A Framework for Analyzing the Family Urbanization of China from a “Culture–Institution” Perspective

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Abstract: There is a growing number of studies on the phenomenon of urbanization and family migration in China, but there is a lack of corresponding underlying logical constructs to explain the underlying patterns of the phenomenon. Based on the development of Western urbanization theories, it is proposed that the traditional urbanization theories, which are purely based on economic dynamics, are insufficient to explain the characteristic patterns of Chinese household urbanization, and traditional urbanization theories usually ignore the role of Chinese family-oriented cultural concepts. Through a theoretical review and a summary of the characteristics of the phenomenon, we propose an analytical framework based on “culture–institution”, in which the cultural and ethical concepts represented by family orientation and intergenerational upbringing are the ideological basis of family urbanization. In this process, China’s household registration system and land system have resulted in the coexistence of multiple stages of urbanization, such as moving to the city, moving to the city in stages, and moving back to the city. The purposes of this study are to explain the phenomenon of Chinese family urbanization by constructing a “culture–institution” framework and to expand the relevant content of China’s theoretical urbanization system. A deep understanding of family urbanization with Chinese characteristics is important for the steady promotion of new urbanization in the new era.

Keywords: family urbanization; cultural ethics; institutional environment; analytical framework; China

1. Introduction

Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz once said that China’s urbanization is one of the two major events affecting the world in the 21st century [1]. By the end of 2021, the urbanization rate of permanent residents in China had reached 64.72% (data are available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/sjjd/202209/t20220929_1888798.html, accessed on 1 September 2022) (Figure 1). With the rapid development of urbanization in China, the difference between urban and rural areas has widened, and the urbanization rate of permanent residents is much higher than the urbanization rate of the registered population [2]. More and more, the focus has shifted from the urbanization rate to urbanization quality [3,4]. The National New Urbanization Development Plan (2014–2020) issued in 2014 marks a major transformation in China’s urbanization development, and its purpose is to emphasize the urbanization of people, which also shows that urbanization is not only a matter of numbers. Urban development should also implement an awareness of peoples’ feelings [5,6].
Since its reform and opening up, the scale of the floating population in China has grown rapidly, and the trend of family-oriented migration has gradually strengthened. Statistics show that nearly 90 percent of the new generation of the married floating population is dominated by the flow of spouses, and the flow of nuclear families with spouses and children has accounted for more than 60 percent (data are available at: https://chinaldrk.org.cn/wjw/#/home, accessed on 1 September 2022). Large-scale family migration is emerging, and “family” has become the main unit of population mobility [7]. The next stage of population urbanization in China is largely the urbanization of migrant families [8]. This is a typical Chinese phenomenon, and domestic scholars have gradually noticed this special phenomenon and proposed changing the research on the basic unit of urbanization from the conventional “individual unit” to the “family unit”, taking the level of family urbanization as a new entry point to measuring the overall level and quality of urbanization [9]. However, at present, domestic urbanization research has focused on the practical level of how to promote China’s “family” urbanization process, but there is a lack of a corresponding underlying logic construct to explain the fundamental cause of the phenomenon, so this article focuses on the analysis of the characteristics of the Chinese family urbanization phenomenon and on the basis of the application of the theory of Western urbanization, building an analytical framework of the urbanization of the Chinese family.

The objectives of this study were to (1) assess the basic theoretical system of Western traditional urbanization and analyze the reasons it is difficult to explain the phenomenon of family urbanization in China; (2) analyze the characteristics of the current family urbanization phenomenon in China and deepen the understanding of the characteristics of China’s urbanization process; (3) put forward the analytical framework of Chinese family urbanization based on the “culture–institution” interpretation, and provide an explanatory theory for scholars outside of China to foster understanding of China’s urbanization.

