Research Paper

A new hierarchy between urban and rural:
Is Beijing, China "new town" a new sustainable urban growth pattern?

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This work was jointly supported by the National Social Science Foundation of China Major Special Project (24ZDA048) and the National Natural Science Foundation of China General Project (72474214) of China.

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Abstract

Balanced regional growth is essential for strengthening a nation's resilience and plays a significant role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. New Towns, vital for megacities to decentralize functions and pursue sustainable development, also align with government strategic planning to meet these Goals. Since its first implementation in London, UK, the concept has evolved through distinct phases in cities such as Tokyo, Japan; Singapore; and Hong Kong, China. However, due to differences in urban scale and national cultural contexts, the concept of "New Town" in China has been redefined as "New City" in planning practices. In Beijing's 2016 master plan, the term "New Town" was adopted to establish a novel hierarchical framework positioned between "New City" and rural areas. This plan proposed creating eight New Towns at varying distances from Beijing's central district, ranging from 20km to 60km, below five "new cities" hierarchy. This study focuses on Beijing's New Towns, investigating whether they constitute a new pattern for sustainable urban growth. The research employs a multidimensional empirical framework, based on the perspective of government market interaction, combining quantitative analyses using Baidu's population big data and enterprise census data with over 50 qualitative interviews with government officials and business representatives. Findings reveal significant imbalances in the development of Beijing's New Towns. The Beijing government strictly controls the production factors, so that resources can flow to the surrounding areas 60 kilometers away from the core of the metropolitan area. most new towns easily fall into the capital's aggregation shadow, leading to industrial and population outflows. While Beijing's New Town model demonstrates diverse approaches to urban-rural hierarchies, offering global insights into redefining metropolitan-rural relationships, it remains anchored to traditional planning paradigms. To ensure long-term sustainability, the study emphasizes the need to strengthen regional coordination mechanisms and community-centric planning strategies.

Keywords

New-Town, Hierarchy, Sustainable Urban Growth, Urban-rural integration, Regional Coordination

1. Introduction: New town and regional development

Balanced regional growth is key to a country's resilience. UN SDG 11.a supports "strengthening national and regional development planning"(Berisha et al., 2022), highlighting scientific space management's role in narrowing gaps. All regions, despite size or development differences, face optimizing production factor allocation via effective systems/planning to boost inter-regional coordination and balanced high-quality growth(Alonso, 1970; Firman, 2004; Merlin, 1980; Lan Wang et al., 2010).

New towns address urban problems and improve regional relations. Derived from Ebenezer Howard's late-19th-century "garden city"(Rodwin, 1956), the 1940 Barlow Report laid early theory, and Britain's 1946 New Towns Act first legalized the concept (Wakeman, 2016) to absorb urban populations, solve housing shortages, and revitalize declining areas. New towns have dispersal, aggregation, and radiation functions, aiming for urban-rural integration (Shen et Wu, 2017; Xu, 2022).

Practices in China once replaced "new town" with "new city" due to scale/type differences (Governa et Sampieri, 2020; Shen et Wu, 2017; Xu, 2022), with planned populations up to 800,000 (Shen et Wu, 2017)—far exceeding the original 20,000-60,000-person definition (Merlin, 1980; Rodwin, 1956). Beijing's 2016 master plan reintroduced "new towns" (between "new cities" and rural areas) for its ~22 million residents, planning 8 new towns (20-60km from the center) to undertake "new cities" and radiate rural areas (Liu et al., 2020 b, 2020 a; Long et al., 2020; Tang et Meng, 2021).

Based on new town concepts and Beijing's practices, this study reviews the concept and focuses on whether Beijing's "new towns" are sustainable. Using multi-source data and interviews from a government-market perspective, it analyzes new towns' development, examines if planning balances capital pull and local growth, achieves job-housing balance/industrial upgrading, and verifies if the hierarchy promotes balanced regional growth.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

2.1. Evolution of new towns

Since new towns first appeared in London, Britain, this concept have practiced in megacities like Tokyo in Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong in China. These evolutions formed shifts in ideas such as functional separation, functional integration, jobs-housing balance, and urban-rural coordination & relief reception (Table 1)(Field, 1992; Gratton, 1979; He et al., 2020; Kiuchi et Inouchi, 1976; Lau, 2010; Seik, 2001; Yokohari et al., 2006).

From Beijing new town policies, planning concept should combine China's local practices. They gradually take on dispersal and urban-rural coordination functions, focusing on population dispersal, economic growth, environmental protection, urban-rural integration, and regional coordinated growth.

