

# New Town Utopias

Lessons from China's 21st-Century Urban Experiments

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# 新城乌托邦

中国21世纪城市实验的经验与启示

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Shanghai, 1993



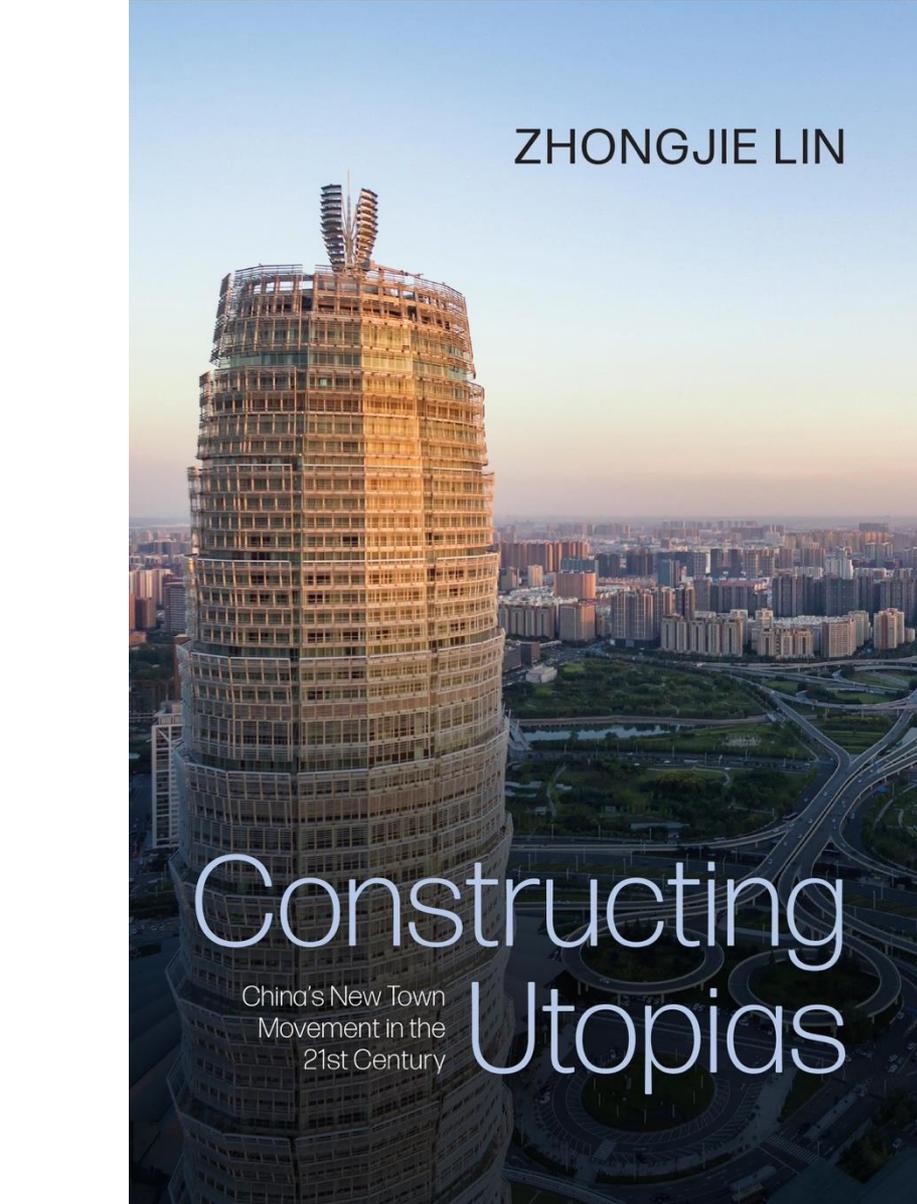
Shanghai, 2013



Artist's rendering of Lujiazui Financial District



Building Lujiazui Financial District, Shanghai, circa 1996 (Photo courtesy Mark Henley/Panos Pictures)



ZHONGJIE LIN

China's New Town  
Movement in the  
21st Century

# Constructing Utopias

## **Constructing Utopias: China's New Town Movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Oxford University Press, 2025

1. Introduction: New Towns as a National Movement
2. The Precursors
3. Suzhou Industrial Park
4. One City and Nine Towns
5. The Eco-Cities
6. The Ghost Towns
7. Epilogue: New Towns after the End of New Towns

