Population and sustainable development in China: Population and household scenarios for two regions

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Preface

Five years ago, before I came to Amsterdam, my knowledge of the Netherlands was so limited. The most impressive picture of the country I had seen was in the textbooks of the secondary school: groups of black-and-white cows leisurely scattered on the carpet of green grass, above them the blue sky with floating clouds. Of course, the stories of Dutch people creating land through blocking the seawater were another part of the body of information. Undoubtedly, this information was correct. However, if I had not been here, I would never have tasted the breath-taking beauty of six million tulips on the 80 acres of land in the Keukenhof. I would never have understood the meaning of “Venice of the North” for Amsterdam. I would never have believed my eyes that were surprised by the many barges and canal boats that seem to be sailing along above you while cycling along the road, never have caught the sight of miles of windmills working along the bank of the seacoast. If I had not been here, I would not have felt the astonishing elegance and splendour of the works of Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and many other Dutch masters. And I would not have experienced the hospitality and friendship received from the sanguine, liberal Dutch people ... All in all, I would not have had the chance to apply for a doctoral degree from the University of Amsterdam.

All these experiences turned out to be possible when suddenly I was selected by Peking University as a visiting scholar for studying abroad in 1994. Among the available 128 host institutions in more than 40 countries, my director, Prof. Zeng Yi, at the Institute of Population Research, Peking University, suggested me to apply for the University of Amsterdam because he knew “a good professor” – Prof. Kuijsten – there. Today, I must say that I happened to make a right and wise decision five years ago. That I refer to the decision as a right one is not only because I enjoyed the amenities of this land, and met the “good” people. It is also because I could field-test the important Chinese traditional belief: “there are other hills whose stones are good for working jade” – other people’s good qualities or knowledge through which one can remedy one’s own defects.

In my childhood, I was proudly taught that China is a country with a vast territory and abundant resources. However, it was very soon that we understood the difficulties for China to meet the challenge of socio-economic development, facing the great pressure caused by its huge population size. “How to cope with the problems?” and “What will and could happen to this land and the people in the future?” were the questions that perplexed and distressed me. The experiences and achievements of the Dutch taught me lessons and gave me encouragement to work for better answers to these questions.

The population-environment interaction has always been an important topic in the history of mankind. The Netherlands is the model society where people strive for surviving and developing, by tremendously changing the natural endowments of the land. More than half of its territory was snatched from the sea. Nowadays, the Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries of the world, while it has remained one of the most important exporters of agricultural products and a developed country where people enjoy a high standard of living. In its long history of coping with contradictions between population and environment, Dutch society has constructed a rich body of theoretical and practical knowledge on harmonising the relationships between human beings and the environment. I hope that I have absorbed and learned something from here.
Although I cannot say that I have found out the solutions to the questions that perplexed and distressed me years ago, after five years of study, however, I have more confidence today in believing that it is possible to solve these problems. My studies and research in these years enable me to understand more about the population-development-environment regime; in the meantime, I wish that they could add some new useful information to the body of knowledge in this field.

For making it possible to finalise this research and this doctoral dissertation, there are many individuals and institutions I should acknowledge. The list could easily be exhaustively long. Therefore, I would like to mention the following institutions and persons:

My immense thanks extend to my home institution – the Institute of Population Research at Peking University (IPRPU), for providing me the chance to study abroad and allowing me to continue my study leave. During my two years (1995 to 1997) of research and fieldwork in China, my colleagues have provided me with unreserved support. My colleagues at IPRPU Prof. Cai Wenmei, Prof. Zheng Xiaoying, Prof. Liu Yuzhi, Dr. Lu Jiehua, Mr. Liang Zhiwu, Dr. Liu Guiping, Dr. Liu Hongying, and Prof. Li Yongping were always willing to help me. I always remember the trip with Prof. Cai Wenmei and Mr. Chen Bomin during our field work in the Pearl River Delta. They forgot their senior age and their physical limitations, and worked harder than youngsters. Of course, I benefited a lot from the co-operation with Dr. Lu Jiehua and Mr. Liang Zhiwu during the fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta and the Jitai Basin. I want to tell them: I really enjoyed working with you.

For the fieldwork, I have to express my appreciation to the people of the institutions at the national, provincial, municipal, county and township levels. Thanks for your help, your hospitality, and your friendship.

I am grateful to the US National Academy of Sciences and National Research Council and the research project team “The interaction between population growth and land-use change” they supported. I was involved in this team as a research member. With their financial support, I attended the workshop “The relationship among population growth, consumption, and land use change in China, India, and the United States” in October 22–30, 1997, Tallahassee, Florida, USA. The financial support from the Population Council was one of the crucial sources for my study. I would like to thank the board of the Council who honoured me with the reputable scholarship for the year 1997–1998. Ms. Jude Lam, the Fellowship Co-ordinator, helped me through the whole year. Not only did she help me with all the matters concerning my fellowship, she also gave me good advice in other aspects. Her suggestion that I should not just focus on research, but also make life more enjoyable, was so important for the years of my staying abroad alone.

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The Office of Foreign Relations of the University of Amsterdam was very helpful in every phase of my stay in Amsterdam. Ms. Marjan Kuiper offered me great help with her professional efficiency and warm-hearted sincerity. The Foundation for Women's Studies of the University of Amsterdam provided me a scholarship with which I could extend my study at the UvA for four months after my visiting scholarship stay in 1995.

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Prof. Zeng Yi is the one who witnessed all my progress in the field of demographic research. His instructions, recommendations, help, and understanding were the driving force and the key support to make this research possible. No matter how busy and how far away he was, he always gave priority to answering my emails, faxes or phone calls concerning the difficulties encountered in my research. As it is expressed according to a Chinese traditional belief: he who has ever been a teacher, even for one day only, should be treated as a father. Prof. Zeng, you will always remain my respectable teacher and dearest friend.

Last but not least, I dedicate this book to my wife Fei and my daughter Baobao. In one of their most popular songs, Chinese people express their recognition to their spouse by singing “half of the medal belongs to you, and half to me”. I speak with full conviction that without Fei's understanding and support I would never have finished the book. With great courage, Fei endured our separation during these years, facing enormous social and economic hardships. Finally, she is with me in Amsterdam now. We are curious to know whether Baobao, who is three years old now and staying with her beloved grandparents, will recognise her papa when we reunite in a few months, after two and a half years of separation ...

Amsterdam, October 1999
Jiang Leiwen