

# Problems and possibilities in Shanghai's satellite towns

**EDITOR'S NOTE:**

To ease crowding and congestion in the central city, Shanghai has built several satellite towns in its suburbs. Have they improved the lives of residents? What are the trade-offs? Why are some new towns "ghost towns"?

Dutch urban designer Harry den Hartog, an authority on Shanghai's urban planning history, spoke to Shanghai Daily opinion writer Ni Tao on October 13 about these issues. This is the first part of the interview.

**Q:** You wrote in your book "Shanghai New Towns — Searching for community and identity in a sprawling metropolis" that Shanghai's rehousing of millions in the suburbs has eased the congestion in the central city. What problems have arisen?

**A:** First of all, this development is a decentralization model.

To protect the countryside, urban planners had made circles to limit the expansion of the city. But the city's boundaries haven't ended within the circles. The circles grow together into one big city. So finally the countryside is not protected since it's developed into one big urban field. In the little countryside that is left you can see a lot of infrastructure. So the protection of the countryside doesn't work as people have planned. That's one problem.

Another problem is speculation.

The majority of houses, especially houses in the new towns, are designed by foreign experts and sell for high prices. But many of these houses are used for speculation.

People buy a second or third house. People from Wenzhou and other cities just buy a house in Shanghai for speculation and they are not going to live there.

So you'll see many empty houses if you go to the new towns. Sometimes you see 80 percent of the houses there are empty. The vacancy rate is high. So they are a success in commercial terms but are not very practical.

**Q:** Many new towns' amenities and transport are unsatisfactory. Does this fact contradict officials' claims that they narrow the divide between urban and rural lifestyles?

**A:** Many residents in new towns are relocated farmers. They have retained their lifestyle, for instance, washing laundry or vegetables in the river and growing vegetables in public greenery.

There is a lot of communication. They meet and greet neighbors in the street.

I've spoken to many of them. They told me they are happy to own their own kitchens and the quality of houses is better. But often they complain they have to walk a long way to the supermarket and the goods on offer there are very expensive.

There are, of course, people who used to live in run-down houses in the central city and were unsatisfied with life after they were relocated to new towns.

I'll give an example about two families. They used to live in Putuo District and were relocated in Jiading District.

As compensation for relocation they were given two houses in a high-rise. The quality of life has improved because they now have their own bathroom and also the houses are bigger.

But the family has to go to work every day and the workplace is still in Putuo. There's no subway. The father has to go there by motorcycle. The trip takes one and half an hours. There are also traffic jams.

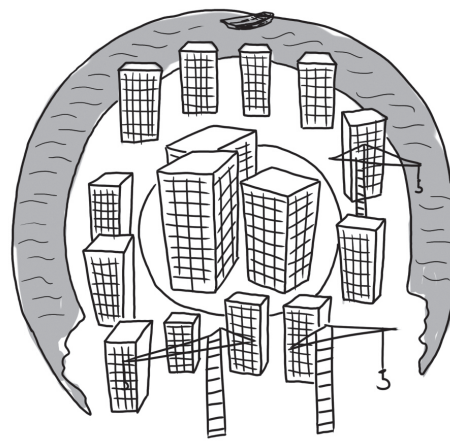
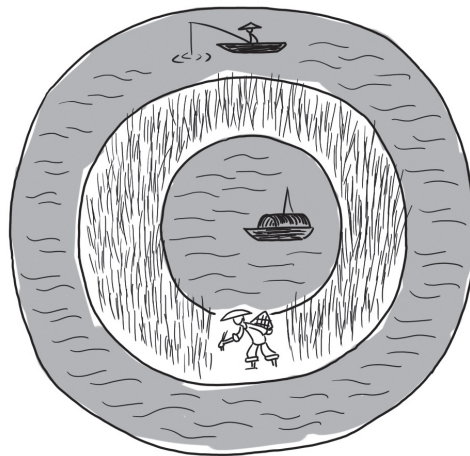


Illustration by Zhou Tao/Shanghai Daily

So in general, life for relocated residents in new towns is quite good but living expenses there are also quite higher.

In old towns people can shop in small and cheaper grocery stores.

**Q:** You wrote that Shanghai is trying to strike a balance between a state-planned urban planning model and a market-oriented model. Has it succeeded?

**A:** Not yet I think, because as I said, there was a lot of speculation in the last 10 years. So many of the houses are chosen for earning quick money, not for living.

Since the adoption of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), the government is shifting to social housing as there is a big need for cheap houses.

But we still have to find a way to solve the problem of speculation, to prevent the similar collapse of bubbles in property prices as in the US, as well as to make those houses affordable and inhabitable.

