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Comparative Study of Urban Planning Systems Across Different City Scales: Case Studies of Beijing and Dali

Yuheng Wan

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University(International Department), Beijing, 100032, China

Abstract. This research focuses on urban planning systems across different city scales, selecting Beijing (a megacity) and Dali (a medium-small city) as representative case studies. Through collecting economic and demographic data from official sources including the Beijing Municipal Government website, conducting in-depth analysis of relevant government documents, and integrating urban planning theories with practical experience, this study performs a multidimensional comparative analysis. Significant differences are identified in urban contexts including economic development, natural ecology, historical culture, and population characteristics. In comparing urban planning models, the study examines city scale and functional positioning, specific planning approaches, and planning adaptability. The analysis reveals that Beijing employs the "One Core, One Main City, One Sub-Center; Two Axes, Multiple Nodes, One Zone" spatial structure to optimize urban functions and decentralize non-capital functions, while Dali adopts the "Three Belts, Six Clusters" framework to develop as an eco-tourism city that balances ecological conservation with distinctive development. By incorporating technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence, both cities could further enhance the intelligence level of their planning systems, providing valuable references for differentiated urban development strategies.

Keywords: urban planning system;urban functions; future technologies; comparative study.

1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating urbanization, urban planning has garnered widespread attention as a critical tool for shaping urban development and enhancing comprehensive competitiveness [1][2][3]. Megacities like Beijing require refined planning to mitigate "urban diseases" while balancing economic growth with humanistic needs and sustainability. Meanwhile, small and medium-sized cities such as Dali must avoid blindly replicating megacity models and instead pursue distinctive, sustainable development pathways. By comparing urban planning systems across cities of different scales, this study aims to reveal the alignment between functional positioning and planning models, providing theoretical support for differentiated urban development strategies nationwide[4].

1.1 Research on Megacity Planning Systems

In studies of megacity planning systems, transportation and spatial layout, as well as ecological and historical-cultural preservation, are key research directions. Regarding transportation and spatial layout, Deng Xin utilized GIS technology to analyze rail transit layouts in Chengdu and Shanghai based on indicators such as land-use intensity and functional diversity around stations. The study proposed optimizing land-use planning around stations to enhance spatial efficiency, offering valuable insights for rail transit planning in megacities [5].

In ecological research, Duan Jingya analyzed surface heat islands, revealing spatiotemporal variations in local climate zones due to differences in urban planning between Xi'an and Nanjing. The study emphasized the importance of constructing ecological frameworks, increasing urban green spaces and water bodies, and mitigating heat island effects [6].

For historical and cultural preservation, Lin Jiarui compared the reuse of industrial heritage in Taipei and Nanjing, summarizing iterative renewal methods involving multiple stakeholders, such as governments, enterprises, and social organizations. Examples include establishing industrial heritage protection funds and developing industrial tourism, providing diverse approaches for preserving industrial heritage in megacities [7].

1.2 Research on Small and Medium-Sized City Planning Systems

In comparative studies of small and medium-sized city planning systems, scholars have focused on industrial transformation and historical-cultural preservation, examining various cities as case studies. Regarding industrial transformation, Wang Yongjian and Yang Xiaoguang compared the transformation paths of Germany's Ruhr region and the UK's Tees Valley. The Ruhr region successfully transitioned its economy by restructuring industries, developing emerging sectors like information technology and biopharmaceuticals, and upgrading traditional coal and steel industries. The Tees Valley, meanwhile, leveraged local research resources to develop high-end manufacturing and services, promoting industrial diversification. The study highlighted that resource-dependent small cities should plan industrial transformations in advance based on their resource endowments and market demands, cultivating emerging industries to avoid decline due to resource depletion [8].

In the integration of historical-cultural preservation and urban planning, the Rugao Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau shared Rugao's experience, where protection plans and micro-renovations were used to blend tradition with modernity and culture with commerce, creating historical-cultural districts. In contrast, Pingyao Ancient City prioritized the authenticity of its overall layout and features, strictly limiting modern construction within the ancient city while developing cultural tourism to preserve history and boost the economy. These examples offer distinct models for small cities integrating historical-cultural preservation with urban planning [9].

Despite abundant research on planning systems for both megacities and small/medium-sized cities, comparative studies across different scales remain scarce. Most existing research focuses on single-scale cities, lacking comprehensive evaluations of planning models and urban functions from multidimensional perspectives such as economic efficiency, environmental protection, and humanistic considerations.