Table 1 Evolution characteristics of new towns

characteristic	Period	Description	Representative Cases
Functional Separation	1940s-1960s	Emphasized strict zoning following Garden City principles and functionalism. Residential, industrial, and recreational zones were clearly demarcated, requiring residents to commute to industrial districts or city centers. Inter-zonal interactions were limited, with public spaces prioritizing utility.	Early London New Towns: Stevenage, Harlow New Town
Functional Integration	1960s-1980s	Shifted toward mixed-use development to reduce commuting distances and enhance community interaction. Integrated jobs-housing links through transit-oriented design, with centralized cultural/educational facilities in community hubs.	Paris: Cergy-Pontoise; Hong Kong: Sha Tin New Town

characteristic	Period	Description	Representative Cases
Jobs-Housing Balance	1980s-2000s	Aimed to ensure proportional local employment opportunities through balanced work-residence ratios. Established local economic centers and promoted transit-oriented development to reduce car dependency.	Singapore: Tampines; Tokyo: Tama New Town
Urban-Rural Coordination & Relief Reception	21st Century Onward	Evolved to integrate population relocation, ecological protection, and sustainable development. Emphasizes industrial upgrading, regional synergy, and the Chinese-style modernization ethos of human-nature harmony and coordinated urban-rural development.	Exemplifies China's urban-rural integration strategy reflecting modernization principles

Source: Gratton, Kiuchi; He, et al. Compiled by the authors.

2.2. New towns in Beijing under the market and government interaction

Beijing's new town core lies in effective regional deconcentration. Its top-down administrative system spans municipal, district, subdistrict/township to community/village levels. The 2016-2035 Beijing master plan positions eight new towns 20-60km from the city center (Figure 1), aiming to absorb central urban resources and reduce regional gaps. Effective deconcentration requires both government management and market participation (Qing et al., 2018; Wu, 2015). The study constructs a market-government interaction framework for deconcentration (Figure 1).

In effective deconcentration (Figure 1), government-market interaction drives rational urban function dispersal: government leads via infrastructure and policies; the market responds with cost-oriented relocation, forming industrial clusters, with two-way interaction maintaining balance (Wu, 2015). In ineffective deconcentration (Figure 1), one-sided government push and weak policies cause single regional growth; forced relocation leads the market to move only low-end industries, lacking high-value sector relocation motivation, and companies have low relocation incentive (Liu et al., 2020 b; Qing et al., 2018; Tang et Meng, 2021). This breaks government-market interaction, weakening market response, hindering policy adjustment, and resulting in superficial function dispersal.

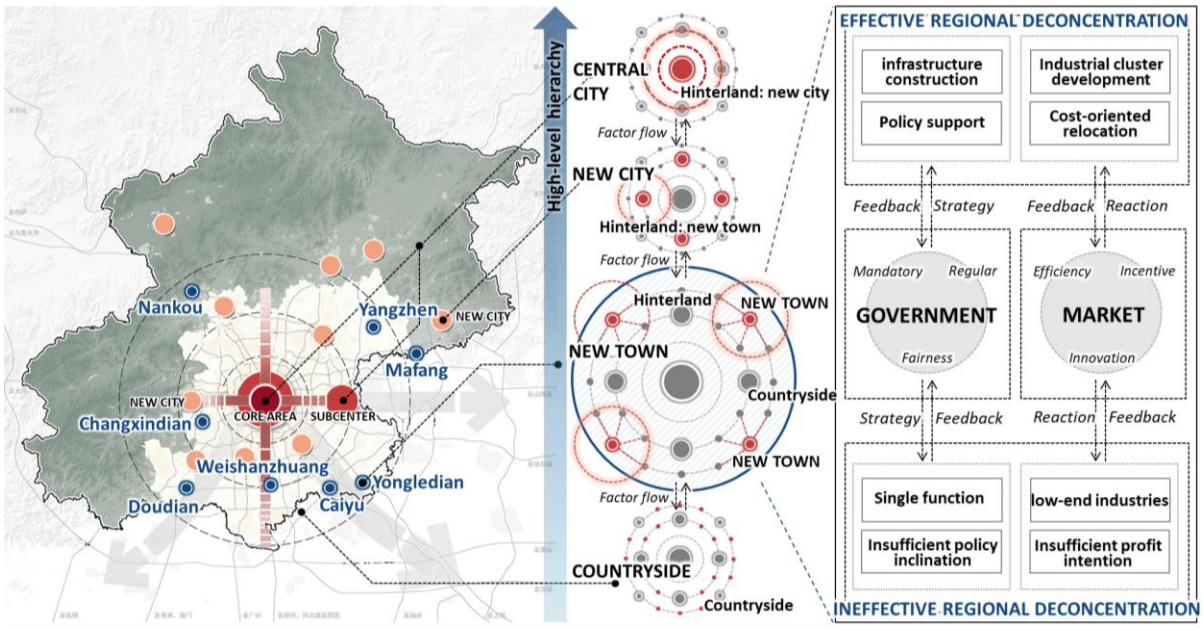


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: hierarchy and the Relationship between Government and Market. Source: Authors.

2.3. Methods and data sources

The study time period focuses on development paths of each new town after the 2016 plan implementation. Since each town has different locations and histories, the study starts with three basic issues: development process, current characteristics, and government-market interaction. It analyzes development phenomena and causes overall (Table 2) (Fa Li et al., 2018; Peng, 1997).

