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Over-Sprawl in Nanchang: The Cost Behind Prosperity

“I love this place,” Mr. Wood said, “I will consider staying here teaching for a few more years.” When I was studying in high school in China, my psychology teacher, Mr. Wood, always talked about the city, Nanchang, during the class. During the last few minutes of the class, he often brought up the discussion that Nanchang is so developed even though it is a third tier city (tier one is the highest tier and tier four is the lowest tier, third tier city means the city is below average development but is growing rapidly) in China. Mr. Wood envied people in Nanchang who have malls across the road and a metro system covering the entire city. Without professional knowledge about city development, we just smiled and guessed that the city structure in China is different from in the United States. The development in Nanchang is so fast that we did not realize the great change happening to our city and the invisible cost of such city sprawling behind the prosperity until I knew about the phrase “urban sprawl.”

The definition of urban sprawl is that the population in the central city is moving to low-density areas. As the third largest city in central China and also the capital of Jiangxi province and being different from the urban sprawl, Nanchang is experiencing an over-sprawl, causing the center of the urban area to transfer to a new district. The urban area of Nanchang is located at the center of the entire city, and the surroundings are suburbs, consisting of many other

small counties and rural areas. Before the sprawl, the urban district is at the east of the Ganjiang River, one of many branches of Yangtze River. The city development accelerates the sprawling

