

Research Series on the Chinese Dream  
and China's Development Path

Peilin Li *Editor*

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# The Quality of Life in Contemporary China



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# **Research Series on the Chinese Dream and China's Development Path**

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Editor

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## Series Preface

Since China's reform and opening began in 1978, the country has come a long way on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. Over 30 years of reform, efforts and sustained spectacular economic growth have turned China into the world's second largest economy and wrought many profound changes in the Chinese society. These historically significant developments have been garnering increasing attention from scholars, governments, and the general public alike around the world since the 1990s, when the newest wave of China studies began to gather steam. Some of the hottest topics have included the so-called China miracle, Chinese phenomenon, Chinese experience, Chinese path, and the Chinese model. Homegrown researchers have soon followed suit. Already hugely productive, this vibrant field is putting out a large number of books each year, with Social Sciences Academic Press alone having published hundreds of titles on a wide range of subjects.

Because most of these books have been written and published in Chinese, however, readership has been limited outside China—even among many who study China—for whom English is still the lingua franca. This language barrier has been an impediment to efforts by academia, business communities, and policy-makers in other countries to form a thorough understanding of contemporary China, of what is distinct about China's past and present may mean not only for her future but also for the future of the world. The need to remove such an impediment is both real and urgent, and the *Research Series on the Chinese Dream and China's Development Path* is my answer to the call.

This series features some of the most notable achievements from the last 20 years by scholars in China in a variety of research topics related to reform and opening. They include both theoretical explorations and empirical studies and cover economy, society, politics, law, culture, and ecology, the six areas in which reform and opening policies have had the deepest impact and farthest-reaching consequences for the country. Authors for the series have also tried to articulate their visions of the "Chinese Dream" and how the country can realize it in these fields and beyond.

All of the editors and authors for the *Research Series on the Chinese Dream and China's Development Path* are both longtime students of reform and opening and

recognized authorities in their respective academic fields. Their credentials and expertise lend credibility to these books, each of which having been subject to a rigorous peer review process for inclusion in the series. As part of the Reform and Development Program under the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China, the series is published by Springer, a Germany-based academic publisher of international repute, and distributed overseas. I am confident that it will help fill a lacuna in studies of China in the era of reform and opening.

Shouguang Xie

# Introduction: Towards a Greater Emphasis on the Quality of Life

China has set itself the goal of building a *xiaokang* society in all respects by 2020. *Xiaokang* is a traditional Chinese expression for what may be understood as a “comfortably well-off life.” Before being used to symbolize a milestone in the course of China’s modernization, the phrase traditionally described a sort of peaceful, idyllic village life. In this book, we shall refer to *xiaokang* society by its official English translation: “moderately prosperous society,”<sup>1</sup> or more comprehensively, “moderately prosperous society in all respects.”

“Moderately prosperous” refers more to the quality of life (as measured by comprehensive social indicators) rather than merely the level of economic development (as measured by per capita GDP). After 38 years [*sic*]<sup>2</sup> of reform and opening up, China has seen rapid economic development, momentous social change, and a steady rise in the living standards of her people. These same years have also seen China moving toward a greater emphasis on the quality of life.

## From the “Take-Off Mode” to a New Stage of Growth

In 2008, the 30th anniversary of reform and opening-up, GDP per capita in China exceeded USD 3000 for the first time. Various attributes of China’s development during that period led me to believe that China had in fact begun to embark upon a new phase of socioeconomic development. The fundamental characteristics of socioeconomic development during that period were, to a very large extent, completely unrecognizable from that of the “economic take-off mode” three decades ago. In

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the official work report delivered by Xi Jinping at the 19th CPC Congress.—Trans.

<sup>2</sup> This book was originally published in 2016. China launched economic reforms known as “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) in 1978, which made 2016 the 38th anniversary of China’s economic reforms.—Trans.



other words, I was arguing that China had by then already moved past the take-off mode.