Table 2 Source and explanation of research data

Category	Types	Data source	Description
Development process	Historical information of development stage	Historical data of towns, previous master plans of beijing	Analyze the establishment, historical causes and positioning contents of previous master plans of towns.
	Strategic positioning	Beijing city master plan (2016-2035)	Analyze the contents and leading industries involved in the positioning of new towns in the master plan.
Current characteristics	Social development	Baidu population big data	It mainly analyzes the jobs-housing ratio (formula: working population/resident population) and the population inflow-outflow ratio (formula: inflow population/outflow population). Due to the statistical reasons of working population data, the calculated job-residence ratio will be lower than the real job-residence ratio.
	Economic development	Industrial and commercial enterprise registration data	It mainly analyzes the total registered capital of enterprises and the inflow-outflow ratio of enterprises (formula: inflow enterprises/outflow enterprises).
	Space environment development	China land market network, Gaode map POI.	It mainly analyzes the quantity of land transfer and shannon diversity index. Shannon diversity index formula is: $H' = -\sigma (p_i \times \ln(p_i))$, p_i is the relative abundance of the i-th poi category. The calculation formula is $p_i = n_i / n$. n_i is the number of the i-th category, and n is the total number of all individuals in this type(Marcon et al., 2014).
Government-market interaction	Qualitative interview	A total of 23 interviews with more than 50 people.	The author and the planners of beijing munich institute of urban planning and design visited eight new towns for six times on march 7, march 26, april 26, may 23, june 4 and june 12, 2024.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

3. Result

3.1. Development process: Different integration into the regional development state

Beijing's new towns have different growth bases. Some new towns went through changes from satellite cities to new towns. Overall, they gradually take on capital function dispersal. From regional pattern changes, each new town shows processes of single growth, market-led integration into regions, and government-led integration. They gradually join and allocate capital regional functions. From growth types, new towns could divided into four main types (Figure 2). Among them, Changxindian and Nankou became Beijing's satellite towns in 1958. They formed early industrial production and living group; Caiyu, Doudian, and Yangzhen formed early industry clusters in 1990s; Mafang and Weishanzhuang show investment-led growth modes; Yongledian shows natural growth mode.

From strategic positioning in the Beijing City Master Plan (2016-2035) and each district's master plans, districts set different growth positions for new towns (Table 3). They show four main types: 1) Directly join “new cities” as parts: Mainly Doudian and Caiyu. They join “new city” areas directly. For example, Doudian Industry Park joins as an enclave of “Yizhuang new city”. Caiyu's middle group joins as one of “Fangshan new city's” three parts. 2) Become reception areas for large city industry and function overflows: Mainly Changxindian and Nankou. They are near central urban boundaries with good locations. For example, Changxindian takes Zhongguancun West Zone industry transfers. Nankou takes university city overflows.

3) Sit as nodes on district planning development axes: Mainly Yangzhen and Mafang. They are parts of district planning axes. They are parts of district main functions (like Yangzhen auto industry park) and services (like Mafang logistics park). 4) Sit in district planning structure edges with poor growth levels: Mainly Weishanzhuang and Yongledian. Their positions are unclear. They are in edges of several "new city" parts. Their structure locations and function positions are not clear.

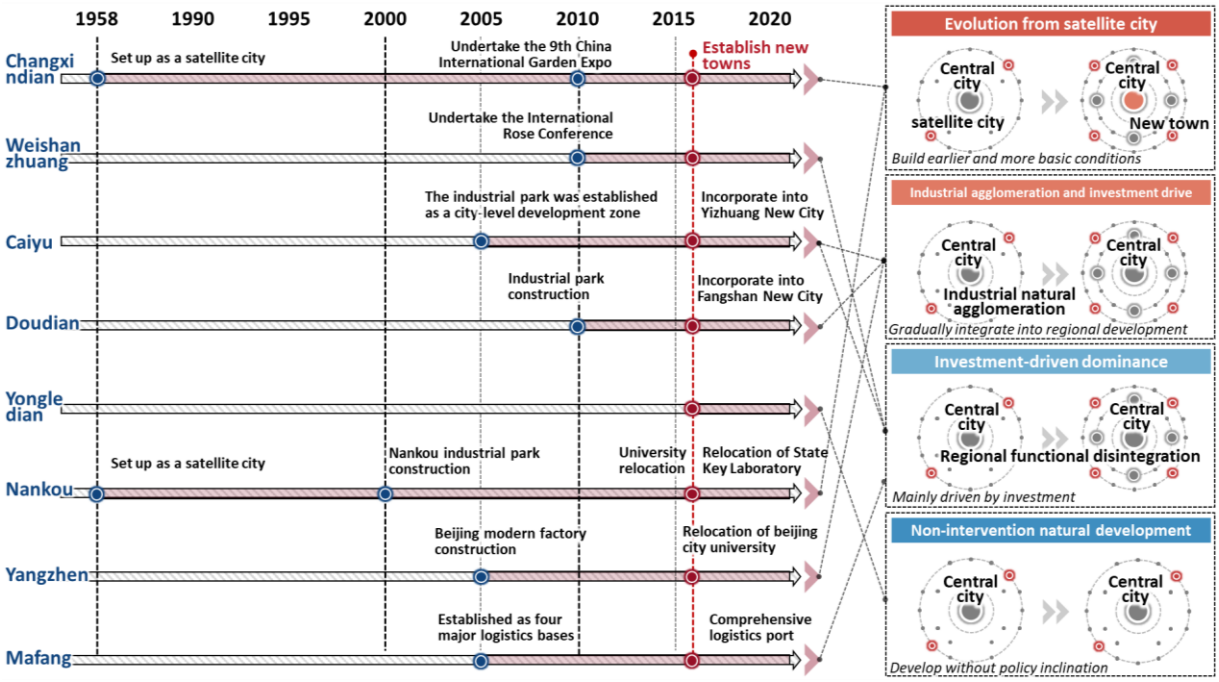


Figure 2. Evolution and classification of new town types. Source: Authors.