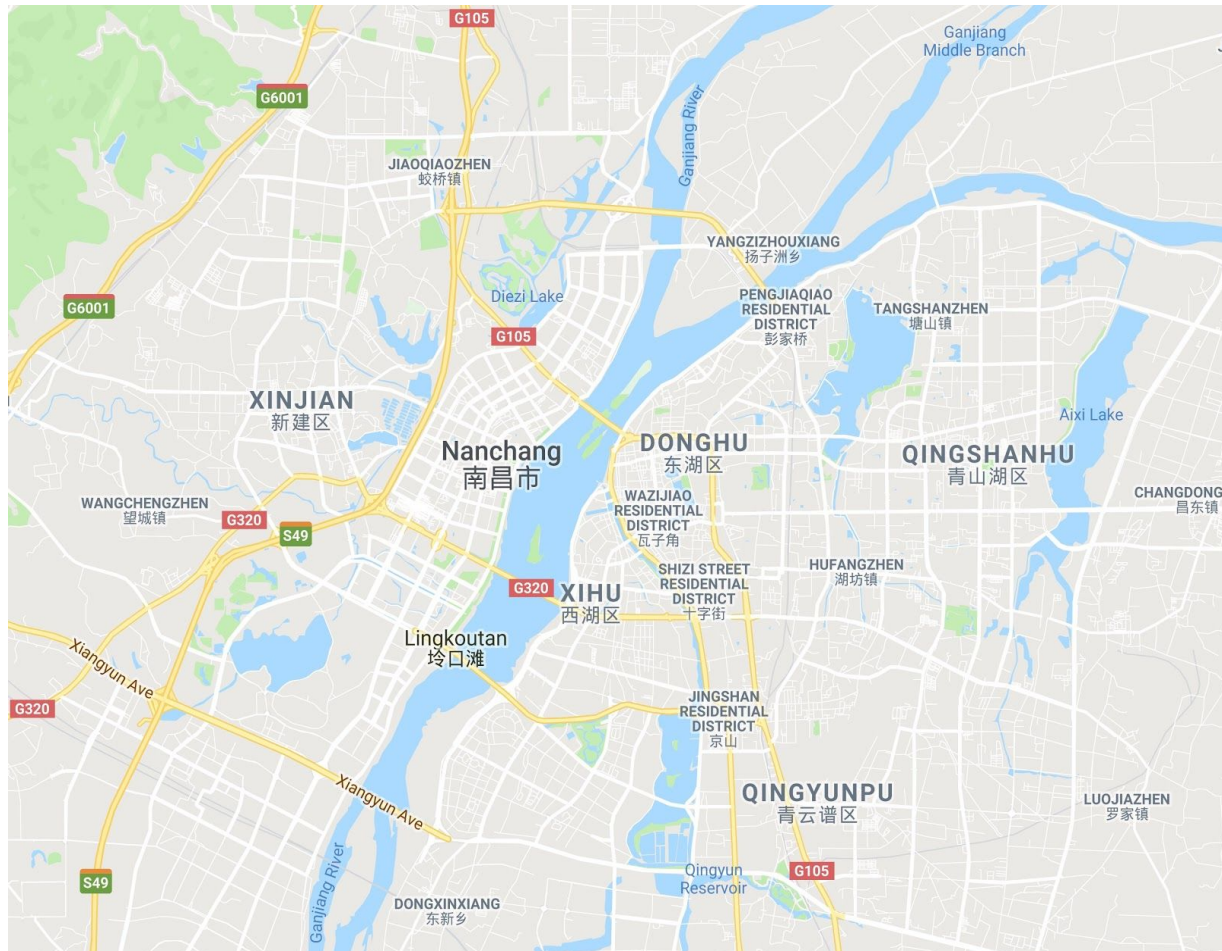


Fig. 1: The area on the right of the Ganjiang River is the urban area of Nanchang in the map. The area consisting of dense grid lines in the center of the figure and at the left of the Ganjiang River is Honggutan.

process and the population is moving to the Honggutan district across the river. Being different from urban sprawl, the over-sprawl is defined as the continuing development of the sprawled district in this paper. The sprawl did not stop after the urbanization of Honggutan, which became the “new center” of the city due to the over-sprawl. The cost caused by over-sprawl behind the

prosperity of Honggutan is noteworthy, including the increasing sense of distance between people, an old feeble urban area, and wrong understanding of the multicentric city.

Honggutan (meaning “the land with red soil” in Chinese) is a new urban district located at the west of downtown Nanchang. In the 1990s, Honggutan was mostly suburbs with a few neighborhoods where people lived off the farmland. Around the year 2002, some of the government facilities and enterprises decided to move their base to Honggutan. They did so because the city is becoming more and more crowded, which slows their efficiency and increases their commuting time. The other reason is that the government has the responsibility to provide retired workers who used to work for the government with housing as their special privilege, so a part of the original government was transformed into residential areas. After that, more and more companies moved to Honggutan due to the same reason -- the city is too crowded for commuting.

The crowded urban area did not only made the government and enterprises move their bases but also stimulated the urban sprawl. As Jonathan Rose describes in the chapter “Sprawl and Its Discontents” in his book *The Well-Tempered City*, which introduces the urban sprawl of American suburbs, the automobile became the mainstream transportation tool in Modern Alexandria (Egypt’s second largest city) around the 1950s and heavy traffic and little parking area are now two problems because the city was not designed for today’s automobiles (119). The city not designed for cars means that it has no highways, not many parking lots, and narrow roads and streets; however, the automobile is an inevitable trend of commuting which brings much less travel time and convenience of carrying capacity. When these two factors come

together, it will result in frequent traffic jams, road accidents, illegal parking, and other related problems. Nanchang, a city built after 1949, which is almost the same time as Modern Alexandria, encountered the same problem. In Nanchang, the residential areas and public areas are mixed, so the population density is relatively high before the sprawl. Neighborhoods are built close to each other, and not all of them had interconnected roads. Most of the roads in Nanchang were two-lane, which resulted in low driver speed. With the need for faster traveling, people whose companies are in Honggutan started to move to Honggutan and live there. Otherwise, it would usually take them more than two hours to get home due to the traffic jam.

With the urban area's sprawl, Honggutan was gradually becoming a part of urban areas of Nanchang. The process of sprawling lasted for about fifteen years, and more people are moving to live in Honggutan either because the old urban district is crowded or a certain mall, school, or company moved there. Also, the real estate company saw the opportunity of investment and offered citizens with more housing in Honggutan. With more crowds moving to Honggutan, the business followed. Wanda Plaza is a good example of a commercial factor. The Wanda Plaza is located at the center of the Honggutan district, integrating entertainment, food, shopping, finance, and hotel. The first three floors consist of diverse stores, mostly clothing shops, cosmetics shops, and luxury stores, with the maximum flow. The fourth floor has restaurants, including American, Chinese, Korean restaurants, and many more local restaurants. On weekends, people from both the Honggutan district and the old urban areas will come and wait in a long line at every front door. The fifth floor has the Wanda Cinema, a top cinema in China. The first and second floor underground is a supermarket, similar to Safeway but with much more

diverse goods, surrounded by a parking lot with 1250 parking spots. On the back of the mall, a street called “Golden Street” with hundreds of restaurants and stores selling authentic Chinese food and snacks, milk tea, and several bars where adults gather every night. Three office buildings containing many tech and financial companies were built on top of the