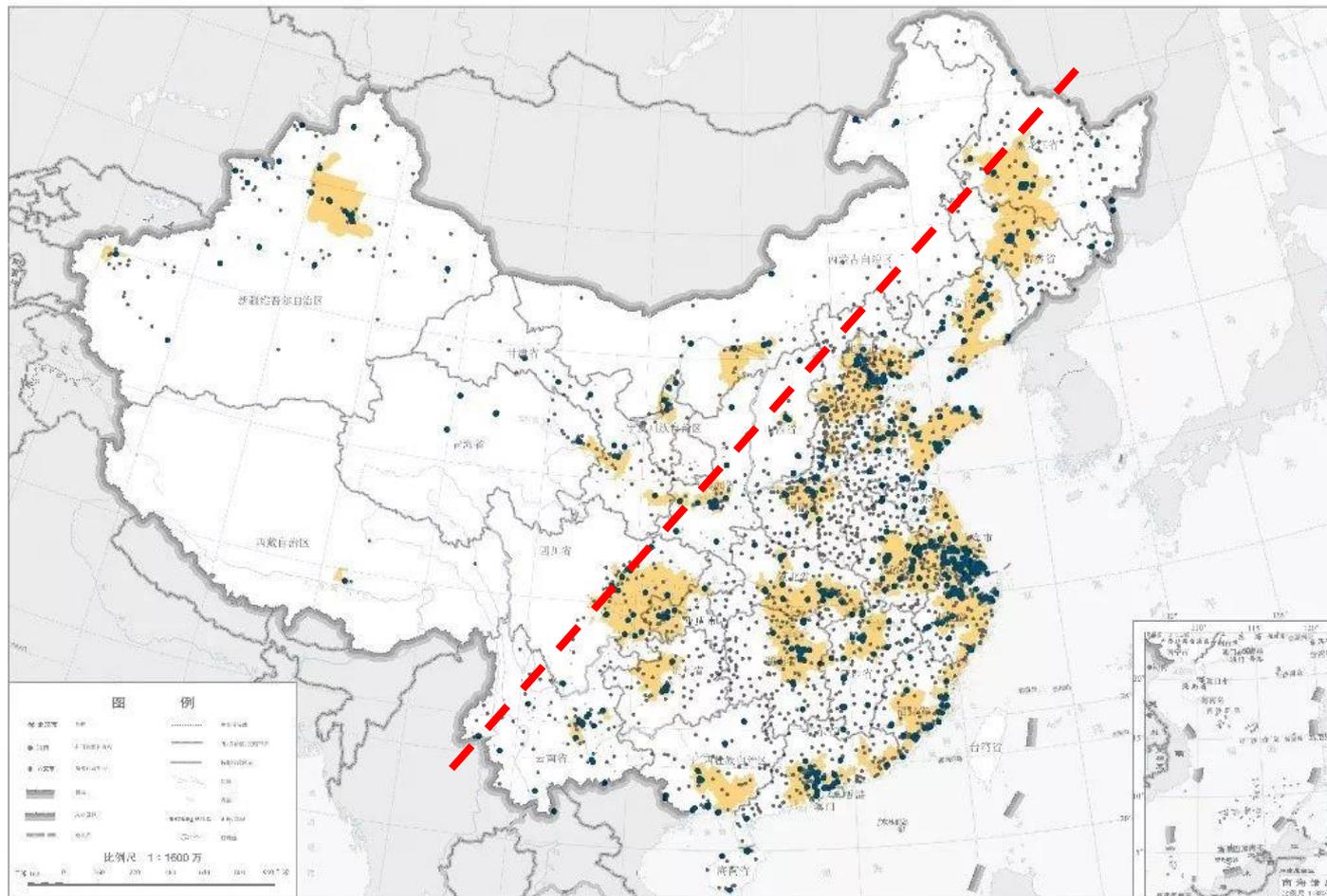
## **Forty Years of Chinese New Towns and New Districts: Evaluation and Prospect** (K. Wang et al, 2020)