Table 3 Industrial base and planning industry of new towns in Beijing

Name	Industrial development	Industrial strategic positioning	Planning initiatives
Changxindian town	The science and technology foundation is good, and the west area of Fengtai Park in Zhongguancun Science Park is located here. Railway culture and historical culture gather, with profound cultural heritage and rich ecological resources.	Zhongguancun Fengtai Park West Zone serves as a pivotal area in the Hexi region for fulfilling Beijing's technological innovation service functions for the capital. West Zone 1 emphasizes comprehensive regional support and ecological demonstration capabilities, while West Zone 2 integrates collective industrial development with Changxindian Town.	Restore Changxindian Old Street and establish the West Zone of Zhongguancun Fengtai science Park
Yangzhen town	Urban modern agriculture has achieved a certain scale. Form a modern manufacturing industrial base dominated by the automobile industry. Beijing city university's settlement is conducive to promoting industrial agglomeration and transformation.	It aims to cultivate an ecological industrial demonstration zone for new energy intelligent vehicles, integrating R&D design, smart manufacturing, and other sectors. The vision includes a vibrant new town in the capital characterized by university-town integration, distinct cultural identity, and coordinated urban-rural symbiosis.	Relocate universities, optimize the distribution of manufacturing sectors among enterprises, and promote university-town integration
Nankou town	With a long history, Juyongguan Great Wall and other cultural heritages are located in the town. Beijing university of chemical technology and other universities are located in the east of the town.	Focusing on ecological conservation, industrial upgrading, and old town revitalization, the area will develop into a new town along the Great Wall Cultural Belt, promoting coordinated growth across agriculture, industry, scientific research, and cultural tourism.	Relocate national key laboratories and leverage tourism infrastructure
Caiyu town	Beijing Caiyu Economic Development Zone is a part of Yizhuang "New City", and new energy vehicles and auto parts have become two absolute pillar industries.	Caiyu Town, located in the supporting service sector of Yizhuang New City, is planned as a new town with leisure and tourism features. Key industries include new energy intelligent vehicles and sports-leisure sectors.	Integrate into new town clusters and develop leisure tourism

Name	Industrial development	Industrial strategic positioning	Planning initiatives
Weishanzhuang town	Agricultural industrialization has begun to take shape, and the planting scale of flowers, vegetables and fruits has reached the leading level in the whole region. It has a cultural industry foundation and a natural forest landscape.	Enhancements will focus on aviation services, ecological protection, and rural revitalization. The town is designated as a new town with cultural and creative exhibition characteristics, prioritizing cultural displays and aviation services.	Establish the main exhibition area for the International Moon Festival
Doudian town	Beijing's high-end manufacturing base is the core area of Zhongguancun South Innovation City.	The Doudian Cluster primarily develops modern transportation, intelligent equipment, and pharmaceutical-health industries. The new town will drive and support development in surrounding rural areas.	High-end manufacturing base
Mafang town	Relying on land port, develop port economy, modern logistics industry and e-commerce industry.	Leveraging transportation structure adjustments, Mafang will be transformed into a demonstration-level Grade 1 hub for Beijing's integrated road-rail development, securing land for the Jingping Logistics Comprehensive Hub and promoting the transfer from road to rail freight ("公转铁").	Industrial park and regional logistics hub
Yongledian town	Edible fungi, special vegetables and aquaculture are the primary industries, while general manufacturing is the secondary industry.	Yongledian New Town will capitalize on its transportation, ecological, and spatial resources to strengthen tech services, business services, and green services. It will actively nurture regional strategic emerging industries and drive traditional industry transformation.	Industrial functional transfer is not yet underway.

Source: Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035). Compiled by the authors.

3.2. Current characteristics: Spatial representation of society, economy and environment

From social representations, Yangzhen and Mafang have strong population absorption capacity (Figure 3). The jobs-housing ratio (working to resident population) reflects employment-living balance; data comes from Baidu population big data (4-hour daytime stay standard, unified across towns with minor deviation). New town employment features: 1) Yangzhen (many working college students) and Mafang (stable working-resident college student ratio) are labor-intensive employment centers; 2) Doudian, Nankou, Caiyu, Yongledian are absorbed by nearby "new cities" but balance flows; 3) Changxindian and Weishanzhuang (low jobs-housing ratios) are absorbed by nearby strong work centers (Changxindian by east urban areas, Weishanzhuang by west town). Over 6 years, new town working population flows are overall balanced, with varying contact hinterlands (Figure 3): 1) Six have inflows (Yongledian, Changxindian, Weishanzhuang, Doudian, Mafang; Yongledian has the clearest inflow, including distant Chaoyang District); three have outflows (Caiyu, Nankou, Yangzhen; Nankou has the clearest outflow to areas like Chaoyang District); 2) Hinterland types: Doudian, Mafang (cross-district influence), Changxindian, Nankou (medium range, some outward influence), Weishanzhuang, Caiyu, Yongledian, Yangzhen (district-limited influence).