2. Data and Methodology

2.1. Interview Location

In order to ensure the scientific reliability of the research conclusions, the research team went to Chebu Town, Hubei Province, to conduct many surveys and interviews with local villagers and village cadres. Chebu Town is a typical rural area in central China, covering an area of 144.6 square kilometers. By the end of 2020, the registered resident population was 45,690, and the permanent population was 30,126 (data are available at: https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%BD%A6%E5%9F%A0%E9%95%87/1870446,
The villagers who go out to work are mainly concentrated in Wuhan, Beijing, Shanghai, and other places (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Location of Chebu Town.

2.2. Data

The data used in this study mainly include two categories: quantitative nationwide statistics and qualitative interview data from the team in S Town, Wuhan. The statistical data include China’s population census data (http://www.stats.gov.cn, accessed on 1 September 2022), China’s population mobility data (https://chinaldrk.org.cn, accessed on 1 September 2022), and China’s migrant worker survey data (http://www.gov.cn, accessed on 1 September 2022). Through these statistical data, we can intuitively determine the current household urbanization phenomenon in China, and statistical results from over the years can also provide us with a deeper understanding of the changes in this phenomenon. The interview data are mainly the results of the questionnaire analysis of several villagers and village cadres in Chebu Town, Hubei province. Although we did not carry out a detailed survey of villagers across the country due to time and energy constraints, we can more specifically analyze the causes through the situation reflected in this ordinary rural area.

2.3. Methodology

This is a theoretical study, so we did not use absolute quantitative analysis methods but instead used four other methods: literature analysis, data statistics, field survey, and induction and deduction. Among them, we analyzed the deficiencies of Western urbanization theory in China’s urbanization interpretation by sorting the literature, and then identified the characteristics and process of the current Chinese family urbanization phenomenon using data statistics and field survey methods. Finally, an innovative interpretation framework of the “culture system” is proposed using induction and deduction (Figure 3).
3. Western Traditional Urbanization Theory Combing and Paradox

A city is a complex body, and the process of urbanization is also complicated. Many disciplines take it as a research object and continue to study it. Therefore, many urbanization theories have been established to explain the corresponding urbanization process. Due to the early start of urbanization in Western developed countries, the current mainstream urbanization theory was mainly born in the West, which includes not only the “immersive” urbanization theory studies in developed countries but also many “sidelining” urbanization studies in developing countries [10–12]. Most scholars from post-urbanization countries are also moving forward under the guidance of the urbanization research theories of the above Western developed countries [13]. As the research on family urbanization has just started, there is no special theoretical explanation for it, so the current research is mainly based on the analysis of traditional urbanization theory.

