

A Retrospect on the Second Decade of the 21st Century *

by

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In the tense atmosphere of prevention and treatment of new coronavirus pneumonia (commonly known as "Wuhan pneumonia") in the world and especially in China, the hour hand turned not only around the New Year's Day of 2020, but also passed the Spring Festival of 2020! Now, regardless of the Gregorian or the traditional Chinese calendar, the solar or the lunar calendar, we are already in 2020 and in the 2020s. One fifth of the twenty-first century has passed, and the twenty-first century is no longer a "new" century.

Exactly ten years ago, I wrote a short article called "A Retrospect on the First Decade of the New Century", which gave a brief review of the first decade of this century and a much briefer outlook for the second one. Today, ten years later, I am feeling to be obligated to write another short retrospect to review the second decade of this century that just completed.

Let's start with the outlooks for this decade in my article of ten years ago. In that article, I said: "No matter what will happen in the second decade of the 21st century, the trend of slowing population growth, the process of de-agriculturalization and the China problem, all of which took place in the first decade, will continue and there will also be less poverty all over the world. At the same time, I pray that the world will see less warfare, less pollution, less autocracies and less injustice today in ten years."

With regard to population issues, the world has not only continued but strengthened the trend of slowing population growth in the past decade. The annual growth rate of the world population once fell from 1.33% in 1999 to 1.23% in 2009, a decrease of 0.1 percentage point. But in the past decade, the decline in the rate must have exceeded 0.2 percentage points. The world population growth rate in 2019 should be slightly higher than 1.00%. The US Census Bureau even predicts that it should reach the iconic 1% in the first half of the year 2020. The most immediate cause of the slowdown in world population growth was the decline in world's female fertility. The world's female fertility rate has continued to decline from the peak of 5.1% in the mid-1960s, and it should still be higher than 2.4% at the present. However, it will continue to decline to 2.1% (the so-called population replacement rate) at which there will be no population growth anymore. Of course, even if the world population stops growing, the world population may still be excessive. However,

compared with several other dangers that threaten humanity, the problem of "population explosion" or overpopulation should no longer be the focus of the next decade in any case.

In the past decade, the world's agricultural labor forces were still moving to the non-agricultural sectors. When agricultural labor transfer was particularly prominent in China in the first decade of this century, the largest of this should have occurred in the Southeast Asia and South Asia. Accompanied by the rapid transfer of agricultural labor, these regions have increased their shares in the world manufacturing and world economy. In general, the proportion of the world's agricultural labor force to the total labor force, that is, the agricultural share of labor should be slightly lower than one-third in 2009. By 2019, this share should have dropped to about one-quarter. Therefore, if measured by the agricultural share of labor, three quarters of the world's agricultural labor should have transferred into non-agricultural activities, or the so-called de-agriculturalization process has been completed its bulk. Therefore, like the population problem, the transfer of agricultural labor is no longer among the most important issues in the world's economic and social changes in the new decade and beyond. There is no doubt that de-agriculturalization will continue, but in terms of completing this historical process, mankind has no longer faced any major difficulties.

In contrast to population growth and de-agriculturalization, the China problem, which my 2010 article listed as one of the three major problems which would continue in the 2010s, did not lose in significance, but became more acute and more important in the past decade. Ten years ago, my article raised the problem of China from the perspective of global warming. At that time, China had become the country with the largest carbon emissions in the world. Hence, without China's cooperation, any international agreements on carbon emissions would have no real meaning. It was at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference that China firmly opposed any proposals for verifiable targets of carbon emission reduction. However, ten years later, China problem has expanded from the field of environmental protection that time to not only the world economic and technological fields, but also the international political and military ones, and even rose to one of the most important problems facing humanity in the 21st century. In a sense, we can even say that the changes in the world during the past decade are particularly manifested in the changes of relationship between China and the rest world.