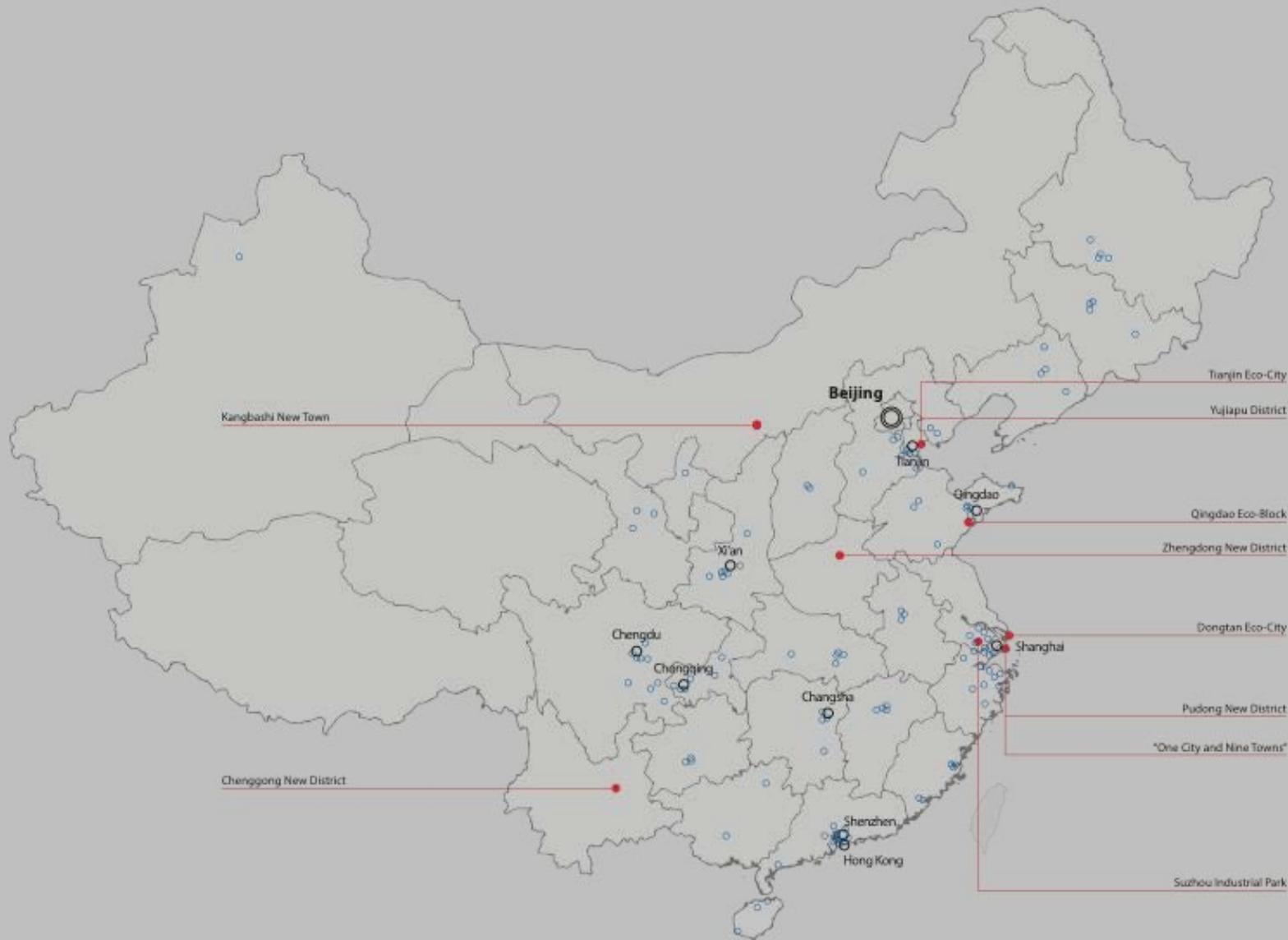
《中国新城新区40年—历程评估与展望》王凯/刘继华/王宏远

Tiers	Numbers	Approved Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Planned Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Buildable Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Built-up Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Planned Population (10,000)	Current Population (10,000)
National New Area	18	20396	23951	6145	3409	5339	2564
National Development Zone	552	5522	29674	16169	7692	9570	3794
Provincial Development Zone	1991	12652	57806	31221	12346	16340	5661
Special New Towns	1284	—	34542	18525	5506	11421	3325
Total	<b>3845</b>	—	<b>142418</b>	<b>72060</b>	<b>28952</b>	<b>42670</b>	<b>15345</b>

- **3,845 new towns and new districts** have been created by 2018, including 19 National New Areas, 552 National Development Zones, 1991 Province-level development zones, and 1284 new town at the sub-provincial level.
- The average planned area is 37km<sup>2</sup>. The average **developable area is 19km<sup>2</sup>**, compared to the current average **built-up area of 7.6km<sup>2</sup>**. The average **planned population is 110,000**, compared to the average **current population of 40,000**.
- The total planned population of all new towns is **426.7 million**.

# Locations of the New Towns and New Districts (Wang et al, 2020)





Kangbashi New Town

Beijing

Tianjin Eco-City

Yujiaju District

Tianjin

Qingdao Eco-Block

Qingdao

Zhengdong New District

Xian

Dongtan Eco-City

Chengdu

Shanghai

Pudong New District

Chengqing

"One City and Nine Towns"

Changsha

Chenggong New District

Shenzhen

Hong Kong

Suzhou Industrial Park



**Ebenezer Howard**

***GARDEN  
CITIES of  
To-Morrow***

edited with a preface by  
**F.J. OSBORN**

Introductory essay by  
**LEWIS MUMFORD**

## What is a new town?

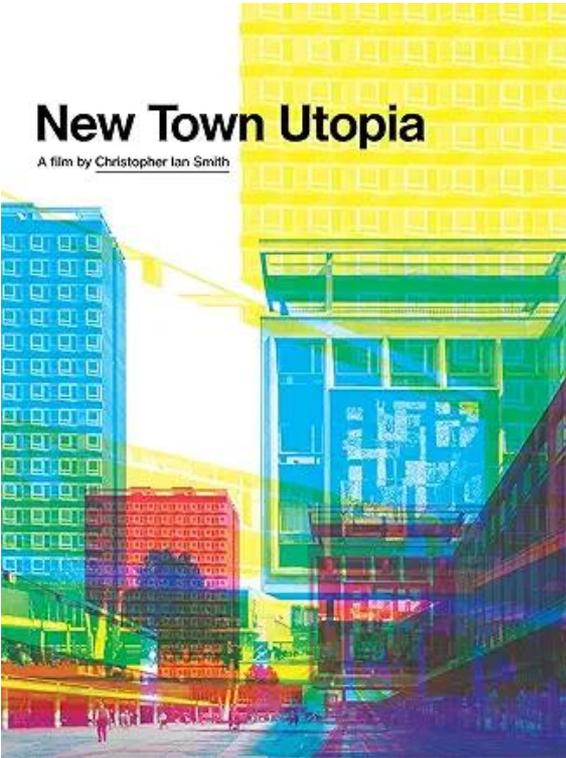
“...built from scratch as an autonomously administered town, built according to a master plan, and often based on a political decision.”

--Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout,  
*Rising in the East* (2011).



Letchworth Garden City, UK

# Precedent 1: New Town Movement in the United Kingdom, 1946-77



Basildon, Essex

## Precedent 2: US “Green Towns” under the Resettlement Administration, 1935-37



Greenbelt, Maryland

## Precedent 3: New Towns in Asia



Jurong, Singapore (1961-present) and Shatin, Hong Kong (1972-present)