In that case, what stage of development did China enter after her economy had taken off? Of course, according to the development goals that China had set for herself, we may say that the country had entered the stage of “building a moderately prosperous society in all respects,” which is an overarching term for the stages of development that would span from 2000 to 2020. However, this characterization does not lend itself easily to international comparison. Put differently, how is the stage of “building a moderately prosperous society in all respects” related to the universally accepted concept of an “(economic) take-off mode”?

The idea of an “economic take-off” was first proposed by the American economist W. W. Rostow in his book, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, published in 1960. Rostow divided the economic growth of a country and society into five stages (later increased to six<sup>3</sup>): the traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off, the drive to maturity, the age of high mass-consumption, and “beyond mass-consumption.”

However, most of Rostow’s writings on these stages were merely descriptive, with the exception of the “take-off mode.” His research focused on the take-off mode, for which he provided a more detailed definition. Rostow argued that, in “taking off,” an economy overcomes traditional economic structures, for which three preconditions are required. First, there must be a rise in the rate of effective investment and savings to 10% of national income or more. Second, take-off requires the predominance of a modern industrial sector. Third, there must be institutional changes, i.e., the establishment of political, economic, and social institutions that allow for the expansion of the modern sector. Among the Western countries, Britain “took off” during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, France and the US “took off” over some decades before 1860, while Germany achieved the same between 1850 and 1875. Similarly, Japan achieved her take off in the last 25 years of the nineteenth century.

Thus, we see that these countries took roughly two to three decades to complete their economic take-offs. From these dates, it is also apparent that Rostow’s conception of the economic take-off was largely equivalent to basic industrialization. Rostow also proposed certain specific indicators characteristic of an economic take-off: his theories in this respect would later be known as the Rostovian take-off mode. However, the other stages that Rostow spoke of have mostly been forgotten. The age of high mass-consumption, frequently mentioned in the media, is perhaps an exception, although it has so far failed to become an established theory.

After reform and opening-up, I was one of the earliest researchers to characterize the course of China’s long-term development as a “social transformation.” By social transformation, I meant China’s transformation from an agricultural, rural

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<sup>3</sup> Rostow would go on to describe a sixth stage in his 1971 book *Politics and the Stages of Growth*, which the author termed the “beyond mass-consumption stage” (*chaoyue dazhong xiaofei jieduan*). Rostow himself originally called this stage “the search for quality.” See W.W. Rostow, *Politics and the Stages of Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 22.—Trans.

and (semi-) closed society to an industrial, urban, and open society. In other words, the usual process of modernization experienced by countries and societies, marked by industrialization and urbanization. This is a theoretical generalization based on common knowledge. Yet, back when most attention was focused on the transition from a planned economy toward a market economy, this characterization provided a perspective from which to scrutinize development from a longer horizon and greater dimensions, which assumed that momentous social changes would continue even after the economic system had been reformed. The transformation of the social structure would become a different force that drives social change—a force that is more fundamental and long-term in nature.

This characterization of China's development from "pre-traditional to modern," which encapsulated a rather long horizon, was not without its drawbacks: It does not clearly define the various stages in between, which makes it difficult to form a workable definition that may be directly applied to the analysis of each specific stage. Hence, we require a new characterization of the post-take-off stage, which would allow us to analyze the changes that have taken place during this phase in China's development. Ultimately, I decided on the concept of a "new growth stage."

In late 2009, when I was writing the general report for *Social Analysis and Forecast of China 2010*, I opted for the heading "A New Growth Stage of Development." At the time, the report outlined the characteristics of this new growth stage from six aspects:

1. Industrialization and Urbanization Advancement Enters Middle Period of the New Growth Stage
2. Changes in Social Structure Breaks with the Dualistic Structure of Urban and Rural Areas
3. People's Lifestyle Enters a New Growth Stage of Mass Consumption
4. Higher Education Enters New Growth Stage of Mass Education
5. Social Security Enters New Growth Stage of Extensive Coverage
6. From Economic Reform to Comprehensive Reform, Transition to a New Growth Stage

Thereafter, I made repeated attempts to formulate a more persuasive characterization of the new growth stage to make clear that this is a new stage of development radically different from the past. In late 2014, I wrote a Preface for *Social Analysis and Forecast of China 2015* titled "The New Stage of Growth Against the Backdrop of the 'New Normal'." In this preface, I outlined the following major attributes of China's current transition between different stages of development.