3.1. Traditional Urbanization Theory Combing and Development

Urbanization in Western developed countries started with the industrial revolution in the 18th century, and the long process of industrialization promoted the rapid development of urbanization. The theory holds that urbanization in developed countries is a process driven by industrialization from an agricultural society to an urbanized society, and the main motivation of urbanization is industrialization. This mainly includes the agglomeration economy theory, cumulative causation theory, surplus product theory, central place theory, location and urban sprawl theory, externality theory, and so on [14]. The agglomeration economy theory by economist A. Weber was put forward in 1909. The theory posits that the city is the core of modern economic activities that are usually the center of the process of production, distribution, and exchange; the centricity groups more and more companies together, reducing the production cost, attracting suppliers and customers, and resulting in city size and population aggregation and growth [15]. Cumulative causation theory, by the well-known economist Myrdal, was put forward in 1957. The theory is that a region’s economic development can stimulate strong demand, and the demand for a marginal area of investors creates a chance to meet their needs. Investors in marginal areas use cheap land and labor resources, and if demand is strong enough, these diffusion effects will enable the marginal region to develop its own virtuous cumulative causality cycle. This theory explains the spatial process of urbanization expansion and diffusion [16]. Surplus product theory is derived from the study of surplus value and was systematically analyzed by the German sociologist Marx on the basis of previous studies. In the interpretation of urbanization development, it is considered that a surplus labor force in the agricultural sector will be absorbed into the manufacturing sector due to the continuous progress of agricultural technology and the development of the manufacturing industry, and the rural surplus labor force gradually transforms into an urban labor force with urban residents [17].
German economist A. Lösch in 1940. It is one of the basic theories for studying urban agglomeration and urbanization. Central place theory describes the distribution and relative scale of each central place in a region. According to this theory, the basic function of a city is to provide goods and services for the surrounding areas. The most important center is not necessarily the area with the largest population, but it is the most critical location in the transportation network and can provide a wide range of goods and services. This theory has great application in studying the distribution law of urban systems [18]. The theory of location and urban sprawl, also known as rent competition theory, was first proposed by German agricultural economist von Thünen in 1826. However, he only took agricultural land as an example to analyze that different crops would be chosen to grow in different locations away from the market because of their different land rents. On this basis, William Alonso, a professor at Harvard University in the United States, put forward the model of land price bidding in single-center cities in 1964. He believed that competitors who are more sensitive to location and have strong ability to pay land rent (such as the commercial service industry) would obtain the land use rights in the downtown area, and the land use of other activities would be extrapolated in turn [19,20]. The externality theory was put forward by Jacobs in 1969 on the basis of Marshall’s research. She pointed out that cities are the main driving force of economic growth, which comes from the externalities that cities have. Different from Marshallian externality, Jacobs’ externality refers to the externality between enterprises in different industries. Industrial diversification can promote the flow, spillover, and innovation of knowledge. Jacobs’ externality corresponds to the urbanization economy [21]. The second model relates to the urbanization of developing countries. It is widely believed in academic circles that many developing countries actively promoted the modernization of their countries after World War II and formed a series of modernization-driven urbanization theories, mainly including the dual economic structure theory, the push–pull theory, the dependency theory, etc. The dual economic structure theory was first put forward by American economist Lewis, completed in 1954. He pointed out that due to the large differences in productivity of the labor force in the agricultural sectors of developing countries, the urban economy was dominated by modern industrial production, while the rural economy was dominated by the typical small-scale farmer economy. The key to the process of urbanization in these regions is to transition from the dual economic structure to the modern economic model of CNY 1 [22]. The push–pull theory is a famous theory explaining the cause of population migration flow. D.J. Bogue’s 1959 system, on the basis of his predecessors’ research, believed that the purpose of immigrants is to improve their living conditions; the factors that help to improve the living conditions of the region are the pull, and bad living conditions in the region are the push in the process of urbanization [23]. Dependency theory is an extension of Raul Prebisch’s structuralism, which points out that the relationship between developing countries and developed countries is dependency. In this process, the resources of later-developing countries are constantly flowing into developed countries, but the developing countries must be “dependent” if they want to achieve development [24].

3.2. General Explanatory Paradox of the Application of Traditional Urbanization Theory

The agglomeration economy theory of Western developed countries, the cumulative causation theory, and the theory of surplus products are focused on the simple perspective of economic power and the process of urbanization. The first has the limitation of time. The theory of the industrial revolution in the late period of Western urbanization was developed by scholars after reflecting on it. China went through the same industrialization process in 30 years that the West experienced for nearly a century; industrialization is not the same as urbanization [13,25,26]. Traditional economic theories are not fully applicable in the current information age. Therefore, there is an obvious disconnect between these theories and the process of urbanization in China [14,27,28]. For example, the social network theory in the gravity model is that the strong and weak relationships in the social network are of great benefit to shaping the attitudes and behaviors of actors and can also affect many
important results for actors. This also partly explains some characteristics of rural families’ urbanization through social relations in China, but which factors affect the changes of such social relations in China is worth considering [29,30]. Secondly, China is a socialist country. Compared to highly market-oriented Western countries, the “institution” has become an inevitable and important factor in the process of urban development. Chinese scholars once proposed “institution-based urbanization” to summarize the characteristics of China’s urbanization [31]. Last but not least, regarding spatial constraints, most Western countries are large and sparsely populated. In China, nearly one-third of the per capita arable land area is defined as being above the 0.8 mu per capita survival warning line by the United Nations in more than 2000 county-level divisions [32].