## Precedent 4: Shenzhen



1970s



1980s



2010s



Today

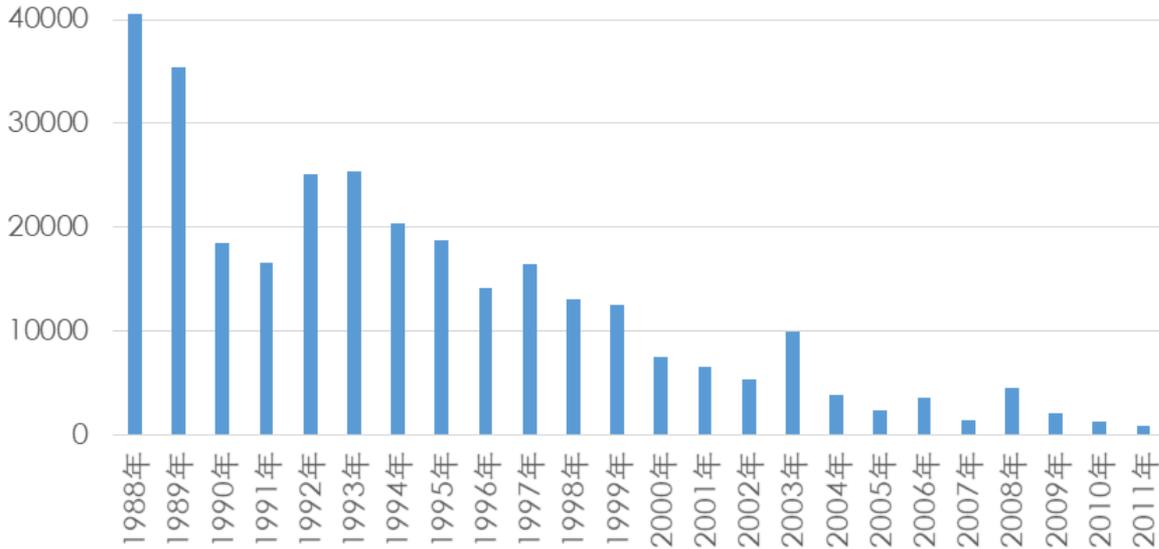
## Township & Village Enterprise (TVE)



By the end of 1990, rural industries accounted for 25 percent of China's total GNP and 60 percent of its rural production. Ninety million people were registered as employed in rural industries, and the real number may have been much higher. Two years later, at the start of 1993, the number of rural employees was reported to be over 105 million. The 1990 figure implies that rural industries employed 87 percent as many people as state industries; and the 1993 figure implies these two sectors were about equal in employment.

# Decline of TVE and Rise of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

乡镇企业承包公证办证件数(件)



China's TVE Registration (Annual)



## China's actual use of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)



China's FDI Utilization (Annual)

Source: Chinese Ministry of Commerce

# Three Reforms circa 1990 Driving Massive Urbanization

## 1. Release of urban land into the capital market

The 1988 revision of the Constitution legalized the separation of land-use right from public land ownership. The 1990 “Regulation of Urban Land Use Rights” further consolidated this policy to permit the transfer of development rights in the real estate market.