Economically, new towns focus on manufacturing and services with varying industry polarization; Mafang has the strongest company attraction (Figure 4). Industry capital spreads from town centers (discontinuous with the central city): multi-center (Changxindian, Weishanzhuang), single-center small-scale (Yongledian, no clusters), single-center diffusion (Yangzhen, Mafang). Towns have mixed tertiary industry patterns (Figure 4): 1) Leading factories + industry clusters (Yangzhen, Caiyu, Doudian; e.g., Yangzhen's auto manufacturing, Doudian's Changan Automobile); 2) Industry parks + leading factories forming clusters (e.g., Nankou's high-tech, Changxindian's Zhongguancun transfers); 3) Scattered, no industry scale, primary industry-dominated. Company inflows/outflows (Figure 4) show overall growth (ratios >1); Mafang has the strongest industry attraction, Changxindian the largest inflow, followed by Yongledian and Weishanzhuang.

Spatially, new towns have "new city" coordinated/independent growth modes (Figure 5). Land transfer (2003-2023) reflects vitality: high-volume towns (Caiyu, Doudian, Mafang, Weishanzhuang, Changxindian) develop via "villagers moving upstairs"; Yangzhen, Nankou, Yongledian have small totals (Yangzhen,

Nankou focus on allocated land). Shannon diversity index shows layout differences (Figure 5): 1) Joining urban areas (Changxindian, Nankou); 2) High growth, large range (Changxindian, Doudian, Nankou); 3) High-value multi-core (Caiyu, Yangzhen); 4) High-value focused clusters (Mafang south).

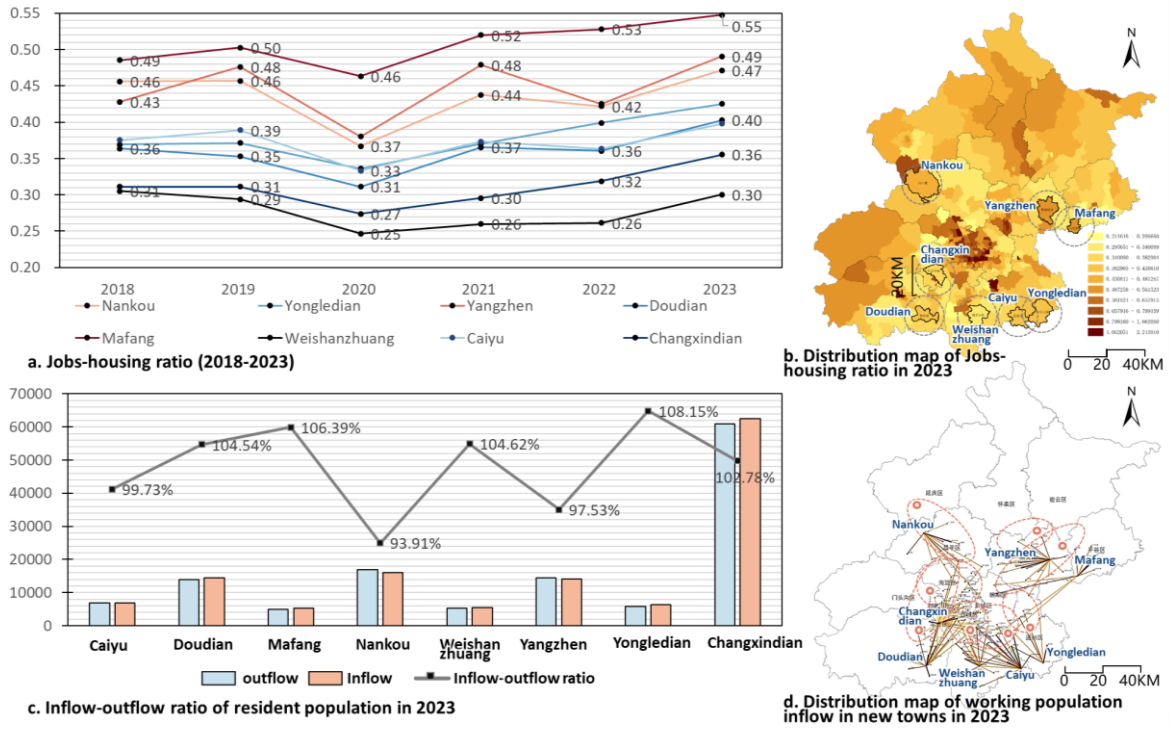


Figure 3. Main social indicators of new towns in Beijing. Source: The data from Baidu population big data, drawn by the authors.

