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# 9

**THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC CITY —**

**POWER AND PLANNING**

Carolyn Cartier



## Xiongan panorama

Source: David Prowse, Flickr

**THE NOTION THAT A CITY** is powerful relies on some kind of anthropomorphism. A city is not a thing itself that constitutes and wields power. It lies on a map, inert and lifeless, staring back at us and rhetorically imploring, am I important? How big is my dot? Capital cities are always more important on the map: they get the star, like Beijing. Yet in a recent Party announcement about leading places in China, Beijing did not feature at all. Only three appeared — Shenzhen, Shanghai Pudong, and Xiongan 雄安 — and one of these, Xiongan, in Hebei province, is only just planned. (See the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Chapter 6 ‘Magic Cities, Future Dreams — Urban Contradictions’, pp.188–205.) Nevertheless, in April 2018 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee and State Council issued a joint announcement ‘in the name of Comrade Xi Jinping as the core’ to confirm its leading importance, affirming that ‘Xi Jinping has personally planned, personally decided, and personally promoted’ the construction of Xiongan as ‘a national model for promoting high-quality development’.<sup>1</sup>





**Xiongan**  
Source: news.cn

Xiongan is the latest planned city in China to be symbolically attached to the prevailing paramount leader. The founding of the city of Shenzhen, which includes the first and most successful special economic zone (SEZ), is directly linked to Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, who led reform and opening up after 1978. When China opened up to the world economy, it was a selective opening up: SEZs were established in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, followed by a select group of coastal cities and coastal regions. Shenzhen led the way, catalysed by capital flows from Hong Kong. The role of Shenzhen is so significant in anchoring the reform economy that it is difficult to imagine the path of China's export-oriented industrialisation without it. A decade later, in 1990, Deng Xiaoping envisioned the Pudong New Area — a new economic district for Shanghai. He practically apologised to the people of Shanghai for making them wait ten years to rebuild it. Now, Pudong includes the national financial district, marked by Shanghai Tower — the tallest building in China. Shanghai Pudong developed as a central government project under the leadership of Jiang Zemin 江泽民, who succeeded Deng Xiaoping.

The Party narrative of Xiongan foregrounds its significance as if re-prising the reform model of Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen: ‘It is another new administrative area of national significance after the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and the Shanghai Pudong New Area. It is a millennial plan and a national event’.<sup>2</sup> Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen are just two of more than 500 new urban areas in China and one hundred urban administrative divisions with populations of larger than one million. But they are national projects that link to the world economy. Comparing Xiongan with Pudong and Shenzhen implies that Xiongan will also play a similarly significant local–global role for the Beijing region.

Recent announcements about Xiongan reveal how the Party-state constructs, in both discursive and material ways, dynamic places of power in relation to Party leadership. Likening Xiongan to Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen signals to the world China’s commitment to continuing economic growth. Its heralding of Xi’s leadership places Xiongan at the leading edge of Party-state commitments. Much more than a technocratic project, the location of Xiongan and its planned characteristics symbolise new ideas about the future of cities in China. The location of Xiongan in north China, south-west of Beijing in Hebei province, demonstrates commitment to redressing uneven development among the coastal regions. It also demonstrates the power of exclusion by ignoring two prominent cities of the reform era at the level of Beijing and Shanghai in the urban system — Chongqing and Tianjin. The narrative of Xiongan pointedly belongs to the New Era of Xi Jinping thought that was formally incorporated into the Party Constitution at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017.

## The Hebei Xiongan Outline Plan

Following the lead of the English-language Xinhua report of 21 April, ‘China Publishes Master Plan for Xiongan New Area’, various international media, including *The Telegraph* (UK) and the *Straits Times* (Singapore),



**Xiongan: a new growth pole for China**  
Source: Ma Xuejing/China Daily

quoted the publication of the master plan.<sup>3</sup> The international news cycle typically follows the lead of China's state media — but the headline was incorrect. The Chinese government did not release the 'master plan' 总体规划 for Xiongan; it

released the 'outline plan' 规划纲要. The outline plan constitutes a report on the project's scale and scope including strategic rationale, guiding ideology in the terms of Party thought, and construction and development objectives. It serves as the foundation on which master plans are to be based, which will necessarily appear incrementally because the Xiongan area, at 2,000km<sup>2</sup>, covering three counties, exceeds the scope of any single master plan.