Therefore, this study takes Beijing and Dali as cases to explore the relationship between planning models and urban functions across different scales, clarifying the reasons for their differences. The aim is to provide recommendations for optimizing planning models in the new era, addressing gaps in existing research and offering targeted theoretical support for urban planning practices. Future studies could further compare planning philosophies and implementation mechanisms across cities of different scales, providing more comprehensive theoretical and practical guidance for sustainable urban development.

2. Research Methodology

This study selects Beijing and Dali as research cases. As China's capital and a megacity, Beijing holds significant economic, political, and cultural importance, with a large population and highly developed industries. Dali, a medium-small city, is primarily focused on tourism and specialty agriculture, featuring beautiful ecological environments and rich ethnic culture. The two cities demonstrate marked differences in scale, industries, and functions, making them highly representative cases [10][11].

The research methodology consists of three main steps: First, economic and demographic data for both cities were collected from official sources including the Beijing Municipal Government website [12] and Dali People's Government portal [13], along with in-depth analysis of relevant government documents to comprehensively examine urban context differences. Second, the collected data was systematically organized and analyzed, combining urban planning theories with practical experience to conduct a multidimensional comparison of planning models. Finally, based on the analytical results, targeted recommendations were proposed.

3. Urban Contexts of Beijing and Dali

3.1 Economic Development Differences

3.1.1 Beijing's economic characteristics:

- Economic scale: GDP reached 4,984.31 billion yuan in 2024 (national leader), with tertiary sector accounting for over 80% of economy
- Core pillars: Financial services, technology services, and digital economy (digital economy value-added grew 7.7%, core industries grew 10.1%) [14]
- Growth drivers: High-tech manufacturing (e.g., new energy vehicle production increased 2.8 times) and digital economy
- Investment focus: Fixed asset investment grew 5.1%, concentrating on equipment upgrades and technological innovation
- Consumption recovery: Service consumption grew 6.5% [15]

3.1.2 Dali's economic characteristics:

- Economic scale: GDP of 173.11 billion yuan in 2023, with 2.5% growth in 2024
- Industry structure: Tertiary sector accounts for 66%, heavily reliant on tourism (over 100 million annual visitors) and green energy (new energy battery industry grew 141.6%)
- Weaknesses: Underdeveloped secondary sector (traditional manufacturing dominated), fixed asset investment declined 22.75%, real estate investment dropped 34.17% [16]

3.2 Natural Ecological Differences

3.2.1 Beijing's ecological profile:

- Climate: Temperate monsoon climate with distinct seasons (~600mm annual precipitation)
- Water resources: Per capita water availability <150m³ (1/10 national average), relying on South-North Water Transfer Project
- Ecological advantages: 44.4% forest coverage, 49% urban green space rate, initial success in Yongding River restoration
- Challenges: Significant heat island effect (urban center 3-5°C warmer than suburbs), frequent sandstorms, Yongding River dries up 120 days/year, high water resource stress, limited tree species diversity in artificial afforestation [17].

3.2.2 Dali's ecological profile:

- Climate: Subtropical plateau monsoon climate (~1000mm annual precipitation)
- Environmental quality: Abundant water resources, negative oxygen ion concentration of 10,000-20,000/cm³, 97.5% good air quality days
- Ecological advantages: Erhai Lake water quality rated "excellent" for three consecutive years, >60% forest coverage, ranks among Yunnan's top regions for biodiversity (>3,000 higher plant species)
- Challenges: Tourism development causes Erhai Lake nitrogen/phosphorus loads to exceed warning levels by 1.5 times, farmland/wetland encroachment increases ecological fragility [18]

3.3 Historical and Cultural Differences

3.3.1 Beijing's cultural heritage:

- 3,000+ years of city history, 870+ years as capital

- Represents continuity and diversity of Chinese civilization
- World Heritage sites including Forbidden City and Temple of Heaven showcase pinnacle of ancient Chinese capital planning
- Challenges: 15% loss of traditional urban features during redevelopment, conflicts between modernization and heritage preservation, management difficulties due to high population density and tourism pressure [19]

3.3.2 Dali's cultural heritage:

- Former capital of Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms
- Blends Bai culture (33.4% of population), Ming-Qing ancient city layout, and multi-ethnic traditions
- Well-preserved ancient city with 127 intangible cultural heritage items
- Challenges: Over 30% outmigration of original residents due to commercialization, need to balance tourism development with cultural authenticity [20]