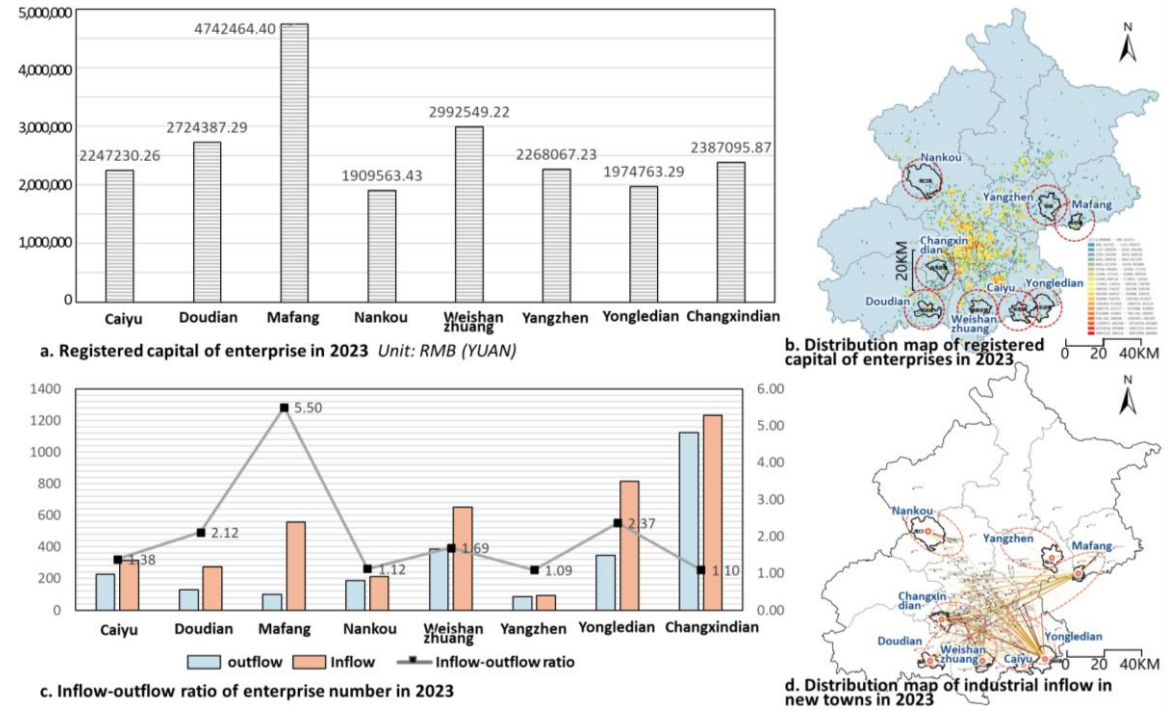


Figure 4. Main economic indicators of new towns in Beijing. Source: The data from China industrial and commercial registration data, drawn by the authors.

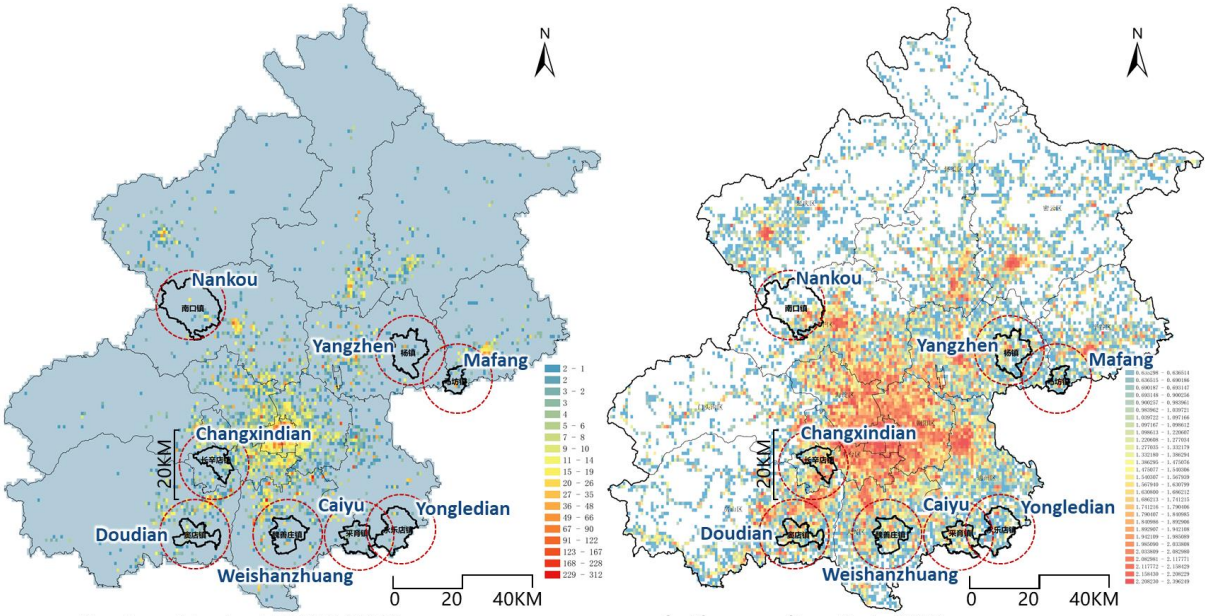


Figure 5. Current Spatial Environment Map of Beijing's New Towns. Source: The data from China land market website, POI data of gaode map. drawn by the authors.