First, the transition between different stages of urbanization. At the global level, urbanization has generally been sub-divided into four phases: (1) urban population growth, (2) suburbanization, (3) de-urbanization, also known as counter-urbanization, and (4) re-urbanization. China's level of urbanization first exceeded 50% in 2011 and has reached 56.1% in 2015. Urbanization in China can be described as a form of accelerated, leapfrog development. On the one hand, the overall urban population is still growing. On the other hand, China is already seeing trends of suburbanization and de-urbanization. This indicates the dawn of a new stage: Though

these trends are as yet largely manifested in the forms of “agrileisure,” retirement in rural villages, and the running of tertiary industries in rural areas by urban residents, they are signs of a future trend. Suburbanization and de-urbanization do not imply a reversal of urbanization, but rather a new phase of urbanization with greater urban–rural integration that will breed vast new opportunities for further development. Although China’s huge population makes it unlikely that urbanization can be achieved merely through population influx into cities, it is nevertheless likely that urbanization levels in China will continue to increase until sometime around 2035, when 75% of the Chinese population will be living in urban areas. In this respect, China still has great flexibility for structural adaptation and room for development, making it advisable to move along with prevailing trends and actively promote new forms of urbanization. These new trends will also require China to find new ways to manage internal migration. Given the urban–rural stratification in the household registration (*hukou*) system, it will be necessary to integrate the hundreds of millions of rural migrants flowing into cities, as well as manage the flow of urban residents into rural areas, whether for leisure or business.

Second, shifts in the labor market as China transitions between different stages of development. Unemployment rates in China have not increased despite the slowing economic growth rates—urban unemployment surveys, which reflect the actual rates of unemployment, have been closely aligned with registered urban unemployment rates (which are somewhat statistically limited in terms of sample size). Given that previous slowdowns had led to higher unemployment, this was a rather pleasant surprise. Despite slowing economic growth, companies in the Yangtze Delta and Pearl River Delta were instead worried that migrant workers would not return after the Spring Festival break—which had not been the case during the cyclical fluctuations of the past decades. This was mainly due to three factors:

1. Immense government efforts to promote job creation, which resulted in more than ten million new jobs in 2014 alone.
2. Job growth attributable to the rapid development of modern service industries. The service sector contributed more to job growth than either the primary or secondary sector. For instance, there was a great increase in new forms of employment, such as in Beijing’s express delivery and “designated driver” (*daijia*)<sup>4</sup> services.
3. Profound shifts in the relationship between supply and demand for labor. China’s working-age population has begun to shrink, both in proportional and in absolute terms, making it highly likely that China will experience a structural labor shortage in future.

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<sup>4</sup> *Daijia* (literally “substitute driver”) has been translated as “designated driver (services).” Basically, an inebriated user would use a car-hailing app (Didi, for instance) to “hail” a “driver on behalf” that will drive them home in their own car. In English-speaking countries, this would probably be known as “drive home services” or “valet services.” However, *daijia* is unique to China in terms of both scale and pricing—such services are far cheaper, and hence more popular, in China than in most Western nations.—Trans.

Theory-based estimations indicate that there will be large numbers of unemployed rural residents. However, given the ageing of the rural labor force, it will be difficult for these workers to be effectively deployed in the industrial sector, given that such jobs generally require younger workers. When designing employment policies, China must pay great heed to these new trends. Wage levels will continue to increase, and it will be necessary for China to adapt correspondingly by intensifying workforce training schemes and focusing on labor productivity as a new source of growth. China still has great potential in this respect.

