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China is struggling to control its rapid urbanization as experts warn of resource shortages and pollution problems

Growth Pains

As a forerunner of China’s opening-up and reform efforts, Shenzhen, a city near Hong Kong, has long attracted young people who come to find a job and seek their fortune. Because of its openness, Shenzhen has created many miracles in its economic development, but to the surprise of many people, in August, entry to the city suddenly slammed shut.

By April, Shenzhen’s total population was approaching 12 million, including 1.65 million local residents and a whopping 10.25 million registered migrants. Half of total population is a floating population, meaning people who reside in the city for less than a year. To govern such a large, transient population is a formidable challenge.

Past experiences in Western countries show that a city of 3 million people usually takes about 100 years to grow to 10 million. But Shenzhen, a 30-year-old city, made this jump in only a decade.

In the 1980s, Shenzhen was supposed to hold 800,000 people. In the city’s 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–05), the population capacity was limited to 4.8 million. Today, with 12 million people crowded into the city, crises loom ahead.

A major problem is the water supply. Shenzhen is listed as one of China’s seven thirstiest cities, with its per-capita freshwater resources comprising a quarter of the national average. Even if the population decreases to 7.5 million in 2010, the city will still be facing a water shortage of 1.6 billion cubic meters a year.

The local government is fully aware of the grave situation and warns Shenzhen's future development will collide with four major crises—diminishing land resources, water and energy shortages, overpopulation and weakening environmental sustainability.

Shenzhen, one of the earliest special economic zones in China, is a test balloon for the country's reform and opening-up policy. What the city is facing now may afflict other cities in the future. If and how Shenzhen will cope with its problems has great meaning to cities around the country.

In mid-August, some 40 citizens in Beijing came up with advice and suggestions on how to control their city's population during a meeting called by a working team for formulating Beijing's 11th Five-Year Plan (2006–10). Among the feedback, the most-frequently mentioned approach was to reduce the number of migrants.

According to the latest population statistics from the local government, Beijing's population jumped to 14.93 million last year from 4.2 million in 1949, an increase of nearly 200,000 people per year. Overpopulation has threatened the city's water supply, land usage, traffic systems and environment.

Cities facing a rapidly expanding population and resources shortage are still a minority at present, but will increase in the near future if population in China is not properly and effectively controlled....

Source: Feng Jianhua. "Too Big, Too Fast." *Beijing Review*. 27 October 2005.