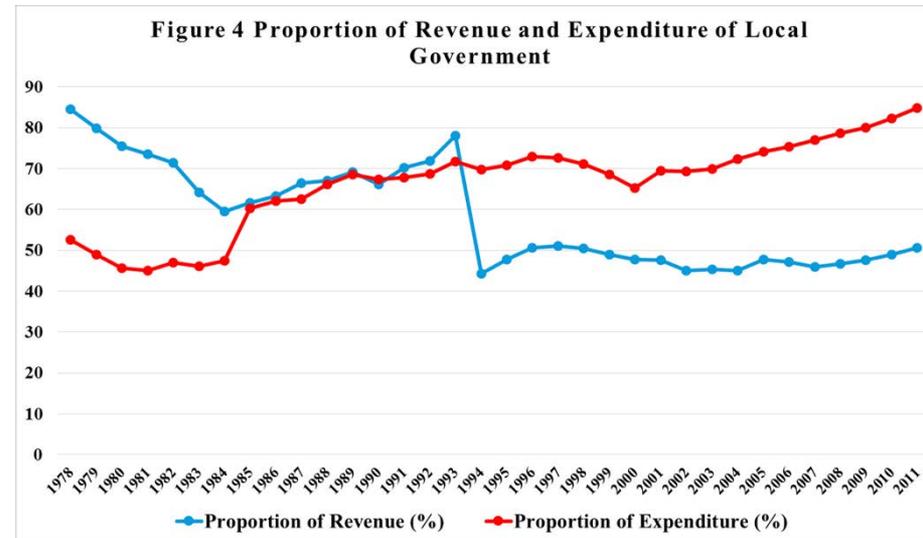


## 2. Transfer of physical planning Power

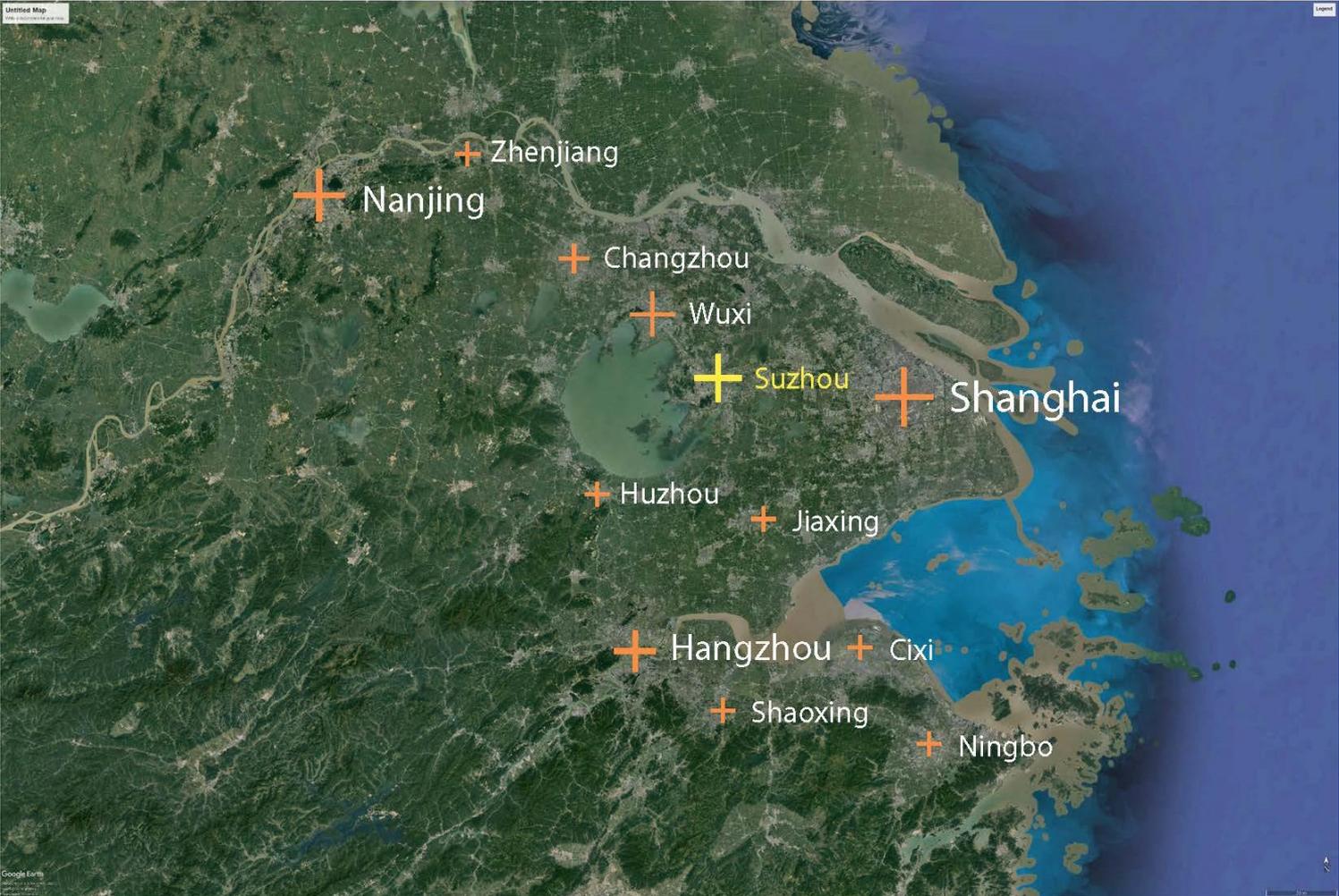
The first ever planning law, enacted in 1989, transferred the power of planning and development control to local governments. It also extended the cities’ administrative boundaries to include rural areas.

## 3. Redesign of revenue system

The State Council introduced a new tax-sharing system in 1994, to split revenues between the central and local governments.



# Case 1: Suzhou Industrial Park



# Creation of SIP: International Cooperation and Local Context

“We can inspire ourselves using the Singaporean social model and then do better.”

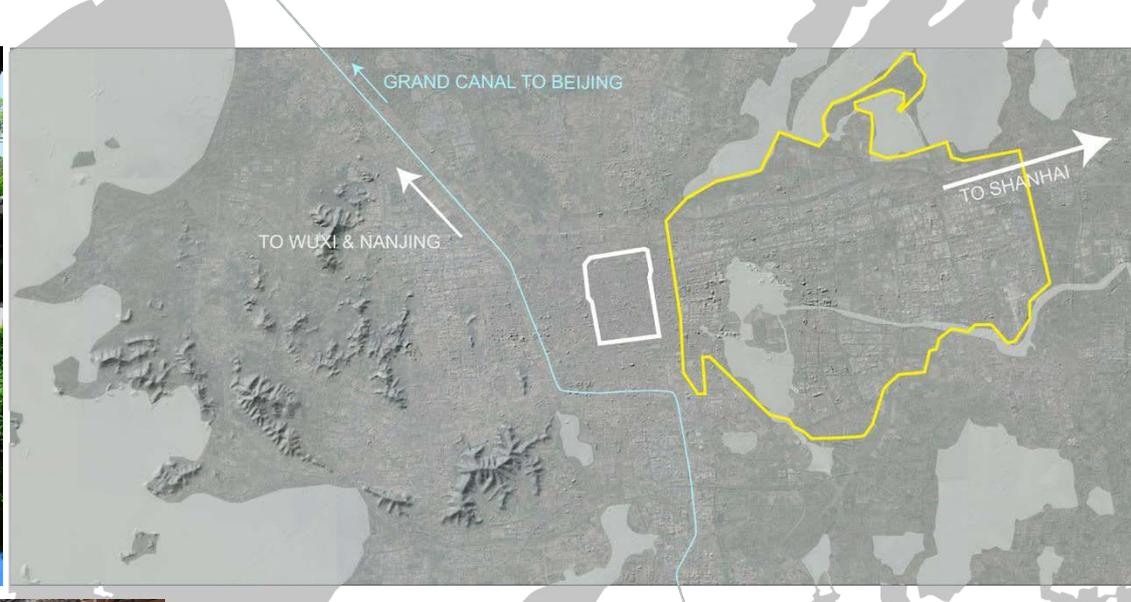
-- Deng Xiaoping



Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew

Suzhou Industrial Park (circa 2001)