The theory of the dual economic structure of developing countries, the push–pull theory, and the dependency theory, based on economy, population, and society, respectively, reflect the power and process of urbanization in a developing country over time. The degree of convergence of the theories of urbanization has become an important theoretical basis for domestic research on urbanization, but some theories are also not applicable. After decades of development, an obvious dual economic structure still exists in China, and uncoordinated urban and rural development is still an important problem, so China’s currently proposed region coordination is the integration of urban and rural policy, with the hope that through a series of measures, the duality gap between urban and rural areas will be reduced. However, China’s urban and rural problem is obviously not as simple as the difference between the urban and rural economy, and it cannot be completely solved simply by balancing them. The push–pull theory, as one of the most widely used theories on the dynamic mechanism of the urbanization process in the current domestic research, have already gained consensus, but there is still major controversy over what the push and pull of China’s urbanization are. Ning and Zhou think that the current main reason for China’s urbanization has changed [33]. Liu believes that the transformation of industrial structure is the driving mechanism of urbanization, the flow and agglomeration of economic factors are the realization mechanism of urbanization, and institutional arrangements and changes are the push and blocking mechanisms of urbanization [34]. Gu believes that the driving mechanisms of urbanization in China are the pluralism, imbalance, and instability of the main governing body [14]. Throughout development after China’s reform and opening up, with the globalization trend, China has become an important part of the world system. To some extent, it is a kind of interdependent relationship, but different from the one advocated by dependency theory, which is based on exploitation and utilization. The current international situation has changed dramatically, and how to make the internal economy the principal component of the dual economic strategy has become the main theme of research.

Looking at these urbanization theories to explain their convergence from the perspective of an individual or the whole country, urbanization of represents both the transfer of the population and the transformation of identity. However, although the theories and practices are more mature after decades of development, they cannot explain China’s national conditions regarding the phenomenon and characteristics of the urbanization of the family.

4. Characteristics and Patterns of the Current Chinese Family Urbanization Process

National floating population dynamic monitoring data released by the National Health Commission of China and the relevant indicators of the Chinese population census data released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China are important reflections of the dynamic characteristics and basic scale of the current national family population migration pattern. Although the seventh Chinese Census data show that the average size of the national family decreased from 3.10 in 2010 to 2.62 in 2020 (data are available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/xfb/202105/t20210510_1817176.html, accessed on 1 September 2022), national floating population dynamic monitoring data over the past years show that China’s floating population is becoming more and more family-oriented. The proportion of the floating
population with three or more family members exceeded 50% in 2013 and reached 53.5% in 2017 (https://chinaldrk.org.cn/wjw/#/data/classify/population/yearList, accessed on 1 September 2022) (Figure 4). It can be seen that the current floating population shows a continuous expansion of the family-oriented flow trend.

Figure 4. Household size distribution of floating population.

4.1. Characteristics of Multi-Stage Migration

In real life, the process of family urbanization in China is not always completed in one step. There are many forms of family urbanization, including partial migration into cities, and return migration after entering cities. This is a common phenomenon of population urbanization in China [35]. First of all, the family in the city is the easiest to understand. Neoclassical economy theories state that farmers moving to the city is due to benefit maximization. The push and pull of both urban and rural areas make the city the best choice, but the huge cost of living in the city often prevents family members from moving to the city together, so the phenomenon of some family members moving to the city appeared. At the same time, some family members, especially the older generation who moved to the city after the return migration phenomena, also want to understand this phenomenon and are the first to speak about the decisions of farmers to move to the city. In the context of China, the decision-making unit regarding moving to the city is often not an individual nor the so-called Western nuclear family, but contains “ancestors-descendants” in the traditional sense of family. Therefore, moving to the city does not have to be completed in a generation, it can be achieved from generation to generation using the relay method [36].