The Hebei Xiongan New Area Outline Plan 河北雄安新区规划纲要 is attributed to the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Collaborative Development Leading Group Office. It is not a normal planning office but a specially formed group with select membership 'under the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core'. The foreword to the Outline Plan states that Xiongan will become 'a national model for promoting high quality development in a new era', whose implementation, 'by the middle of the century, will become a significant part of the world-class Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei city cluster, effectively performing Beijing's non-capital functions and providing a Chinese solution to "big city malaise"'. It will become a relocation site for education, health, and government institutions whose activities do not require them to be in the centre of Beijing. Xiongan is to be, in this sense, a 'spillover' city that will contribute to rebalancing settlement in the capital region.

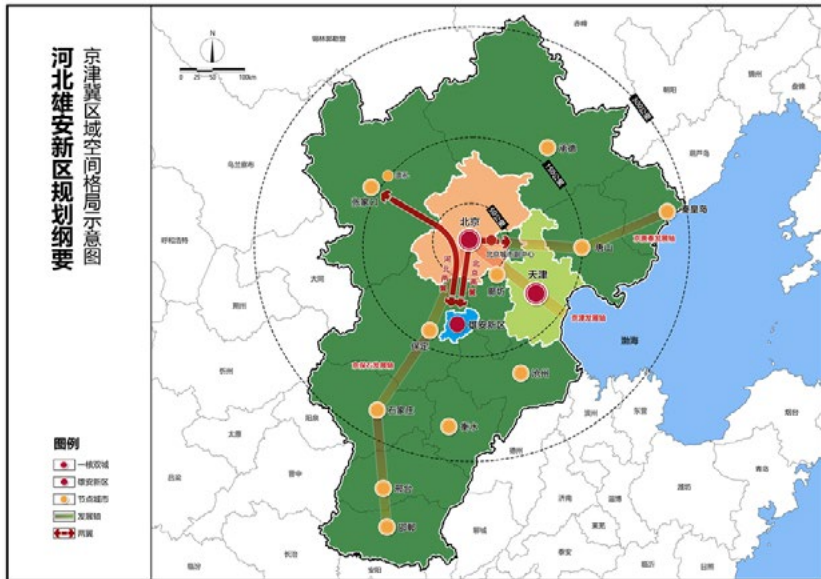
The Outline Plan is interesting because, in ten chapters, it narrates principles and values of modernisation and development for the New Era — a vision much broader than the construction of Xiongan itself. It begins with general requirements for a city in accordance with the renewed vision of Socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the New Era, the city will represent the shift from the stage of high-speed growth to the stage of high-quality development. Stylistically, the Outline Plan resembles the historical practice of seeking to discern ‘logic’ and ‘order’ or 理 through the ‘investigation of things’ 格物 in order to ‘extend knowledge’ or 致知. For instance, the process depends on identifying and selecting from best practices in urban environmental management worldwide to adapt them for implementation in Xiongan. The new city will adopt ‘modern information and environmental protection technologies for a green low-carbon, smart and efficient, environmentally friendly, and livable environment with high-quality public services’. Xiongan will thus become ‘an innovative development demonstration zone’ that models new standards for national high-quality urban development in the New Era.

The Outline Plan treats Xiongan as a key part of the Beijing–Tianjin region — the Jing-Jin-Ji region. Chapter One of the Outline Plan envisions Xiongan as the ‘Beijing city sub-center’ that will become a ‘new model for optimizing development in densely populated areas’. It introduces the ‘two wings of Hebei’, in which Xiongan is only the southern wing in the larger transformation of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei capital region. It also covers project-specific construction for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics in Zhangbei in the province’s north-west, bordering Zhangjiakou — a historic prefecture-level city known as the gateway to both Mongolia and Beijing.

Like all general Party-state documents, the Xiongan Outline Plan refers to theory and policy endorsed by multiple Party offices and government ministries. Borrowing language and principles from the New-type Urbanisation Plan (2014–2020), it emphasises improvement of the ‘people’s livelihood’; promotes ‘ecological civilisation’ as laid out in the Na-

tional Civilised City program; and refers to ‘Belt and Road’ construction. It also introduces the notion of ‘Xiongan quality’.