Given that employment is closely related to livelihoods, it is inadvisable for China to lower her guard even though the labor market has improved somewhat. There is still a need to boost employment and promote entrepreneurship, especially when it comes to graduate employment, re-deployment of workers laid off as a result of policies to cut production capacity, and re-employment of workers laid off from small and medium-sized businesses facing economic challenges. The provision of aid to unemployed individuals must continue to be a priority in social governance. In addition, with the changes in the labor market, a younger generation of migrant workers will intensify their demands for greater rights, leading to a higher incidence of labor disputes, which will make it necessary to further develop channels for social mediation and law-based resolution.

Third, shifts in income distribution as China transitions between different stages of development. In general, income gaps have widened steadily in China since her reform and opening up, as the result of both the laws of a market economy and economic policies orientated toward economic efficiency (which had the unfortunate effect of increasing income inequality). This trend peaked in 2008, when the Gini coefficient reached 0.491.

2008 to 2014 saw a gradual decline in the Gini coefficient, which was the result of three factors. First, the urban-rural disparity had begun to shrink. Per capita net rural incomes had grown at a higher rate than urban disposable incomes for four consecutive years. Second, regional disparities have been kept in check. The relatively underdeveloped local economies of central and western China had been growing at a higher rate than the more developed eastern regions for nearly a decade. Third, large-scale poverty alleviation efforts have come to fruition. Income inequality has been worsening among most major nations, including the USA, Russia, and India; only China and Brazil have managed to buck this trend. The improvement in China's income distribution has provided new conditions that are advantageous for her transition toward a model of economic growth and development based on greater consumption. However, income inequality in China remains high relative to other countries. China needs to vigorously address the problem of income inequality, given that it not only holds back economic growth and stymies economic fairness, two of China's development goals, but has also become a deep-seated cause of various social problems.

Fourth, shifts in the employment structure during China's different stages of development. The tertiary sector contributed 50.5% to total GDP in 2015, exceeding 50% for the first time, which was a significant sign that China was about to transition from the "middle stage of industrialization" to the "late stage of industrialization." Because

employment flexibility was greater in the tertiary sector than in the secondary sector (which was in turn higher than in agriculture), this shift in the economic structure was also reflected by changes in the employment structure. Alternatively, we may say that the employment structure in China was perhaps on the verge of a new stage, i.e., the “white-collar age,” where the majority of the labor force will be employed in white-collar jobs. The white-collar age was also when ideas such as the “age of high mass-consumption” and the “middle class” were first proposed in Western countries. Despite being somewhat controversial, these topics attracted widespread discussion. The formation of a middle class, on the one hand, contributes to social stability and harmony, as well as the formation of mainstream values. On the other hand, it also entails the arrival of an age of diversity and individualism, where new approaches to social governance will be required.

Fifth, shifts in household consumption during China’s different stages of development. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, final consumption expenditure and household consumption expenditure have successively declined for more than a decade in proportional terms. However, these trends have been shifting in recent years; in particular, final consumption expenditure and household consumption expenditure have been contributing more strongly toward economic growth. In 2015, final consumption accounted for as much as 66.4% of GDP growth, becoming the most significant driver of economic growth. Although China’s age of “imitative, wave-style consumption”<sup>5</sup> has basically ended, diversified, individualized mass-consumption has yet to reach its full potential. In particular, there has been rapid development in new forms of consumption, such as telecommunications, leisure, travel, retirement, housekeeping, health care, education, personal fitness, and online shopping. Consumers have begun to put greater store on the quality of life, especially in aspects such as health, food safety, air and water quality, sense of contentment, and happiness. The age of high mass-consumption has also seen an ever-increasing tendency toward consumerism, leading to economic materialism, “money-mindedness” and widespread conspicuous consumption. Any economic contraction will then have the potential to easily arouse broad discontentment and a relative sense of deprivation. This is a potential problem that social governance in China must remain vigilant against.

Sixth, shifts in population ageing trends during China’s different stages of development. As of 2014, 14.9% of the Chinese population, more than 200 million, are above the age of 60. Population ageing has become a global problem in the 21st century. As of today, China has the largest population of elderly persons in the world, more than 250,000 Chinese citizens crossing the threshold into “old age” each day. China’s population ageing is characterized not only by sheer numbers but also speed. In addition, young people are increasingly drawn toward urban areas, causing rural areas to experience more severe population ageing than urban areas.