Specifically, in the analysis of the three generations of the visited villager family in Chebu Town (Figure 5), the first generation of farmers often presents the obvious nature of “migrant workers”. When they are young migrant workers, they will choose to return home for the Spring Festival and other important holidays. Within the first two generations, returning home for holidays gradually stops. The first three generations are often similar. The first generation accumulates some wealth and focuses on their children’s education. Although they cannot necessarily meet the requirements household registration and buying a house, the second generation will often choose to settle in the city to seek better education services for their children. At the same time, in order to reduce the pressure on the second generation, the first generation, having largely lost their ability for labor, will frequently go to cities to fulfill the “obligation” of bringing up and accompanying the children until the end of their basic education. To summarize, family urbanization in China is a multi-stage urbanization process with the coexistence of many phenomena, including family migration to the city, partial migration to the city, and return migration after entering the city. However, it is difficult to explain this process by relying on only the urbanization
The theory of traditional economics, and it urgently needs to be elaborated by China’s own set of explanatory frameworks.

Figure 5. Schematic diagram of multi-stage characteristics in the process of rural urbanization in Chebu Town.

4.2. Multi-Type Urbanization Model

4.2.1. Type of Education Drive

Education has been of great significance in the hearts of Chinese people since ancient times. As the old saying goes, “wish for a successful son and a successful daughter”. Ancient Chinese students hoped to achieve the ideal of becoming an official through imperial examination. The current education system has made entrance into city universities become an important means of class transition in modern society. Previous studies have shown that education level is positively correlated with the urbanization rate, and the monitoring data of the floating population also show that the proportion of the floating population with a college or university degree or above is increasing [37]. However, such studies have often only focused on the educated and have ignored the process of family urbanization brought about by education. Indeed, since the college entrance examination system was restored, children of original families have had to go to school. Settling outside of the city after graduation is the first step in the urbanization process of the individual. At the same time, due to the traditional concept of intergenerational parenting, parents in the original family will choose to help raise their grandchildren to alleviate the burden on their children. Children will also choose to bear the obligation of supporting the family in the city, finally realizing the process of family urbanization [8,38].

Education-driven family urbanization is a more common model in China at present. The data show that the gross enrollment rate of higher education in China was less than 18% in 2000, and it increased to 57.8% by 2020 (data are available at: https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%BD%A6%E5%9F%A0%95%87/1870446, accessed on 1 September 2022.) (Figure 6). Many students from low-income families stay in big cities through the opportunity of receiving higher education, realizing the transformation from rural to urban household registration. Due to their higher education, they often have more decent job opportunities in the city. Under the influence of the traditional family concept and the actual demand of raising the next generation, it has become more common for people to bring their parents to the city, and in this process, the urbanization of the whole family is realized.
4.2.2. Type of Market Demand

During the planned economy growth period, because China’s industry was not developed, there was concern that the rural population migrating to the city would put pressure on urban employment, affecting social security. In 1953, China promulgated special authorization of the Central Government of the People to discourage farmers from blindly moving from the countryside to the city. After China’s reform and opening up, the liberation of thought and the development of the market economy provided more opportunities for a large number of the rural population to move into big cities and gain a foothold in the city, due to the dual effects of their own original accumulation efforts and the market demand. At the same time, people started to think that their children would stay at home in the city and hoped to enjoy the supply of public services in the city. In this way, the urbanization of families has gradually been realized.

The market demand urbanization model has been more common since the reform and opening up, highlighting that some rural people who come to big cities to seek development opportunities often do not have good job opportunities due to their lack of education and professional skills. In addition, big cities do not provide the desired sense of home, and the Spring Festival is the only opportunity to return home to visit their relatives. Because people do not want their children to be left behind in rural areas, they often choose to bring their children to the city. However, due to their own economic conditions and the restrictions of the household registration system, the living environment of some families in the city is not optimistic, which has become an urgent problem in the urbanization process of big cities [39,40].

4.2.3. Type of Policy Change

In the process of urbanization in China, in addition to the urbanization caused by the flow of the population from rural areas to cities, another method is due to the expansion of urban land, which makes the original rural population become urban even without the flow of the population. This method is also relatively common. In December 1987, Shenzhen held the first land auction in China, which marked the first time that land became a commodity and entered the market. Land finance came into being. Under the market economy system, the urban-scale economy began to play a huge role, and the rural areas around the city gradually became urban construction land. The original residents of the land become an urban population from a statistical perspective by way of local resettlement or resettlement after demolition, and entire families naturally realized urbanization in this process [41].
The family urbanization method of policy change mainly focuses on the changes in the number of urban families due to changes to the original land use attributes from a statistical perspective. This type of urbanization is also an important method of urbanization in current metropolitan and suburban areas. It mainly focuses on public service supply in the process of urbanization and social and spatial issues in the process of demolition and resettlement [42].