In terms of the world economy, the most commonly used keyword of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank was "rebalancing" of international trade ten years ago. At that time, the proportion of the world trade surpluses and deficits of all countries to the world's total production reached a record height and the world economy was seriously unbalanced. The world financial and economic crisis in 2008 was closely related to the imbalance of world trade. Therefore, the focus of the world's attention was to balance again. Today, ten years later, the proportion has dropped by half, and "rebalance" is no longer a hot word. It is replaced by "uncertainty". Both rebalancing and uncertainty are related to the trade between China and the United States. The imbalance of world trade ten years ago

was most prominently manifested in the Sino-US trade imbalance. This imbalance ultimately led to the US-China trade conflict that broke out in 2018. On the one hand, this conflict has helped rebalance Sino-US trade and world trade, on the other hand, it has greatly exacerbated the instability of Sino-US trade and world trade. Ten years ago, despite the imbalances, no one thought of rebalancing through a “shock therapy” or a trade war. Therefore, scholars and businessmen had relatively certain expectations of “self-righteousness” in the prospects of world trade and economy in the 2010s. Today, ten years later, although there is more balance, no one dares to predict with certainty what will happen in the next decade or even only in five years: All that can be expected is the uncertainty of the future; nothing else can be expected.

If the terrorist attacks on a passenger plane during the Christmas holiday 2009 and the armed conflicts in Iraq at the end of 2019 are used as signs, then international politics can be marked by terrorism in the past decade. Coupled with the Syrian civil war that broke out in 2011 and continues to this day, and the rise and fall of the officially named “Islamic State” in 2014, terrorism may be regarded as an important feature of this decade. However, compared with the first decade of this century, terrorism has ebbed. In the contrast, China's positioning has become the central issue of international politics. Ten years ago, few people realized that China's international positioning was a problem. At that time, although China first got out of the 2008 economic crisis and became the second largest economy in the world, although some scholars within and outside China began to advocate the "China road" or "Chinese model", there seemed to be a general consensus that China would, through its reform and opening up, integrate into the world economic and political systems and the framework of regulations of the world affairs. Today, ten years later, this consensus broke completely. There were many events that led to break the consensus, such as that China abolished the presidential term limits through amending its constitution in 2018 and the annual tonnage of warships newly built by China in recent years continuously exceeded the sum of that by all other countries in the world together, and so on. The renewed focus of the United States on itself means that the United States no longer believes in the stability of the world system functioning since the mid-20th century. In this way, with 2018 as a symbol, the two strongest countries in the world, China and the United States, formally and openly changed from a friend to an opponent relationship. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization subsequently officially announced East Asia as its area of concern. A new international political pattern has been formally formed. In my opinion, it is this international political change of the past decade that will have the greatest impact on the coming decades. In my article ten years ago, I said: "Just as the German question was brought to the world in the first decade of the 20th century, the Chinese question was brought to the world of the first decade in the 21st century. What position China should take among all countries of the world will be a question which is difficult to be solved but forced to be solved by China and the whole mankind in the 21st century." The second decade of the 21st century highlighted the China problem to the world's public, turning it into a clear, that is, no more blurry, question the mankind has to confront inevitably, that is,

no more avoidably.

Regarding the novel coronavirus pneumonia, which is an infectious disease that is spreading over the whole world at the present, we find that the world has experienced many major infectious diseases just in the past decade. In 2009, the pandemic of influenza that began in Mexico spread to 74 countries in the world. In 2012, the Middle East respiratory syndrome broke out in Saudi Arabia, and the mortality rate of the patients reached more than one third. The Ebola and Zika outbreaks in West Africa and South America in 2014 and 2016, respectively, also caused an international public health emergency. The novel coronavirus pneumonia, which was first discovered in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, has already spread to more than 60 countries at this moment. The spread of viruses between animals and humans has a very long history, and it caused great losses to humans many times in the human history. However, since at least the middle of the 20th century, mankind has escaped the serious threat of the kind of plague. Animal-to-human virus transmission cannot be avoided, nor can the plague. Yet mankind has realized that the plague is neither a mysterious punishment from the heaven, nor can it be controlled by prayers and folk remedies. The plague is just a natural phenomenon. It can be understood and controlled by humans through science. Therefore, mankind has shifted the hope of preventing and treating the plague from praying for heaven and remedies to science, although science is still far from fully understanding the plague. At the same time, mankind has become to believe that the large-scale epidemic of the plague can be prevented. The horror of the plague is not its occurrence (which is inevitable), but its large-scale epidemic and pandemic. However, there should be in this world no plague which will widespread on a large scale, as long as the social systems are appropriate. Therefore, although the world has experienced many plagues in the last decade, they were basically controlled within a certain small range and the numbers of both illnesses and deaths were also controlled at a certain low level in comparison with the historical plagues. I sincerely hope that the novel coronavirus infections currently occurring will also be controlled to a small extent and the casualty it will make be controlled at a low level.