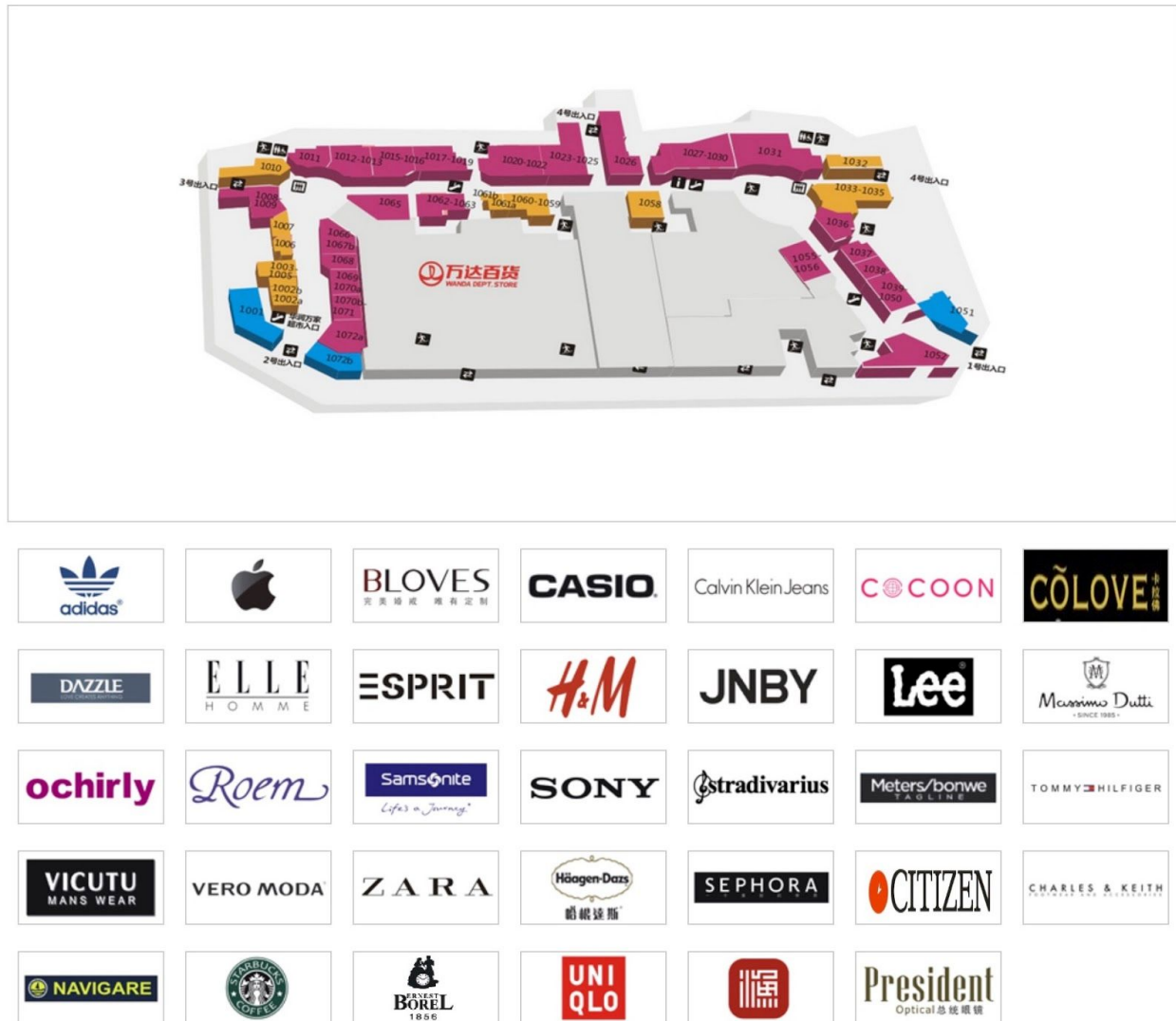


Fig. 2: A map of the first floor (other floors look similar) of Wana Plaza and its representative stores.

mall. All these helped increase tens of thousands of employment position in the new district every year and caused the appreciation of the land and real estate in the surrounding area. People

in the old district came and invested; some others moved here for the jobs. A chain reaction was working behind the sprawling, consisting of the influence of crowded urban area, housing, and business. None of them could stimulate the urban sprawl alone. The current Honggutan combines business, trade, administration, information, culture, housing, becoming the central business district in Nanchang. At this stage, the urban sprawl became the over-sprawl.