Each chapter of the Xiongan Outline Plan articulates multiple goals. Chapter Two calls for construction of ‘new urban-rural relations’, which will implement goals of the ‘New-type Urbanisation Plan’ and protect arable land. Chapter Three combines Chinese heritage design with low-rise development to incorporate the protection of ancient monuments, revolutionary sites, and local culture in towns and villages. Chapter Four commits to the restoration of the Baiyangdian wetland (See the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Chapter 6 ‘Magic Cities, Future Dreams — Urban Contradictions’, pp.193–195) and its establishment as a national park. Chapter Five specifies development of a high-technology digital city with 5G-network commercialisation for information security technology and a ‘self-controllable cyberspace security industry’. Chapter Six outlines standards for social services including education, health, and housing, with an emphasis on urban–rural integrated services and affordable housing. Chapter Seven describes an integrated transport network including ‘four vertical and two horizontal’ high-speed railways that will connect Xiongan to Beijing and Tianjin in addition to Shijiazuang (the capital of Hebei province), as well as seven new expressways. (The Xiongan link to the new Beijing Daxing International Airport, or ‘second’ Beijing airport, is projected to open in 2019.) Chapter Eight mandates the construction of a green low-carbon city, and integrated water management infrastructure for the water-short capital region. It also covers the social credit system and its ‘big data’ platform for ‘a full-time, global, integrated network security decision-making system’, incorporating advances in artificial intelligence. Chapter Nine, on ‘building a modern urban security system’, draws on the ‘overall national security concept’ for disaster prevention, integrating standards for ‘peacetime and warfare’ including air defence, with details of disaster shelters and evacuation routes on the ground. It incorporates water and energy security in addition to drug and food

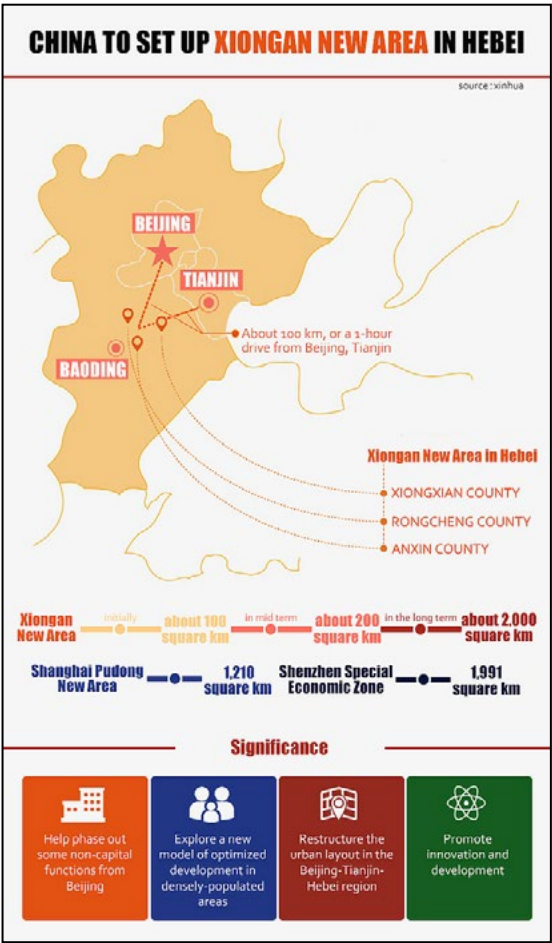


**Hebei Xiongan New Area Outline Plan: a schematic diagram of the Jing-Jin-Ji Region**  
 Source: Xinhuanet

security. Chapter Ten outlines commitment to strengthening planning implementation, supervision, and evaluation of Party and government work, as well as fiscal reforms and the establishment of individual income tax. It concludes with a focus on coordinated development for the unprecedented trans-territorial group of three administrative jurisdictions — Hebei, Beijing, and Tianjin, or Jing-Jin-Ji.