3.4 Population Differences

3.4.1 Beijing's demographic profile:

- Permanent population: 21.843 million
- Urbanization rate: 87.5%
- Population structure: Highly educated workforce, 19.4% aging population
- Challenges: Population decentralization pressure, need to optimize public services (e.g., "15-minute living circles")

3.4.2 Dali's demographic profile:

- Permanent population: 790,100
- Urbanization rate: 73.35%
- Seasonal fluctuations: Over 100,000 daily tourists during peak seasons
- Challenges: Youth outmigration, seasonal tourism-dependent employment, inadequate public service facilities (medical resources only 1/5 of Beijing's level)

4. Comparative Analysis of Urban Planning Models in Beijing and Dali

4.1 Transportation Planning and Spatial Layout Comparison

4.1.1 Beijing: Functional Restructuring and Polycentric Networking

Planning Model: Implements the "One Core, One Main City, One Sub-Center; Two Axes, Multiple Nodes, One Zone" spatial structure to optimize urban functions, decentralize non-capital functions, and build the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei world-class urban agglomeration. Key strategies include densifying rail transit (1,178 km of subway by 2023) and optimizing bus routes to improve accessibility and alleviate "urban diseases" [21].

Implementation Measures:

• Transportation Network: Constructs "ring + radial" road networks, adds 35,000 parking spaces in central areas, advances East Sixth Ring Road renovation, and improves job-housing balance

• Public Services: Builds new schools and hospitals in densely populated areas to reduce service distances; installs barrier-free access in subway stations and establishes community elderly care centers

Challenges: Peak congestion index reaches 8.2/10, significant population decentralization pressure (permanent population: 21.84 million), and need to balance urban expansion with ecological management

4.1.2 Dali: Ecology-Oriented and Tourism-Service Prioritized

Planning Model: Adopts the "Three Belts, Six Clusters" ribbon-like cluster structure to guide development toward Manjiang and Fengyi, with facilities arranged according to Erhai Lake protection and tourism needs [22].

Implementation Measures:

• Slow-Mobility System: Connects scenic areas and communities via national/provincial highways, achieving 85% coverage of tourist service centers

• Tourism Facilities: Establishes tourist service centers near scenic spots and community service centers in residential areas to enhance satisfaction for both visitors and residents

Challenges: Over 100,000 daily tourists during peak seasons causing severe traffic congestion; youth outmigration leading to insufficient public service facilities

4.2 Ecological Environmental Protection Comparison

4.2.1 Beijing: Technology-Driven Ecological Restoration

Planning Focus: Designates ecological conservation zones (68% of municipal area), implements Yongding River comprehensive management and million-mu afforestation projects, yet faces water scarcity (<150m³ per capita) and pronounced heat island effect [23].

Implementation Measures:

• Smart Governance: Uses IoT for real-time Yongding River water quality monitoring (data uploaded every minute) and AI for pollution source prediction

• Green Transition: Promotes 3D-printed buildings, green energy, and high-tech industrial clusters

Challenges: Urbanization causes 120-day annual flow interruption in Yongding River, with high ecological restoration costs

4.2.2 Dali: Ecological Redlines and Compensation Mechanisms

Planning Focus: Delineates Cangshan Mountain-Erhai Lake ecological redlines (42% of prefecture area), implements "Six Two-Year Actions for Erhai Protection", maintaining "excellent" water quality for three consecutive years [24].

Implementation Measures:

• Horizontal Compensation: Upstream Eryuan County reduces pollution while downstream Dali City provides ecological compensation (cumulative 43.96 million yuan over three years) for watershed collaborate protection

• Technology Application: Employs GIS for real-time Erhai ecological monitoring and remote sensing for dynamic land-use analysis

Challenges: Tourism development causes nitrogen/phosphorus loads 1.5× above warning levels in Erhai Lake, with farmland/wetland encroachment exacerbating ecological fragility

4.3 Historical and Cultural Preservation Comparison

4.3.1 Beijing: Systematic Conservation and Urban Renewal

Achievements:

Established clear legal responsibilities for conservation through legislation, creating a unified "master planning" management system.

Significant financial investments enabled city-wide restoration projects, with notable increases in museum numbers and visitor figures.

Integrated digital preservation with urban renewal to enhance accessibility and presentation of cultural heritage.