The “sense of distance” problem already existed among citizen of Nanchang at this stage, after more than a decade of urban sprawl. When I was in primary school, I used to live with my parents and grandparents in a big apartment in a neighborhood called Hengmao located near Bayi Square, located at the right center of the city. Bayi Square is the biggest square in Nanchang, being built to memorize revolutionaries sacrificed in the war. The square was surrounded by malls like Walmart and some office buildings, and our neighborhood is ten-minute-walk away from the square. My parents and I lived with my grandparents since my primary school is close, but after middle school, even I moved to Honggutan because my parents did not want me to spend hours on the way to my high school and my father’s company is in Honggutan, too. My grandparents still lived in the apartment because they were familiar with the geographic environment and the people there. After that, my parents and I only went back to Hengmao once per two weeks. The time on the road was too long, plus my father was always busy and I have the heavy study. Because of the over-sprawl, we are abandoning the Chinese tradition (live with your family or visit them frequently) in exchange for convenience. Gradually, some of my grandparents’ old colleagues moved to Honggutan because they need to be taken

care of. The city sprawled, and the cost of a more prosperous suburb is the increasing sense of distance between family and family.

Under the influence of the over-sprawl, the old urban areas are weaker. Since the suburb of Nanchang, Honggutan, is no longer a suburb now, the center of the city shifted because it has bigger malls, higher-quality housing, fewer traffic roads, and more crowds, whereas most part of the old urban areas still remains the same, which results in a kind of “underdevelopment” compared to the new. Rose describes the importance of the center of cities and suburbs as follows:

Weak urban centers are less capable of driving regional growth. Cities and their suburbs form a deeply independent system; their ecologies, economies, and social systems are all part of a co-evolving whole. And just as regions need a strong, connected center or centers, they also need healthy suburbs. (124)

The urban center is supposed to be the heart of a city and a place full of energy, even if the city is sprawled. Neither the prosperity in the city nor in the suburb can represent the prosperity of the whole if they are unbalanced. The city and its sprawling part, the suburb, are like brothers who share their people, environment, and society; both of them must grow together. In this way, they stay healthy. The situation of Nanchang cannot be defined as healthy because the city and suburbs are not “evolving” together since the focus of the central city is shifted to Honggutan, leaving the old urban district with old malls, old parks, and “old” people. As for Honggutan, we cannot define it as “healthy” because it is an over-sprawled suburb, which “took the place” of the old urban center; however, the true problem is not which center became more popular of the city,

but rather how such multicentric system will develop in the future. In Rose's text, he introduces the problem of a multicentric city as follows:

Most of the world's rapidly developing cities are now multicentric, with several "downtowns." The problem with much twentieth-century suburban zoning is that it doesn't encourage the formation of multiple mixed-use, mixed-income, walkable town centers -- the result is traffic-producing, boring, environmentally destructive sprawl. (125)

A multicentric city still emphasizes the idea of "mixed," which is back to the topic discussed above, the "co-evolving whole." Without mixed-use, the functionality of a city is not fully defined, which can cause a meaningless sprawl since the sprawled suburb is wasted; without mixed-income, the problem of the income gap will come and it will form other problems like income segregation; without a walkable town center, the city has no soul because how can a city be defined as a city if no people are walking on the sidewalk? The old urban center in Nanchang no longer has mixed-income because with more and more companies are moving to Honggutan, high-paying jobs are moving too due to the effect and attraction from a central business district. The result of the old urban district and Honggutan without evolving together will be that the development of one of them falling behind, and problems will follow because of such unbalance. More and more people may want to move to Honggutan because it has all new basic facilities, and the people who already moved here will never go back to a place with everything less developed. Gradually, Honggutan may be overpopulated since it is not a city at the beginning,

but a suburb; even if the level of development of a suburb is like a city, its living space is so limited.

When people are enjoying the prosperity of Honggutan, we should sit down and really think about the gain and losses of the over-sprawl. Obviously, the over-sprawl gave us a city-like suburb, offering us more opportunity, more entertainment, and surely more space, but the cost behind these materialistic factors is what we should rethink profoundly. Since the over-sprawl already made Nanchang a different city, we as citizens must come up with new strategies to protect our city from forming more sense of distance, such as building more public transportation to reduce the travel time and decrease urban traffic pressure; the over-sprawl need to stop because we have to make sure both urban district and Honggutan are developing at the same pace, and implement a new city plan to fit multicentric city. These are intangible things in every day's city life, but they are also what makes city life meaningful.

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