5. A Framework for Analyzing the Urbanization of Chinese Families Based on “Culture–Institution”

The role of culture in urbanization has always been a blind spot in urbanization theories, and little has been mentioned in the existing literature, while “cultural ethics” and “institutional factors” are the fundamental reasons for the urbanization of Chinese families, and the cultural traditions inherited for thousands of years make the phenomenon of the “family unit” obvious in China’s urbanization process (Figure 7). We have supplemented this framework in two ways to verify the rationality of the conclusion: a summary of the literature and interviews with villagers in Chebu Town.

Figure 7. Family urbanization model map.

5.1. Cultural Ethics Lay the Ideological Foundation of Family Urbanization

5.1.1. Family-Oriented Ideology Is Deeply Rooted

Goode mentioned that one can no longer use a simple set of dependent variables to describe family. The variables used must be detailed and precise about which processes influence the family model [43], which indicates the existence of a mutual shaping mechanism of action between the micro family unit and macro social structural changes. In the field of urbanization, there have been many studies on culture, including the analysis of the preservation of ancestral temples in the process of urbanization, which is an important representation of Chinese traditional culture, and the differences in migration destinations caused by cultural origin in the process of urban–rural mobility. These are important references that explain the process of urbanization through culture [44–46]. Fei stated that “family” is an important foundation of traditional Chinese culture and the basic unit of the functioning of Chinese society [47]. Compared to Western societies, the family unit has always been a relatively stable microscopic unit of action in social evolution in traditional China, where the family in vernacular societies has a stronger influence on and richer connotation of individual behavior [48]. In the relationship-based and family-based Chinese social order and cultural tradition, urbanization usually transcends individual units and relies on various relational forms to be realized, such as geo-groups, kinship circles, families, etc. [49]. For Chinese people, the family is not only a property and political
unit but also a value unit, and the family is the foundation of Chinese people’s well-being. In traditional society, there are “Gathering clans and living together, raising clans and moving” [50]. In recent years, most scholars have found that the rise of individualistic discourse and the success of married life have not caused a fundamental impact on Chinese “familyism” but only changed its current form of existence [51]. In addition, in our interview with the villagers in Chebu Town, we found that they would rather move to the city to live together. All these show that Chinese “family urbanization” as a special urbanization unit is rooted in Chinese culture.

5.1.2. Intergenerational Parenting Requires the Involvement of the Family as the Main Agent

Fei summarized the intergenerational relationships between Chinese and Western families as a “feedback model” and a “succession model” [49,50,52]. The feedback model and the intergenerational obligations of family support and maintenance are particularly prevalent in Chinese rural families. In traditional Chinese families, the older generation has the responsibility of establishing a family for the next generation, and in the process of rural–urban migration, due to the change in residence and lifestyle, the method of support has changed to accumulate resources for the next generation to allow them to purchase property in the city, help them raise their children, etc., in order to compensate for the “innate deficiency” of the generation of the rural–urban gap. It is in this context that progressive urbanization with intergenerational support allows the family to participate as a whole [53,54]. In our interviews with villagers in Chebu Town, we also found that basically all children hoped their parents could come to the city to help raise the next generation. Compared to developed countries, such as Western Europe and the United States, urbanization still requires the support of the family for its stable and orderly realization [55], while compared to developing countries, such as Latin America, China’s farmer urbanization is more flexible and adaptable by virtue of the private rural–urban relationship, which is a special feature of China’s urbanization.