## Land and Plan: Reverse!

Despite the official narrative comparing Xiongan with Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen, realities of Xiongan point to fundamental differences, beginning with their basic dimensions. Pudong and Shenzhen began on relatively small sites and grew by extension through changes to the administrative divisions. Before 2009, Pudong district was 533km<sup>2</sup>, includ-



**Xiongan project map**  
Source: Xinhua

ing the area of Liujiazui — the site of the high-rise financial district. In 2009, the central government approved the merger of Nanhui — a former county on Pudong’s southern boundary — more than doubling Pudong’s size to 1,210km<sup>2</sup>. Greater Pudong, which includes Shanghai Pudong International Airport and Shanghai Disneyland, constructed during the mid-2010s, is about two-thirds the size of Xiongan (2,000km<sup>2</sup>). The Shenzhen

SEZ, which was opened in 1980, also expanded in stages. ‘Shenzhen’ names both the prefectural city and the SEZ within it, which tends to generate confusion between the two. Before 2010, the Shenzhen SEZ was only 396km<sup>2</sup>. The area of the SEZ expanded nearly five times to 1,953km<sup>2</sup> in 2010 alone. That year, on 1 July, an official ceremony marked its expansion, attended by Guangdong provincial and central government leaders.<sup>4</sup> It now covers an area about the same size as that allocated to Xiongan, but was, for three decades, significantly smaller.

There are many reasons why Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen developed in stages. One is the administrative division reform ‘changing counties to cities’ that the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced in 1983. The reform reclassified rural counties as urban jurisdictions, which allowed cities to lease land for real estate development. Marketisation of land leaseholds in China started in the second half of the 1980s in Shenzhen, but the emerging market became subject to negotiation — that is, local governments negotiated directly with investors at below-market rates. The ensuing urban development is called land-based urbanisation because land became the major source of capital in the process. Fortunes were made in the moment when land was released from state control for urban construction.

In contrast, the central government’s approach to Xiongan establishes in advance its final size through the amalgamation of three counties — Xiongxian, Rongchen, and Anxin— to form Xiongan New Area. It is only categorically analogous to the Pudong New Area, the first New Area 新区, in the Chinese system of administrative divisions. New Areas are a special category of the administrative division at the national level — they receive economic development support from the central government — typically financial transfers, to realise their targetted goals.

So, why is Xiongan so big? By marking out Xiongan’s total area in advance, the state has effectively asserted its power to control and supervise the development process, including the disposition of land. After many years of land grabs and ‘negotiated’ land transfers in China, the national land protection regime has become strictly enforced in most areas.

In Xiongan, the state may control and assign land use rather than allow it to be marketised for leasing and real estate development. This would allow revival of the system of land allocation, which would accord with the rhetoric of Xi Jinping’s New Era and the comeback of socialist-style central planning.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Pudong, which is a district located in a larger city, the size of Xiongan indicates a new city. If public housing and the state sector become dominant in Xiongan, combined with environmental sustainability and data systems security, Xiongan will become the showcase for a twenty-first century ‘green’ stability city for new Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 中国特色社会主义.

## City as Metonym — and Antonym — of Power

The ideological language of socialism for the New Era also characterises portrayals of Xiongan. The attachment of Xi to Xiongan is the latest iteration in a long history of Chinese leaders standing at the forefront of symbolic national construction projects. Outstanding historical examples are Mao’s 1959 ‘Ten Great Buildings’ 十大建筑 that commemorated the tenth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, which included the Great Hall of the People; Beijing Railway Station; and the Three Gorges Dam, first



**China's most prominent 'ghost town':  
Tianjin's financial district**  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

proposed by Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 in 1919, formally launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1992 (but also considered by Mao).