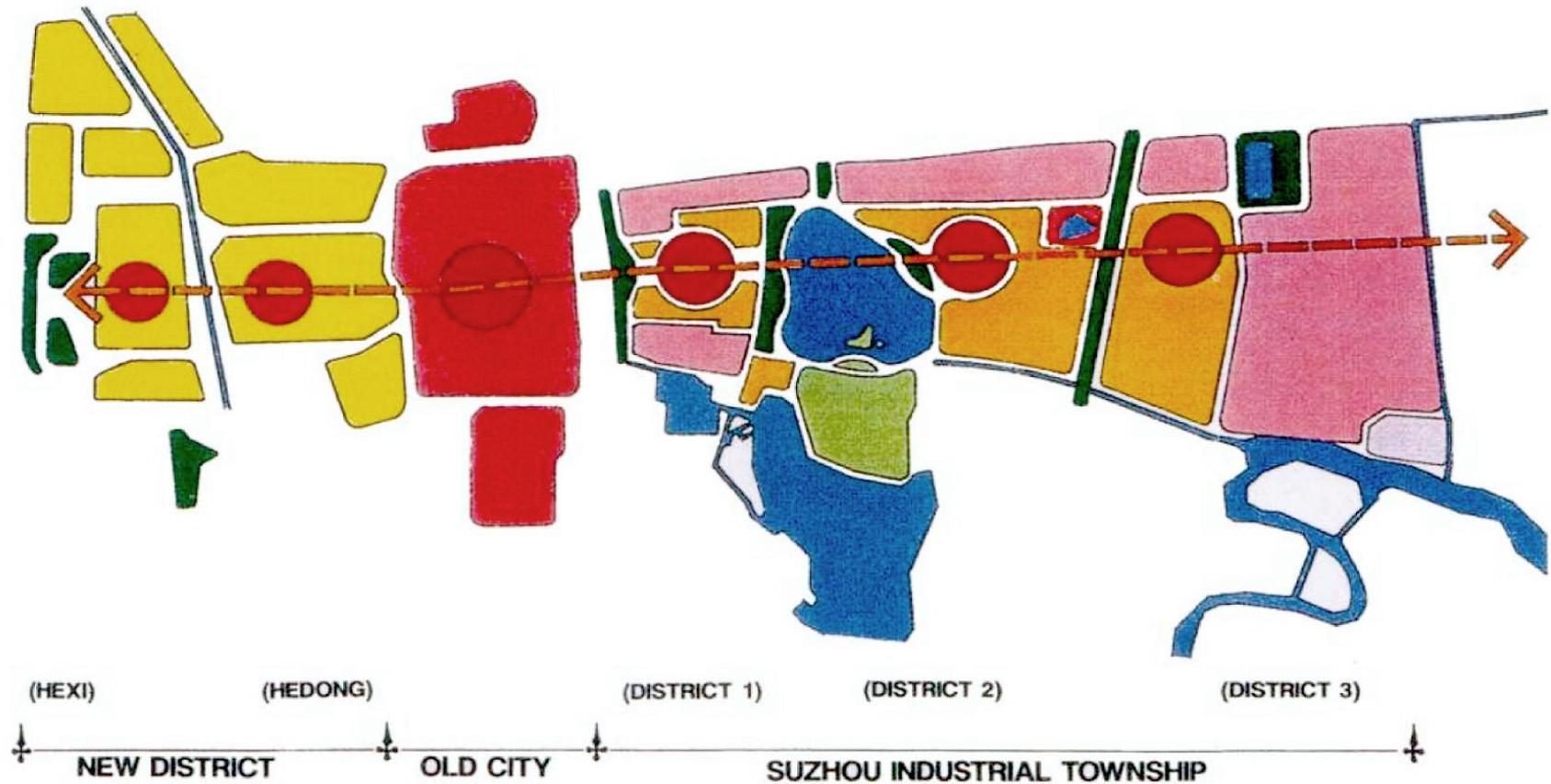
**Suzhou New District (Huqiu District)**

**Old City**

**Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP)**

苏州新区      古城      苏州工业园区

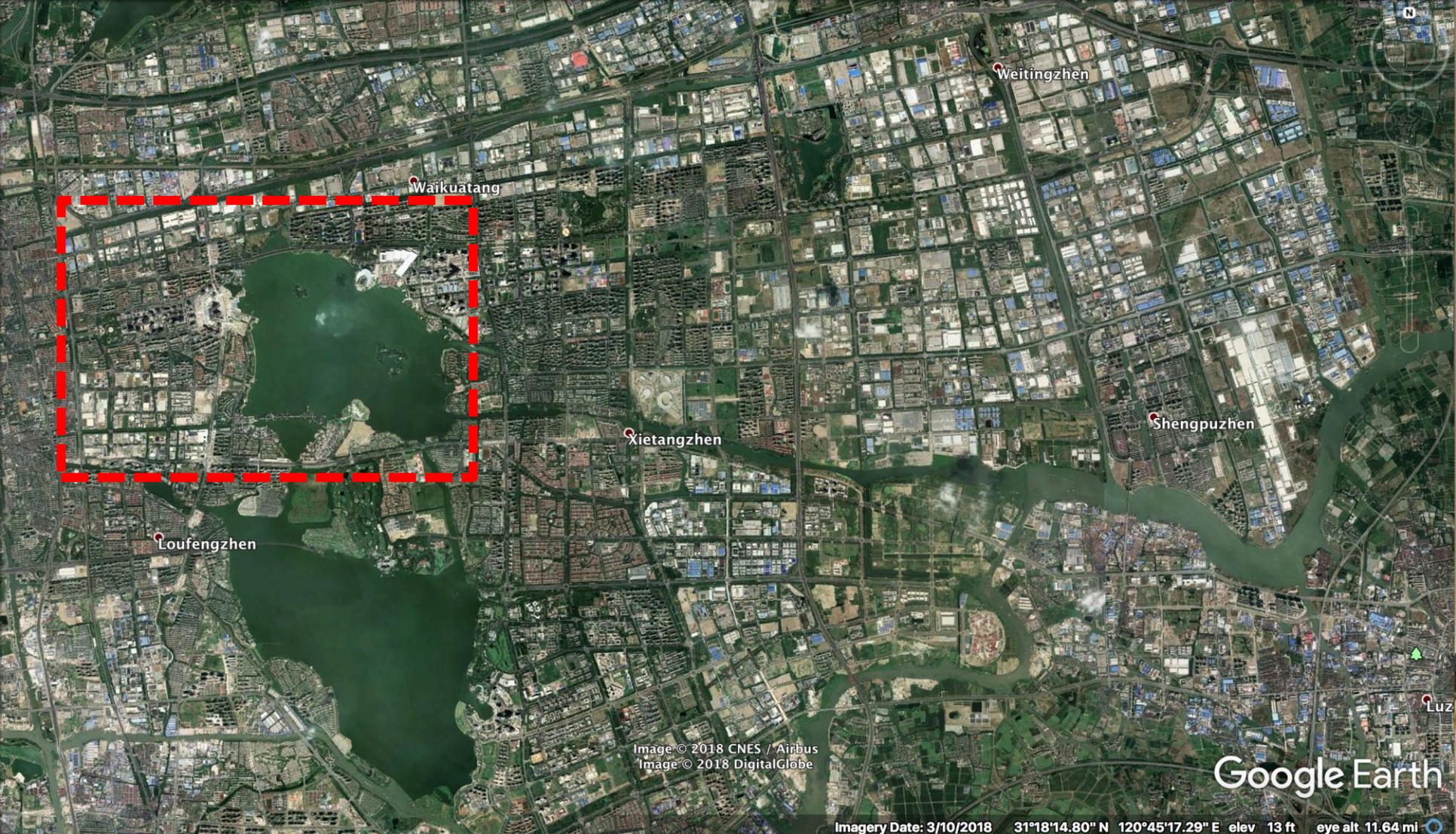
(河西)      (河东)      (第一区)      (第二区)      (第三区)