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<sup>5</sup> “Imitative, wave-style consumption” (*mofangxing pailangshi xiaofei*) refers to trends in consumption characterized by wide-reaching fads that ebb and flow in popularity. For instance, household appliances were once in great vogue, spawning large numbers of companies that produced largely homogenous products, which inevitably led to market imbalances when something else came into fashion.—Trans.

Population ageing also has made increased pressures on elderly care in China. As the average size of a Chinese family shrinks, the traditional mechanism for elderly care, where seniors live with their children, has been threatened, making it ever more important to build a social retirement safety net. Large-scale institutionalized elderly care remains a rarity—most seniors will continue to spend their golden years living at home. There is an urgent need to develop social services for elderly persons in the community, such as catering, health care, home care, and emergency services. These will require innovative social governance models that involve a greater role for the non-governmental sector, in order to lower the costs of social governance and provide better social services.

The characteristics of China's transition between different stages of development, on the one hand, indicate that Chinese society will continue to undergo momentous social changes even after the economy transitions to the “new normal,”<sup>6</sup> featuring medium-high growth rather than fast growth. In this respect, China still has huge structural flexibility and room for development. On the other hand, it indicates that China will require new strategies, policies, and initiatives to respond to the new, radically different, issues and challenges that have arisen during the course of her development.

## A Shift in Focus: From Standard of Living to Quality of Life

When a country or society reaches a certain stage of development, it is inevitable that the people will come to place a greater emphasis on the quality of life. This stronger emphasis on quality is also one of the fundamental attributes of the new growth stage and closely linked to its other characteristics.

Before reform and opening up, China's development emphasized *xian shengchan, hou shenghuo* (“first production, then life”)<sup>7</sup> and neglected the role of consumption in boosting the economy. In the context of economic development, this policy orientation manifested as an emphasis on heavy industry over light industry, the latter being closely related to the material needs of daily life. Ultimately, it resulted in a disconnect between production and consumption—there were shortages in nearly all daily necessities. Even basic sustenance was sometimes a problem. After reform and opening up, China reversed direction, opting to base economic development on the production of daily necessities, which resulted in a rapid rise in incomes and consumption. Back when the economic reforms of 1978 had just been initiated, the bicycle, wristwatch, and sewing machine were known colloquially as the *san da jian* (“three big things”) which were deemed to be representative of the living standards

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<sup>6</sup> The “new normal” generally refers to a stage of growth that emphasizes the quality and sustainability of economic development, in contrast to China's breakneck growth in the past. While the inherent limitations of economic forecasting make it difficult to put a number on “medium-high” growth, it is generally understood as a rate of growth somewhere between 6% and 7%.—Trans.

<sup>7</sup> Basically meaning that raw economic development should take priority over the quality of life.—Trans.

of the people. In the 1990s, the original “three big things” had been supplanted by the television, refrigerator, and washing machine. Today, housing, cars, and insurance have become the new “three big things.” The speed of change has exceeded all imagination.

The first hallmark of a greater emphasis on the quality of life is the greater value placed on food safety. When economic reforms were first initiated, the Chinese people had nearly zero awareness of food safety. At the time, basic sustenance, colloquially known as *neng chi bao* (“able to fill your stomach”), was the benchmark for the good life. In fact, the universal standard for measuring rural living standards was “amount of grain per capita.” After basic sustenance was no longer a problem, “eating well” (*chi hao*, meaning better nutrition) became the new pursuit. Per capita spending on non-staple foods (as a proportion of total food expenditure) became an important indicator for whether people were “eating well.” After better nutrition became the norm, people came to place greater store on other forms of consumption, such as education, travel, telecommunications, leisure, and so on. At this time, “food expenditures as a proportion of total spending,” i.e., Engel’s coefficient, an internationally adopted benchmark, became the basic indicator for measuring living standards. Now, at a stage of development characterized by the pursuit of quality of life, people demand not only to “fill their stomachs” and “eat well,” but also to “eat organic” and “eat natural.” A series of food safety scandals have caused people to view food safety as an important factor in ensuring a greater quality of life.

