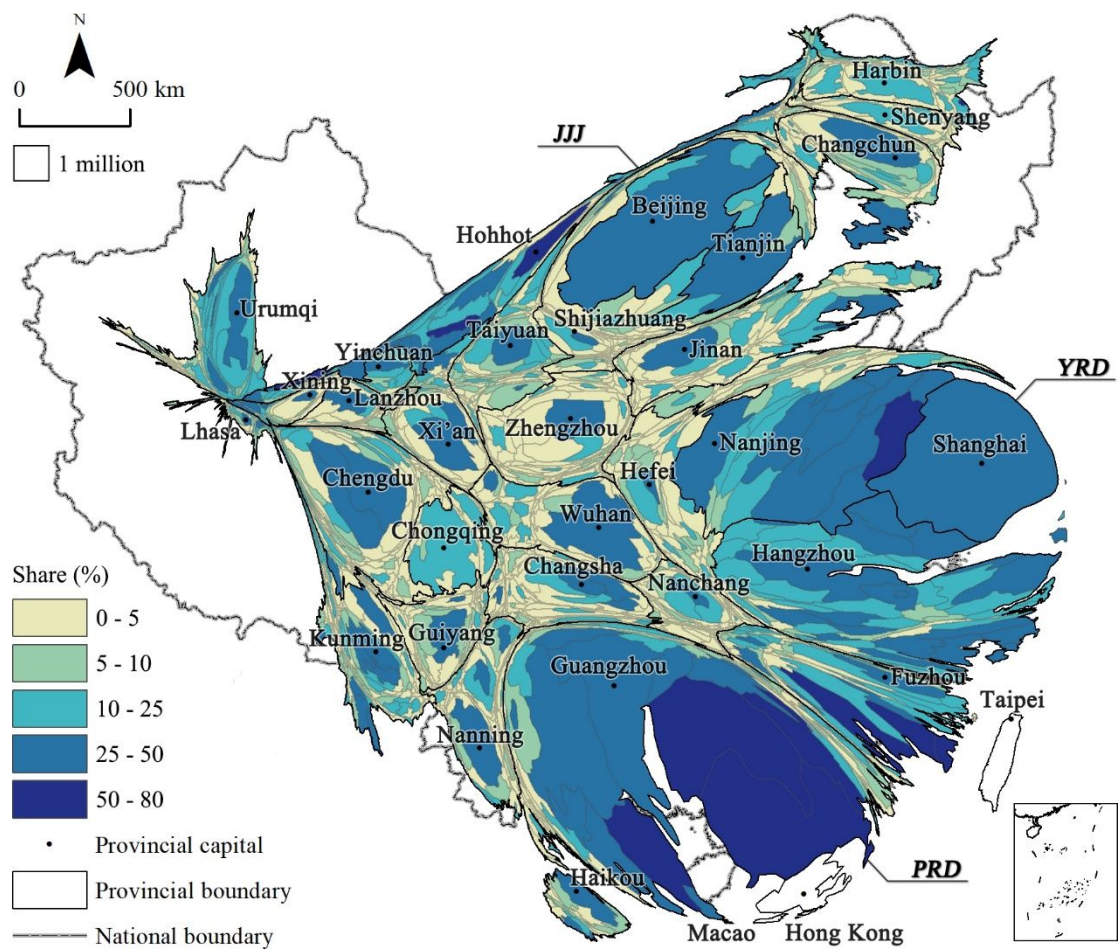


Figure 1. Distribution of the floating population and their share in total population.

Note: Area is proportional to the floating population in each county in 2010.

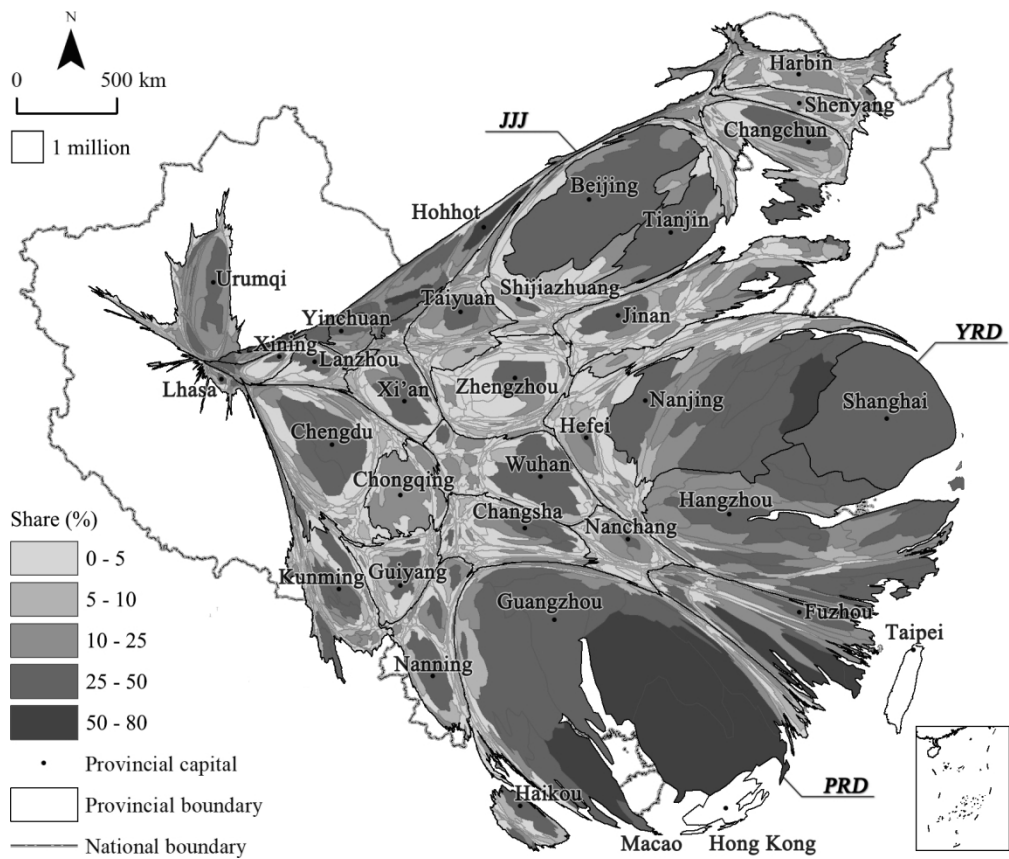
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