5.2. Institutional Factors Cause Household Urbanization to Happen in Multiple Stages

5.2.1. Land System Increases the Potential for Family Separation

The family contract responsibility system for rural land puts the right to use, contract, and transfer the land firmly in the hands of the farmers themselves, so that the “public power” of the state is less effective in the “private sphere” of the farmers, and the farmers have more discretionary power over their economic interests [56]. Only when the expected benefits are much greater than the economic benefits in the countryside will the internal labor resource allocation coordination within the family encourage moving the family as a whole to realize the urbanization process. Otherwise, some elderly people will choose to hold off on migration in order to avoid burdening their children under the pressure of the competitive urban environment [57].

In addition, the social security of the rural land system is also an important reason for the dispersion of families in the urbanization process. Among them, Professor He’s statement that “rural land is a reservoir for peasants and a buffer for peasants’ failure to move to the city” has become a hot topic. In other words, from the perspective of family urbanization, we understand that on the one hand, rural land property rights are different and difficult to trade [58]. On the other hand, according to our Chebu survey, some people lack a sense of belonging in the city, and their land has become the “root” of their hearts, so they visit home often. At the same time, some members choose to stay in the countryside because of the land system and hometown complex.

5.2.2. Household Registration System Reduces Opportunities for Families to Settle

The household registration system in China is a unique product of the current rural–urban dual system. Unlike other countries, the household registration system in China not only serves the purpose of statistics and the identification of personal information,
but it also is an important means of social management by the state [59]. In our interview with villagers in Chebu Town, we also found that the differences between urban and rural household registration systems have led to difficulties in settling down, especially in large cities such as North Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The problem of children’s schooling is especially obvious; rural families with insufficient education and income levels do not reasonably enjoy the same quality of services as urban residents in cities due to household registration restrictions, and the social recognition brought by temporary residence permits is not sufficient to compensate for the lack of relevant welfare benefits, coupled with high urban housing prices that reduce the possibility for rural families to settle permanently in the city [60].

The household registration system has hindered the process of urbanization of rural families, and the current reforms of household registration systems around the world mostly adopt a multi-year social security or points system, which can only be met by some highly qualified people or people in key industries [61]. This makes it even more difficult to settle in the city. On the one hand, this means that the urbanization of the population will never match the urbanization of the household registration system, and on the other hand, it is difficult to reflect the high quality of urbanization because it fails to meet the diverse needs of urbanized families [62].

6. Conclusions and Reflections: Urban and Rural Planning in the Era of Family Urbanization Units

The phenomenon of family urbanization in China has attracted great attention in recent years. In response to the lack of theoretical explanations for family urbanization, this study proposes a “culture–institution”-based analytical framework through literature analysis, data statistics, field survey, induction, and deduction, in which the cultural and ethical concepts of family orientation and intergenerational upbringing are the ideological basis of family urbanization. In this process, China’s household registration system and land system have resulted in the coexistence of multiple stages of urbanization, such as a family moving to the city, moving to the city in stages, and returning to the city after moving to the city, which together constitute the explanatory mechanisms of urbanization of Chinese families.

The current research on urbanization in China has mostly focused on the urbanization mechanism at the national level but neglected urbanization at the household level. While traditional population urbanization refers to individual migration or identity change, family urbanization changes the subject of this process from the “individual” to the “household” [36]. The definition of population urbanization has been structurally changed because it is a change from the “individual” to the “family”. Therefore, from the perspective of urban and rural planning as an important public policy attribute, the level of family urbanization may be an important criterion for reflecting the quality of social urbanization in the top-level structure of urbanization. Secondly, the allocation of public service space for the large-scale urban migrant population should consider the family as the basic allocation unit and afford more public space to the collective family. Finally, the phenomenon of China’s large migrant population is an important field of sociological and economic research, which has led to many classical theoretical systems. As an important symptom of China’s urbanization process, it is hoped that a theoretical system of urbanization with Chinese local characteristics can be explored on this basis to guide the second half of China’s urbanization. Of course, since the purpose of this study was to build a macro-theoretical framework for China’s family urbanization, there is a lack of sufficient data to support the specific micro-analysis. This is the direction that this research needs to follow in the future, along with an in-depth analysis based on this research framework, which is also an important contribution of this study.
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