And urban design cannot be left totally to the market, there must be some government control. The government has to keep an eye on the process so that everything will go in the right direction.

As for the quality of the houses in new towns, I've seen cracks in walls, leaks and other problems, but I also see these problems in expensive houses sometimes.

So it's not just a good quality or bad quality issue. Often the quality of the houses in new towns is indeed a problem.

For instance the property on the cover of my book. It may look quite good at first sight but if we go inside, we'll find there isn't much maintenance.

The elevator is roughly used and nobody cleans it. And the buildings' walls used to be white. But people parked their bikes close to them. After one year, the walls were full of dirt and were turned gray or almost black. So maintenance leaves much to be desired.



Harry den Hartog

“To protect the countryside urban planners have made circles to limit the urban sprawl. But the city's boundaries haven't ended within the circles.”

## Better pay may reduce poaching of Metro staff

**Dong Zhen**

EACH year, Shanghai's Metro loses half, more than 3,000, of its experienced technical personnel to subway operators in other cities or manufacturers in related industries, who double their pay.

Management of the rapidly expanding city-owned Metro management said last week that core positions vulnerable to poaching and high turnover include experienced drivers, dispatchers and technicians — the heart of smooth and safe operations.

As soon as they get the technical expertise and a few years of experience to become a dispatcher, they are snapped up and move on. This means that few remaining technical staff are older than 30 years.

Shanghai has China's largest and most developed Metro system and the network has boomed in the recent decade as the city sought to build infrastructure for the showcase Shanghai World Expo, and it's still going full speed ahead. But in terms of salaries, including for core technical

workers, Shanghai Metro workers are at the bottom, Metro management officials told Shanghai Daily.

Yin Wei, an official of the Metro Operation Co, said a local Metro dispatcher, with two to three years' job experience, earns 3,000 (US\$470) to 4,000 yuan (US\$627) each month. A daily maintenance technician earns around the same.

“However, salaries for the same positions offered by Metro operators in some secondary cities or Metro-related manufacturing or engineering companies are at least double what we are able to pay,” Yin said.

The system employs 7,000-8,000 skilled people, including dispatchers, controllers, drivers, various kinds of engineers, technicians and technical support staff. Around half of those positions must be filled with new people each year; turnover is greatest among dispatchers and controllers, whose skills are needed in other systems, including railways.

This turnover and lack of retention of the key people has a clear impact on safety for the system that is known

both for its frequently minor glitches and major troubles.

The latest major accident occurred on September 27 in a pile up on Line 10 that sent 295 passengers to the hospital. No one was killed. The public was outraged. At the time of the crash, the service was operated at limited speed with manual dispatch controls following an electrical blackout that damaged the signaling system. The city government report on its investigation said a dispatcher made mistakes and gave wrong orders, which led to the crash.

**Brain drain**

Higher pay won't solve all the problems but it could help retain good staff and improve morale.

“A Metro dispatcher, who supervises Metro traffic in the control room, is supposed to be the best of all staffers and the ‘brains’ of the system,” Yin said.

It requires at least five years for a dispatcher to be well experienced and skilled but most Metro technical workers and dispatchers are on the

job for less than three years, said Zhang Lingxiang, an operations manager with the Metro company.

“Because of the intense work pressure and lower pay, some dispatchers quit the profession or leave to join services in other cities such as Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shenzhen soon after they started to get experienced,” Zhang explained.

Many secondary cities in China are starting to develop Metro services and are eager to hire experienced Metro workers. Shanghai Metro, which has a well-developed staff training system, accordingly becomes a main source for poached candidates.

“Some technicians are also attracted by the related engineering industry because pay is much higher,” said official Yin Wei.

In addition to dispatchers and drivers, technicians are critical because they oversee daily maintenance; they routinely check safety and other systems, carry out tests and repair trains after a day's service when they return to maintenance depots.

In the case of the September 27 crash, Metro officials said that after a long period of stalled traffic, an inexperienced dispatcher totally forgot there was not just one, but two trains on the key segment of track.

Metro managers said the accident “was a wake-up call” for them to improve training of dispatchers to make them better prepared for what they called “rare” emergencies.

Officials said they would order more emergency drills that simulate various emergencies; these are intended to improve judgment and the ability to make fast, sound judgments and take fast actions to save lives.

But it is unlikely the metro company will raise salary levels to retain highly qualified workers, Yin said, adding that the system is state owned and operations are funded by the city government.

Industry insiders told Shanghai Daily a veteran railway train dispatcher in China, performing work similar to that of Metro dispatcher who manages railway traffic, is paid about 100,000 yuan a year.