The major events that occurred in the world in the past ten years are far more than population growth, de-agriculturalization and changes in China's position, and the plague. To my knowledge which is doubtlessly limited, there are in these ten years at least five events worth mentioning. The first event is related to women (and of course men). First, the "#MeToo" movement against bullying women has dominated the world news in recent years. For the first time in this movement, women who were bullied or "sexually assaulted" came forward on a large scale to disclose their grievances. As we all know, the relationship between the sexes is an important indicator of the degree of civilization of human beings away from the beast, and in most countries of the world, sexual assault on women is still a common phenomenon. Therefore, "#MeToo" should continue to get public attentions in the coming years. On the other hand, women may account for more than half of the workforce for the first time in the United States where the comprehensive level of social

development is at the forefront of the world. We know that the proportion of women among college students began to exceed 50 percent around forty years ago. The proportion of women among the two types of master's and doctoral degree holders has also exceeded this percentage in many countries already. Today, the proportion of women in the labor force is rapidly increasing and even starting to exceed one-half. Men as the main body of the social labor forces should be a general phenomenon in the history of mankind. If this phenomenon is started to be broken now, then the gender relations, reproductive and reproduction modes, family and social structure of the mankind should all undergo major changes in the future.

The second noteworthy incident is also related to the United States. It is both the victory of the strike of the General Motors workers and the faster wage increase for the bottom workers in the United States. Both are new phenomena for half a century. Nobel Prize-winning economist Kuznets once proposed the "Kuznets curve" about income distribution in the 1950s, that is, the degree of income inequality rises first and then declines after the start of de-agriculturalization. However, the level of income inequality in developed countries has risen again from the 1970s. Also from the 1970s, large-scale social movements and workers' movements began to retreat (The large placards of "The working class leads everything" also disappeared from all over China at the end of the 1970s). Since then, the world's de-agriculturalization has accelerated. The combination of the capital from the developed countries and the agricultural labor force from less developed ones has created a miracle of the rapid growth of the world economy in the past nearly 40 years. This combination has significantly reduced income inequality worldwide, while seriously aggravating income inequality within all countries, and greatly weakened the negotiation capabilities of the original non-agricultural labor force in both developed and less developed countries. Now in the big context of the deceleration of the world's de-agriculturalization and the deceleration of the world's population and labor force, the complementary relationships between labor and capital will change in the direction of favoring the former when most of the world's labor forces has joined the capitalist production system, Therefore, in the next ten years and longer, the labor forces that has transferred from agriculture to non-agricultural occupations will strive for their normal status in the capitalist production system in less developed countries, while the capital and labor relations will be re-transformed into a period of relative labor shortages with wages for ordinary workers rising faster. In this regard, we may foresee that social movements will enter a new stage throughout the world, and the level of income inequality within countries will also decline.

The third important event is related to the capitalist production system mentioned above. It is in the past ten years that the interest rate began to become negative. This may be the first phenomenon of negative interest rates that occurs since humans invented the loan relationships. The negative interest rate here means that the nominal rate is negative. The real interest rate is the difference between the nominal rate and the inflation rate. During periods of high inflation that occur from time to time, the real interest rate is often negative,

but the nominal one has always been positive. However, the central banks of two important countries or economic blocs, the European Union and Japan, have implemented policies of negative interest rate since 2014 and 2016, respectively. For the first time, the deposits of commercial banks in the central banks become smaller and smaller. If the central banks' negative interest rate does not have direct effects on consumers and businesses, then, driven by the central banks' negative interest rate policy, commercial banks also began to charge interest rates on public deposits in the just completed decade. It started with a negative interest rate for large deposits. In 2019, a negative interest rate for the public deposits starting from one Euro was announced in Germany, while Denmark pioneered a negative interest rate of housing loans for ordinary consumers. It is not difficult to imagine that the third decade of this century now begins will witness the expansion of negative interest rates to the whole world and to all kinds of deposit and loans. Since the capitalist production system cannot be built on a universal and long-term negative interest rate, the negative interest rate not only marks a new stage in the history of human borrowing and lending, but also a new stage in the human production system. Therefore, the beginning decade and the following ones should witness major changes in the history of human economy and capitalism.