Party history credits Deng with the successful development of Shenzhen, and Jiang Zemin with the growth of Shanghai Pudong. Shenzhen represents market reform in the 1980s, while Pudong represents the rebuilding of Shanghai in the 1990s — China under reform opened from south to north. During the Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 era (2002–2012), the leadership promoted projects in Tianjin — notably, the development of a ‘new Manhattan’ financial centre at Yujiapu, located in the Tianjin Binhai New Area. Binhai, the second official New Area, at 2,270km<sup>2</sup>, is larger than Xiongan by close to 300km<sup>2</sup>. As the Hu Jintao era was drawing to a close, Tianjin boasted the highest GDP growth rate among province-level administrative divisions (which include Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing). Yet its stimulus-financed construction boom has turned the Tianjin financial district into one of China’s most prominent ‘ghost towns’. During the building boom, Tianjin’s GDP rose but its debts mounted as floor space in the new built environment remained vacant. Now, Tianjin is the most heavily indebted city government in China.<sup>6</sup>

A so-called ghost town in China is not an abandoned or moribund urban area (as the name might suggest), but, rather, the result of a city government constructing ‘pre-demand’ infrastructure. Yet true financial centres — like those in London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, New York, and Sydney — are highly localised; they are not the result of a ‘build it and they will come’ mentality.

A related problem for Tianjin has been its unsustainable GDP growth. Throughout the 2000s, Tianjin recorded high GDP growth, and from 2010–2012 it had the highest growth among province-level administrative divisions. In apparent response to losing its place in the rankings, Tianjin subsequently inflated — and later downgraded — its 2016 GDP statistics, reporting at the end of 2017 that it was one-third lower than originally reported. Official announcement of the discovery followed the expulsion from the Party and sentencing of the former mayor

of Tianjin, Huang Xingguo 黄兴国, to twelve years' imprisonment on corruption charges in 2017.<sup>7</sup> Between 2012 and 2017, Tianjin went from the top of the GDP growth chart to the bottom — registering just 1.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2018. Now, in the new mode of promoting transparency in statistical reporting, Tianjin has become an official site of experimentation for finding solutions to local government debt.

Returning to Xiongan, the capacity to change the space of three counties to establish a massive 'new area' lies in the political power to order and control the construction of a new urban-economic core — adding a large dot to the map. The official discourse about Xiongan, by including Shenzhen and Shanghai Pudong, but not Tianjin, also represents the Party-state's power over the narrative: not only about what places will be upheld as models but also whose leadership warrants continuing accolade. Tianjin is not the only major city left off the list of exemplars. Chongqing, in western China, is also absent. Where cities equate with positive Party leadership and enduring authority, Chongqing, like Tianjin, cannot feature with Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen, because its past, under the leadership of Bo Xilai 薄熙来, ended in ignominy. (See the *China Story Yearbook 2012: Red Rising, Red Eclipse*, Chapter 10 'Red Eclipse', pp.266–285.)

What unites the histories of these cities in China is not their ambitions, nor their successes and failings. Instead, what unites them is how the Party leadership has represented their changing conditions in relation to its own assessments of the future and reassessments of the past. In *The Burning Forest*, Simon Leys identifies 'the falsification of the past, and the alteration of reality'<sup>8</sup> through dynamic political narratives that contribute to framing how power intensifies and 'moves' through myriad contexts, whether statistical mis/representations, grand plans, exhibitions, or revisionist accounts. One prominent material realisation of power in contemporary China is the city in the image of the Party-state.

This dynamic, and its relationship to how leaders' roles in urban development are portrayed, was well illustrated in 2018 in exhibitions

devoted to the fortieth anniversary of reform mounted in museums in Beijing and Shenzhen. Unprecedentedly, they highlighted the role of Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋 — governor of Guangdong from 1979–1981 — in the establishment of Shenzhen. At the National Museum of Art in Beijing, the exhibit *Spring Tide at the Pearl River: A National Exhibition of Works of Fine Art to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of Reform and Opening Up* 大潮起珠江——庆祝改革开放40周年全国美术作品展, which opened in July, foregrounds photographs of Xi Jinping and Xi Zhongxun.<sup>9</sup>

The new Shekou Museum of China's Reform and Opening in Shenzhen went one step further. It closed unexpectedly for 'upgrading' in June and reopened in August, having replaced a bas relief sculpture featuring Deng Xiaoping with a quotation by Xi Jinping. Uniformly, the honour and acclaim for central government initiatives credits the paramount leader or chairman of the CCP — the one under whose authority the project was initiated. Altering the official history of Shenzhen to credit Xi's father is one thing; but the replacement of Deng's image with Xi's rhetoric is a startling departure from what is normative Party practice — as if reframing the timeline of the entire reform era as Xi's New Era.

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