Key Measures:

Legislation and Planning Leadership:

Released the Beijing Historical and Cultural Heritage Protection and Inheritance System Plan (2023-2035), establishing a "comprehensive conservation" concept covering the old city, the "Three Hills and Five Gardens," and three cultural belts, while creating a dynamic conservation list[25].

Pursued UNESCO World Heritage status for the Central Axis (2024 bid), promoted digital preservation of World Heritage sites like the Forbidden City and Temple of Heaven, and restored landmark structures including the Ming City Wall and Yongding Gate[26].

Organic Renewal of Old City:

Implemented "courtyard sharing" models in hutong renovations, preserving architectural features while improving living conditions. Converted vacated heritage sites like Zhihua Temple and Drum Tower into cultural exhibition spaces[27].

Relocated over 8,000 households in old city areas, repurposing vacated spaces for public services and cultural displays, such as the "Colorful Stream Project" for community optimization[27].

Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Funding:

Annual investment of 1 billion yuan for cultural relic restoration, covering 1,600+ conservation projects while training specialists in ancient architecture restoration[26].

Revitalized time-honored brands and intangible heritage, incorporating traditions like cloisonné and Peking Opera into school curricula, and blending traditional commerce with modern consumption at Qianmen Street[27].

Challenges:

Insufficient adaptive reuse: Some vacated heritage sites have limited functions (e.g., industrial heritage conversion restrictions), lacking diversified cultural services.

Uneven resource allocation: Difficulties in renovating old communities, with some protected units still improperly occupied (e.g., 60% of municipal-level sites have safety hazards).

Grassroots pressure: High-frequency demand resolution relies on intensive frontline efforts, potentially causing governance fatigue.

4.3.2 Dali: Living Heritage and Cultural Tourism Integration

Achievements:

Combined intangible heritage preservation with tourism economy, boosting employment and rural revitalization (e.g., Gucheng Village's per capita income reached ¥16,000).

High community participation: Created a symbiotic tourism ecosystem through village regulations and market-based management.

Harmonized nature and culture: Leveraged the Cangshan Mountain-Erhai Lake landscape to create distinctive experiences, attracting high-net-worth residents.

Key Measures:

Traditional Village Protection System:

Established a "Five Components" management system (conservation plans, signage, technical guidelines, etc.), becoming a national demonstration zone for clustered traditional village preservation that mobilized 2.1 billion yuan in social capital for restoration and development.

Restored historic sites like Jianchuan Ancient Town and Donglianhua Village, reviving traditional features while using rural revitalization funds to upgrade infrastructure[28].

Living Heritage Inheritance:

Supported Bai ethnic tie-dye, Dongjing music and other intangible heritage through industry associations, promoting bilingual education and ethnic culture in schools.

Companies like Lanxu Culture transformed heritage into "fingertip economy," creating 3,000 jobs with annual output exceeding ¥2 million[29].

Integrated Cultural Tourism Development:

Developed Shaxi Ancient Town as a 5A-level scenic area centered on Tea-Horse Road culture, introducing new formats like Librairie Avant-Garde to form a "tourism+culture+community" model[29].

Standardized shopfront aesthetics in ancient towns, adaptively reused traditional courtyards, and built national-level nighttime cultural tourism consumption zones to enhance brand influence[29].

Challenges:

Over-reliance on tourism: Seasonal income volatility due to economic homogeneity, with excessive commercialization in some villages diluting cultural authenticity.

Lagging public services: Healthcare and education infrastructure struggles to keep pace with population growth, especially in rural areas.

Conservation-development conflicts: Tourism development risks damaging village ecosystems (e.g., overconstruction compromising historic landscapes).

4.4 Comparison of Urban Life Service Systems

Beijing: A Refined Service Network Centered on the "15-Minute Community Life Circle"

Achievements: By utilizing big data to analyze demands, Beijing dynamically supplements service facilities to "fill gaps where needed," meeting diverse needs. The "immediate response to complaints" mechanism breaks down departmental barriers, promoting "proactive problem-solving" to enhance governance efficiency.

Implementation Measures:

Comprehensive Coverage of Convenience Facilities:

As of 2024, Beijing has established 501 "15-minute community life circles," covering over 2,280 communities with 68,000 service outlets, including markets, convenience stores, elderly care stations, and small repair services. Digital tools (e.g., e-maps, smart delivery lockers) improve efficiency—for example, Haidian District's Zhongguancun Subdistrict launched a "small repair services" map integrating online and offline resources[30][31].