Vision Plan of Suzhou (1994): "One Body, Two Wings"



1994



Waikuantang

Weitingzhen

Xietangzhen

Shengpuzhen

Loufengzhen

Luz

Image © 2018 CNES / Airbus  
Image © 2018 DigitalGlobe

Google Earth

Imagery Date: 3/10/2018 31°18'14.80" N 120°45'17.29" E elev 13 ft eye alt 11.64 mi

2018

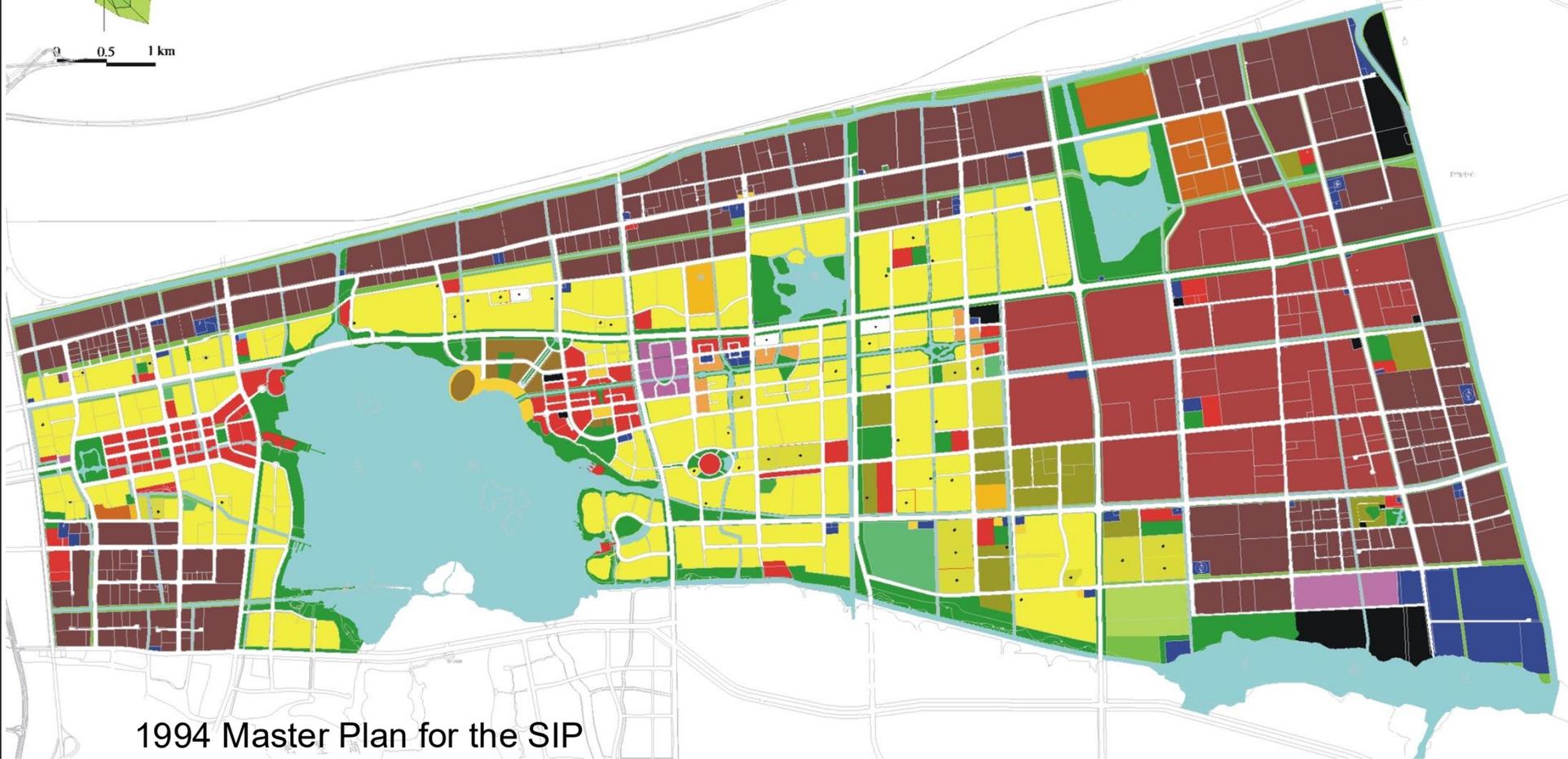
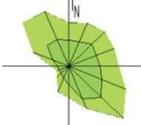