3.3. Government-market interaction: Coordinated and Divergent

Based on each new town's development process and current characteristics (Hanxi Wang, 2024), Using over 50 interviews, the study explains mechanisms, dividing factors into infrastructure, land transfer, industrial capital, labor, and innovation (Table 4). All new towns are in Beijing's population/land reduction system (Qing et al., 2018), with limited town-level land and unclear core functions/policy support; towns need higher-level land indicators, investment, talents, and approvals.

Policy support varies with growth states: unsupported towns are influenced by nearby "new cities" (e.g., Caiyu's core enterprises moved to Yizhuang New City for preferences (Table 4)). Supported towns may hinder surrounding areas (e.g., Mafang's land indicators from nearby towns, "blood sucking"), reflecting megacity shrinkage governance complexity (Zhang et Lerman, 2025).

Table 4 The Development Status of New Towns Based on Interview

Type	Government initiatives	Market response
Infrastructure	*"In 2021, the original Changxindian town was divided into the present Beigong town and Changxindian street, and the two management methods of street and town formed new administrative barriers."* **(Interview from Changxindian)** *"At the beginning, we mainly focused on the environment and quickly upgraded the infrastructure. Now the construction standards are very high."* **(Interview from Mafang)** *"part of the town is included in the new town, and the infrastructure establishment standards of the new town are different, which has formed great difficulties."* **(Interview from Doudian)**	*"Now the infrastructure construction standards are inconsistent with the environment, so enterprises should first consider accessibility and whether they can communicate with the outside world quickly."* **(Interview from Changxindian)** *"After the improvement of environmental construction standards, many enterprises quickly settled in and now have a good industrial base."* **(Interview from Mafang)**
Land transfer	*"Although there are good industries, there are difficulties in planning and implementation, and who will build and invest in land leveling is a problem."* **(Interview from Doudian)**	*"Because of the lax management in the past, there were a lot of land without formalities... Because the enterprises that moved away under the pressure of land want to return to Beijing, Beijing has a good business environment."* **(Interview from Doudian)**

Type	Government initiatives	Market response
	*"In the past, the largest wedding company in southern Beijing was dismantled, and the incomplete procedures became their worries."***(Interview from Weishanzhuang)**	*"The land policy was too tight, and it used to develop better, but now people are lost."***(Interview from Weishanzhuang)**
Industrial capital	*"Now it is a part of the 'new city', and the policy should follow the 'new city'."***(Interview from Caiyu)** *"At present, there is no industrial development at all, and it is close to neighboring provinces. We will not consider coming to Beijing to build a factory because the land cost is too high."***(Interview from Yongledian)** *"Zhongguancun west (中关村西区), which was to be built in 2005, is still under discussion, and it has always been reserved land."***(Interview from Changxindian)**	*"The former big tax collector "Beiqi" moved to Yizhuang, and many industries moved away, and the output value decreased. The new town was supposed to radiate, but the 'new city' built behind took away the industry."***(Interview from Caiyu)** *"Because of the subway, industry and so on will be quickly absorbed, and now it has always been a sleeping city."***(Interview from Changxindian)**
Labor force	*"Beijing requires reducing quantity and improving quality, and the labor force can only come in under strict control."***(Interview from Yongledian)** *"Mafang town is developed with the strength of the whole Pinggu district, which is an indicator of exploiting other towns in the district, not because of the establishment of new towns. I hope to have local government power such as talent introduction and decentralization of approval process."***(Interview from Mafang)**	*"Accessibility is too low, and the resources and environment are not very good."***(Interview from Yongledian)** *"All of them only work here. The high schools in this area merely exist in name—they don't represent genuine high-quality educational resources."***(Interview from Mafang)**
Innovation transformation	*"Now the development foundation is good, but it needs industrial upgrading."* **(Interview from Yangzhen)** *"The relocation of the State Key Laboratory responded to the call of the central government and was an important measure after the establishment of the new town."* **(Interview from Nankou)**	*"The linkage between industry and schools has not yet been established."* **(Interview from Yangzhen)** *"The follow-up development is still unclear, and it is hoped that key laboratories will have new industrial value."* **(Interview from Nankou)**

Source: Excerpt from an interview. Compiled by the authors.

4. Discussion: Is this a new sustainable urban growth pattern?

New town in Beijing has built a Unidirectional management mode, which has achieved the successful development of new towns such as Mafang and Nankou(Liu et al., 2020 b; Qing et al., 2018; Tang et Meng, 2021). This development enables resources to flow to the surrounding areas 60KM away from the core of the metropolitan area. This successful development is based on the framework of "reducing quantity and improving quality" in Beijing(Shengxiao Alex Li et Zhao, 2022). Government guides market from quantity pursuits to quality and efficiency through rigid land and population rules(Wu, 2015). New towns with more policy supports can form new industry clusters through land, capital, and labor transfers, thereby achieving initial job-housing balance.