Rapid Response Mechanism for Public Needs:

The "immediate response to complaints" reform handles 150 million annual requests via the 12345 hotline, achieving a 100% response rate and 97% resolution and satisfaction rates. For instance, customized school bus routes were quickly introduced to address commuting challenges for dual-income families[32].

Challenges

Uneven Resource Distribution**:** Renovating old communities is difficult, and some suburban areas still lack adequate service coverage.

Grassroots Pressure: High-frequency complaint resolution relies on intensive grassroots efforts, potentially leading to long-term governance fatigue.

Dali: A "Lifestyle-Oriented" Service Ecosystem Driven by Cultural Tourism Integration

Achievements:

Industries like tie-dye and homestays preserve intangible cultural heritage while creating jobs, forming a sustainable industrial ecosystem. Leveraging natural landscapes and ethnic culture, Dali offers a differentiated living experience, attracting high-net-worth residents.

Implementation Measures

Cultural Tourism Empowering Local Life: Shifting from "scenic tourism" to "lifestyle experiences," Dali has attracted over 300,000 long-term "New Dali Residents," fostering a tourism-based economy (e.g., homestays, cafes, art studios). Traditional crafts like tie-dye have become a "fingertip economy," with Lanxu Cultural Company generating over ¥2 million in annual revenue and employing 3,000 people[33][34].

Rural Revitalization and Community Co-Building: The "enterprise + base + farmer" model promotes specialty agriculture (e.g., cherries, long mulberries), lifting Mingzhuang Village's collective income from poverty to ¥300,000. Vacant land is repurposed into mixed-use communities (e.g., Hema Tech Town), offering youth spaces for work and living[35].

Challenges

Over-Reliance on Tourism: The economy's structural homogeneity poses risks, as off-seasons may destabilize local incomes.

Public Service Gaps: Healthcare and education lag behind population growth, with rural areas facing medical resource shortages.

4.5 Summary

The comparative analysis reveals fundamental differences:

• Economic Functioning: Beijing focuses on global city roles (political, technological, cultural) while Dali emphasizes eco-tourism and ethnic culture

• Ecological Constraints/Opportunities: Beijing employs technological solutions to mitigate ecological stress, whereas Dali relies on natural endowments but requires strict development control

• Cultural Preservation Approaches: Beijing revitalizes historic spaces through "micro-renewal", while Dali prioritizes "authenticity" in ethnic culture protection

• Population-Space Adaptation: Beijing balances decentralization with optimization, while Dali reconciles tourist demands with resident welfare

These differences reflect distinct planning logics: Beijing centers on "functional optimization", while Dali follows a dual "ecological-cultural" motivate approach.

5. Recommendations for Urban Planning Systems Incorporating Future Technology Trends

Based on in-depth analysis of both cities' urban contexts and current planning systems, this study proposes the following recommendations to address unresolved challenges:

For Beijing:

• Transportation Management: Introduce Singapore's intelligent traffic signal system (potentially improving traffic flow efficiency by 20%), combined with GIS analysis of job-housing balance data to optimize subway station locations and affordable housing distribution [36].

• Ecological Restoration: Implement IoT-based real-time water quality monitoring for Yongding River (with data updates every minute), utilizing AI to predict pollution sources and develop targeted treatment solutions.

For Dali:

• Tourism Management: Adopt Xiamen's "tourist profiling" system to analyze visitor preferences through big data (e.g., 70% preference for eco-tourism), enabling customized products like "Cang'er Hiking" routes [37].

• Agricultural Modernization: Promote smart irrigation systems (achieving 40% water conservation) and utilize drones for tea plantation pest monitoring (with over 90% identification accuracy).

6. Conclusion

As representative cases of large and small-medium cities respectively, Beijing and Dali demonstrate significant differences in economic development, natural ecology, and historical-cultural contexts. This study systematically analyzes and summarizes their distinct planning models while identifying persistent challenges. The findings suggest that megacities should alleviate "urban diseases" through decentralization and technological innovation, while small-medium cities should construct sustainable development pathways centered on ecological and cultural distinctiveness. Both cities could benefit from adopting "neighborhood planning" experiences [38] to enhance community participation, transitioning from "government-led" to "multi-stakeholder governance" models, thereby providing differentiated development paradigms for cities nationwide.

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