The fourth major event should be technological changes. Perhaps the most important technological change in the second decade of this century was the tremendous progress of artificial intelligence. In 2017, a computer equipped with artificial intelligence software and software of basic rules of the chess and the Go could, after only a few hours of "practice" in the game, not only learn to play both games from scratch, but also defeat the world's top human players. It signifies that in the clear-ruled behaviors, the computer outperforms humans through self-learning. Here is to note that a chess genius usually needs more than ten years to learn the skills while a computer using artificial intelligence can learn them within a few hours. Moreover, if the cost for human learning these skills will become higher and higher, the cost for computer learning them must be lower and lower in the future. Therefore, artificial intelligence and computer self-learning will extend automation to new areas of application and new heights. Artificial intelligence is closely related with the biological research of the human brain including the physics studies of human thinking. The combination of three areas of powerful computing capacity, biological research of the human brain and big data should be the focus of technological innovations for the decade just beginning and beyond. At the same time, the impact of such technological innovations on human beings itself and on human's social systems will also be more clearly revealed in the next decade. In fact, the combination of computing and big data has already been used by the governments of some countries for social control in the past decade. China was and is at the forefront of the world in this regard. This is also a reason why the China problem has become the world problem. Therefore, the relationship between artificial intelligence technology and social systems will also become a hot issue around the world in the next ten years while artificial intelligence becomes a hotspot for technological development.

The fifth important event that needs to be mentioned is the human exploration into space. Just in the past ten years, landing by humans on Mars suddenly became an operational and achievable idea. Although humans had launched many Martian spacecrafts, landing on Mars was at most a kind of human target or ambition until the beginning of this century. However, landing on Mars began to become a specific action plan during the last decade, and various studies on the colonization of Mars, that is, humans living on Mars for a long time, also started one by one. NASA even designed plans to land on Mars around the year of 2033. Other major countries in the world have also developed their own Mars plans. Even the relatively poor India successfully launched its Mars spacecraft in 2013. In addition, the United States successfully recovered rockets for the first time in 2015 and utilized the recovered rockets to successfully launch satellites the following year. The economic cost of human space exploration has hence been significantly reduced. We can expect that human space exploration centered on landing on Mars will become the driving force for the development of new technologies and the headline news for the world from time to time in the ten years beginning today.

Finally, as the same as before ten years, I very hope that the world will have fewer wars, less pollution, less autocracies and less injustice in the new decade of 2020s, although I do not review the progress of the world in reducing war, pollution, autocracy and injustice in the past ten years in this short retrospect. At the same time, I very pray for my Chinese compatriots and everyone in the world to be protected from the novel coronavirus and to keep themselves healthy. I also pray that I may still have energy in ten years to write a retrospective review of the third decade of the 21st century which is beginning now.

"Night Talk" No. 3, 2020, February 8, 2020

Original Chinese texts at <https://www.hujingbei.net/archives/2036>

Note to the English translation

The first two versions of this article in Chinese were not allowed to be issued in the social media of “Wechat” in China. The present one is the third version which is different from the first two versions at least on the sentence in the paragraph beginning with “If the terrorist attacks on a passenger plane”:

1st version: such as that China abolished the presidential term limits through amending its constitution.

2nd version: such as China’s amendment of its constitution

Present version: such as the change in China’s national leadership system

A screenshot of the prohibition of the first two version is attached as follows:

mp.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/home?t=home/index&token=19034290&lang=zh_CN

消息管理
用户管理
素材管理

推广
广告主
流量主
返佣商品推广

统计
用户分析
内容分析
菜单分析
消息分析
接口分析
网页分析

已群发消息

输入搜索关键词

星期六 10:46
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已修改 胡景北: 回顾二十一世纪第二个十年
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星期六 03:23
无法查看 -



胡景北: 回顾二十一世纪第三个十年

星期六 02:57
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胡景北: 回顾二十一世纪第三个十年

02月01日
发送完毕 -



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