Beijing new towns' growth features one-way government-to-market production factor flows (Figure 6). For land resources, Government leads allocation, controls supply (Wu, 2015), pushes land-quota linking (Shengxiao Alex Li et Zhao, 2022), binds land with population/industry; market gets commercial land and participates in land finance, with feedback to government. At capital levels, Government guides flows via state firm relocations; market lays out industries by policy (Xue et al., 2013). At labor levels, Government prepares human resources, coordinates personnel with industry; market matches supply-demand, creates jobs, drives employment. From other factors, Government activates market via high-value factors (Marcon et al., 2014), relocates institutions to boost innovation; market uses knowledge for innovation, forming vitality points (Liu et al., 2020 b; Qing et al., 2018; Tang et Meng, 2021).

This Unidirectional management mode not only shows as flows from government to market. It also shows as one-way flows in "central city, new city, new town, rural" order. Each level's function positions and industry allocations come from upper levels(Liu et al., 2020 b; Qing et al., 2018; Tang et Meng, 2021). This

deconcentration mode is top-down administrative push type. Market spontaneous forces are lacking, resulting in the absence of two-way interactions. Thus, most new towns easily fall into the capital's aggregation shadow,and fall into industry and population loss traps. For regional sustainable growth, local controls over production factors may become new policy strategies, which lets them form self-support abilities from passive reception gradually(Wu, 2015).

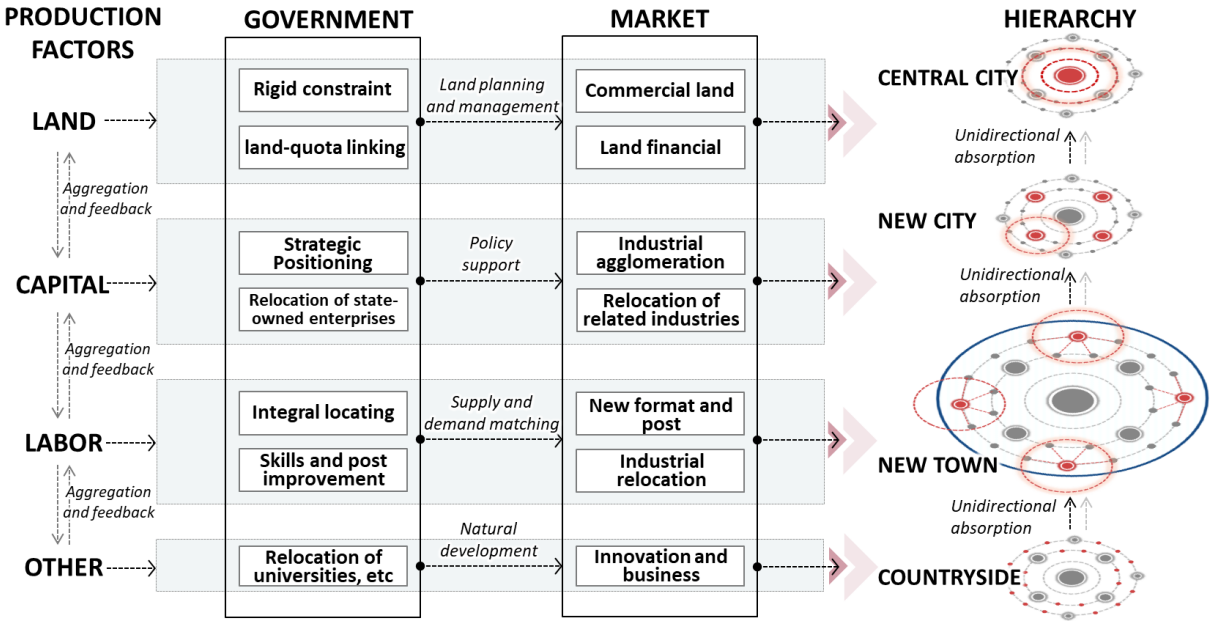


Figure 6. Unidirectional management mode of government-market. Source: Authors.

5. Conclusion

China's Beijing established a new hierarchy between “new cities” and rural areas. It provides key practical insights for global megacities exploring new urban-rural relations(Liu et al., 2020 b; Qing et al., 2018; Tang et Meng, 2021). In this new hierarchy, Beijing planned 8 new towns as key nodes and strengthens their industry bearing and function dispersal abilities. This new town building is not a simple expansion but is embedded in Beijing's overall " reducing quantity and improving quality" logic (Shengxiao Alex Li et Zhao, 2022). It pushes orderly flows of production factors like land, capital, and labor to metropolitan edges through strict management. Beijing's practices show that megacity urban-rural relation rebuilding focuses on orderly transmission of city radiation energy to rural hinterlands through effective space management and system designs(Xue et al., 2013). This provides useful solutions for global megacities facing similar growth pressures(Marcon et al., 2014).

From sustainable growth views, production factor flows under strict management assume central urban areas can keep ongoing growth (in economy or population). Due to policy tilt reliance, this new hierarchy does not break from existing planning paths. From several new towns with slow growth, local governments without policy tilts hard form suitable main industries for themselves. Homogeneous rule location settings also stop natural flows of industries and populations. Based on this, delegating core production factor powers at new town levels sparks diverse subject market vitality, while strengthening regional coordination mechanisms and community-based planning remains significant for many megacity regional plans (Wu, 2015).

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