**Central Business District (2001)**



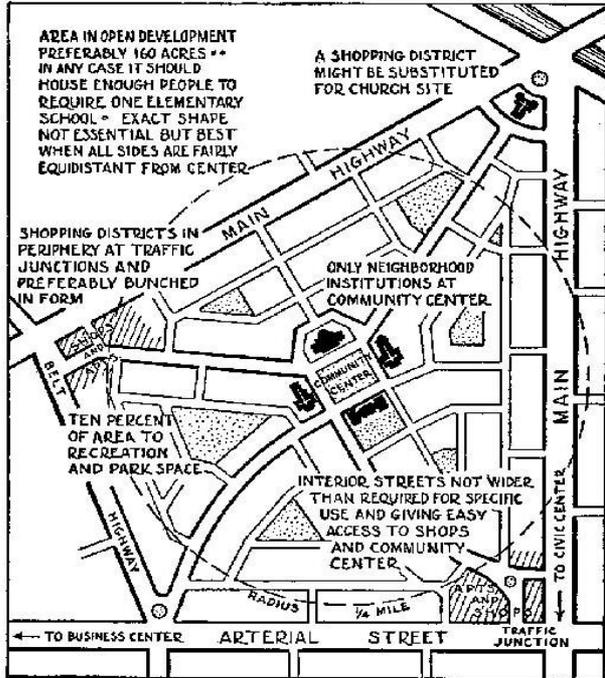
**Central Business District (2018)**

# Key Feature 1: Primacy of Planning



1994 Master Plan for the SIP

# Neighborhood Units and Neighborhood Centers in the SIP



The Neighborhood Unit for the Regional Plan of New York 1929  
by Clarence Perry



Diagram of Neighborhood Units in SIP

Clarence Perry's diagram of  
Neighborhood Unit, 1929



Neighborhood Centers in the SIP

中新联合协调理事会机构  
Organization of  
China-Singapore Joint  
Steering Council



## Key Feature 2: “Software Transfer”

**What is Software Transfer:**  
“...sharing of Singapore’s successful experience in public administration and economic management with the Chinese authorities so that they can formulate pro-business policies for the SIP, and govern with transparency and efficiency.”

Structure of the SIP Partnership  
between China and Singapore

## Software in Three Tiers

1. **Urban management and regulation:** urban planning, land use policy, management of infrastructure and public amenities, transportation, and environmental protection.
2. **Economic management:** market regulation, economic development strategy, investment promotion, financial incentive, taxation, and customs.
3. **Policy-making and implementation:** legislation, law enforcement, bureaucratic system, and fighting corruption, as well as issues related to culture and education.

The 1994 agreement states that the Chinese authority would “autonomously and selectively” adopt Singaporean experience in governance within the Cooperation Zone.



SIP delegation in Singapore



One-stop Administrative Center

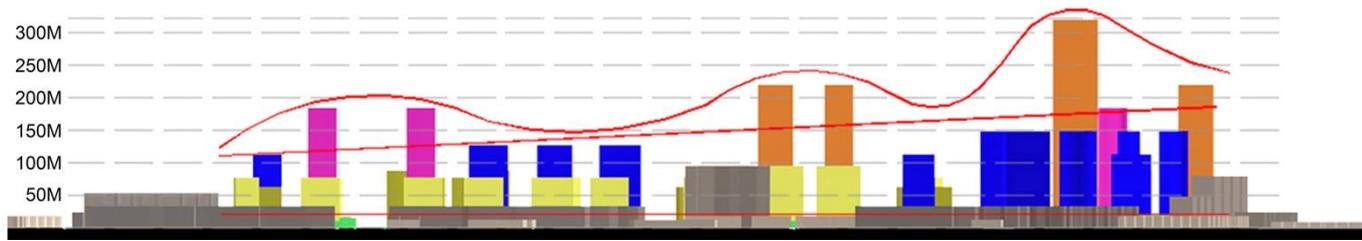
- **Training:** 198 delegations, including more than 3,700 officials, have been sent to Singapore.
- **Consultation:** Experts from the public and private sectors of Singapore were sent to Suzhou as consultants or managing members directly involved in the project.
- **Collaboration:** The OLSE and the OSP hold bi-monthly meetings to coordinate software development and transfer.
- **Legalization:** More than 80 legal documents define the institutions of the new town.
- **Administration:** Streamline decision-making process and promote transparency

### Key Feature 3: Implementing Urban Design



# “Infrastructure First, Landscape First”





The "Gate of the East" and the Suzhou Center

# What Constitute a “SIP Model”?

1. **Synergy of urbanization strategy and economic policy** sustains high-speed, long-duration growth.
2. **Institutionalized urban planning and design governance** delivers consistent, high-quality urban environment.
3. **Prioritization of infrastructure and landscape** creates durable value, stabilizes revenues, and buffers economic cycles
4. **A hybrid Chinese–Western model** integrates “hardware” with “software”



# Key Challenges for SIP

1. **Geopolitical stress** on SIP's export-oriented economy
2. Friction between **industrial path dependency** and high-tech pivot
3. **Car-centric layouts** limiting transit and street life
4. **Superblock and spatial segregation** hinder social integration
5. **Mismatch of business program** and infrastructure
6. Transitioning from new land to **complex redevelopment**