The second hallmark of a greater emphasis on the quality of life is the greater value placed upon the environment, particularly air quality. During the childhood years of most Chinese alive today, azure skies dotted by white clouds and starry nights were the norm. Sadly, most people failed to appreciate these—the environment did not seem to have much to do with the quality of life. After reform and opening up, the rapid pace of economic growth caused an immense increase in environmental pollution. Still, most people accepted that this was a necessary price for higher incomes and greater living standards. “Pollute first, clean up later” also seemed to be a path of development that was hard to sidestep.

Yet, the course of history can sometimes be altered by a single incident. In mid-January 2013, the city of Beijing endured successive days of severe smog, which led authorities to issue an “orange alert” (the second-highest level), which caused large numbers of air travelers to be stranded at airports. Much of central and eastern China, from the northeastern and northern regions to the Huang-Huai<sup>8</sup> and Jiangnan regions, was blanketed in air pollutants. In some regions, visibility was less than one hundred meters. Among the 120 key cities monitored by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, 67 were deemed to be polluted, while 22 expressways across eleven provinces were partially closed. This incident led to nationwide reflection. What are we pursuing? What is the point of development? What was the point of pursuing living standards or quality of life if the air was so terrible that one had to don masks when outdoors? A new social consensus was taking shape: “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.”

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to the region south of the Yellow River and north of the Huai River.—Trans.

The third hallmark of a greater emphasis on the quality of life is the greater value placed upon health and personal fitness. As living standards improved, average life expectancy became an important indicator for measuring the quality of life. The increase in life expectancies was not only due to better living standards, but also due to improvements in the healthcare safety net and advances in medicine. The large, fatal pandemics of the past, including leprosy, bubonic plague, smallpox, schistosomiasis, dengue fever, and various viral influenzas, have gradually been conquered by the human race. However, new fatal diseases such as cancer have reared their ugly heads. Health has become an important aspect of the quality of life, which has given a great boost to health-related industries. Poor health has become an important factor that adversely impacts the quality of life.

The fourth hallmark of a greater emphasis on the quality of life is the greater value placed upon greater social engagement. The transition from an agrarian society to an urban society is also a transformation from a “society of acquaintances” to a “society of strangers.” A society’s level of psychological care is often linked to the loneliness and depression suffered by people living in a society of strangers, as well as the psychological stress caused by fast-paced modern life. Although psychological care is not well-developed in China, interpersonal relationships, which are important in Chinese culture, often act as a substitute. Nonetheless, against the backdrop of rapid social development, increasing numbers of people are suffering from loneliness, depression, and paranoia, the result of living among a society of strangers. At the same time, people are also developing an ever-stronger awareness of liberty, rights, and participation, which have made social expression, social trust, social support, social justice, and social engagement important conditions for ensuring a greater quality of life.

The fifth hallmark of a greater emphasis on the quality of life is the greater value placed upon emotional well-being. For a long time, quality of life was assessed solely on the basis of material living conditions and associated welfare indicators. Today, people have come to place an unprecedented emphasis on happiness and contentment.

## **A Review of Previous Research on the Quality of Life**

The American economist John Kenneth Galbraith was one of the first researchers to explore the quality of life from a theoretical perspective. In *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, Galbraith argued that quality of life should not only be measured in terms of private wealth. Quality of life also referred to the enjoyment or pleasure, that people derived from creature comforts, “conveniences of life” and “spiritual fulfillment.” Of course, Galbraith also pointed out that, although happiness was a universal pursuit, there remained great uncertainty with regard to actually *measuring* happiness. He stressed that, at the time, there was a stark contrast between private wealth and the filthy public environment in America, arguing that the latter was a major impediment to quality of life. Galbraith characterized it thus: