

HEARTLAND SURGE: CHINA'S URBAN SHIFT AND THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL PARADOX

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China's urbanisation miracle is entering a new, and more uneven, phase. Provincial capitals are booming while smaller cities are hollowing out, creating new spatial inequalities that demand policy attention. Hefei, Guiyang and Zhengzhou are now growing faster than megacities Beijing and Shanghai, marking a dramatic shift in China's growth map.

Between 2003 and 2023, nearly half of the fastest-growing cities were in central and western regions, fuelled by migrant workers following relocated industries and high-tech talent drawn to new innovation hubs. This shift began with the 2011–2015 “Plan for Industrial Transformation”, which moved labour-intensive manufacturing inland. Cities like Zhengzhou captured both jobs and people, raising the share of migrant workers in central/western regions by 6.5% between 2009 and 2022.

China's “strong provincial capital” strategy concentrates opportunity but risks draining smaller cities — the next challenge is to spread these gains more evenly across provinces.

(Click on the link to read the above in [Chinese](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#))

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Chinese:

腹地跃升：中国的城市转型与“省会城市悖论”

中国的城市化奇迹正进入一个更新且更不均衡的阶段。省会城市蓬勃发展，而较小城市正在空心化，催生新的空间不平等，亟需政策关注。合肥、贵阳和郑州的增长速度已超过特大城市北京和上海，标志着中国增长版图的重大转变。

2003 年至 2023 年，增速最快的城市中近一半位于中西部地区，动力来自两类人群：随产业外迁而转移的农民工，以及被新兴创新枢纽吸引的高科技人才。这一转向始于 2011—2015 年的“产业转型”规划，将劳动密集型制造业向内陆迁移。郑州等城市同时承接岗位与人口，使中西部地区农民工占比在 2009—2022 年间提高了 6.5%。

中国的“强省会”战略集中机会，但也存在虹吸较小城市的风险——下一步的挑战是在省域内更均衡地扩散这些增长红利。

French:

L'ELAN DE L'INTÉRIEUR: LA TRANSITION URBAINE DE LA CHINE ET LE PARADOXE DES CAPITALES PROVINCIALES

Le miracle de l'urbanisation chinoise entre dans une nouvelle phase, plus inégale. Les capitales provinciales connaissent un véritable boom tandis que les petites villes se vident, créant de nouvelles inégalités spatiales qui exigent une réponse politique. Hefei, Guiyang et Zhengzhou croissent désormais plus vite que les mégapoles Pékin et Shanghai, marquant ainsi un changement spectaculaire sur la carte de la croissance chinoise.

Entre 2003 et 2023, près de la moitié des villes à la croissance la plus rapide se situaient dans les régions centrales et occidentales. La dynamique est portée par les travailleurs migrants suivant le mouvement de relocalisation des industries ainsi que par les talents du secteur des hautes technologies, attirés par de nouveaux pôles d'innovation. Ce basculement avait commencé avec le « Plan de transformation industrielle » de 2011–2015, qui a déplacé vers l'intérieur les industries manufacturières intensives en main d'œuvre. Des villes comme Zhengzhou ont attiré à la fois emplois et population, faisant augmenter la part des travailleurs migrants dans les régions du centre et de l'ouest de 6,5 % entre 2009 et 2022.

La stratégie chinoise de « renforcer les capitales provinciales » concentre les opportunités, mais elle risque également d'assécher les petites villes. Le prochain défi consiste ainsi à diffuser ces gains plus équitablement à l'échelle des provinces.

Spanish:

AUGE DEL INTERIOR: EL CAMBIO URBANO DE CHINA Y LA PARADOJA DE LAS CAPITALES PROVINCIALES

El milagro de la urbanización de China está entrando en una nueva fase, más desigual. Las capitales provinciales están en auge mientras las ciudades más pequeñas se vacían, creando nuevas desigualdades espaciales que requieren atención de política pública. Hefei, Guiyang y Zhengzhou crecen ahora más rápido que las megaciudades Pekín y Shanghái, lo que marca un cambio drástico en el mapa del crecimiento de China.

Entre 2003 y 2023, casi la mitad de las ciudades de mayor crecimiento se ubicaron en las regiones central y occidental, impulsadas por trabajadores migrantes que siguieron la reubicación de industrias y por talento de alta tecnología atraído a nuevos polos de innovación. Este giro comenzó con el “Plan de Transformación Industrial” de 2011–2015, que trasladó hacia el interior la manufactura intensiva en mano de obra. Ciudades como Zhengzhou captaron tanto empleos como población, aumentando la proporción de trabajadores migrantes en las regiones central y occidental en un 6,5% entre 2009 y 2022.

La estrategia china de “fortalecer las capitales provinciales” concentra oportunidades, pero corre el riesgo de vaciar las ciudades más pequeñas; el próximo desafío es distribuir estos beneficios de manera más equitativa entre las provincias.

Executive Summary

1. China's urbanisation patterns have undergone a dramatic reversal: inland provincial capitals like Hefei, Guiyang and Zhengzhou now outpace traditional megacities Beijing and Shanghai in population growth.
2. Data from 2003 to 2023 shows a structural shift: 40% to 50% of China's fastest-growing cities are now in central and western regions, breaking decades-long coastal dominance as the east-interior growth gap narrows.
3. All fast-growing inland cities are all provincial capitals or centrally administered municipalities in western and central regions. Seven provinces host both the fastest-growing cities and fastest-declining cities in population, with capitals booming and smaller cities struggling.
4. The pivot towards inland provincial capitals is driven by two cohorts: migrant workers following relocated industries and high-tech professionals attracted to emerging innovation hubs.
5. Industrial relocation began around 2010 when the *Plan for Industrial Transformation and Upgrading (2011-2015)* steered the east from labour-intensive manufacturing to high-tech sectors, while central and western regions built industrial parks to absorb transferred industries.
6. Provincial capitals like Zhengzhou have captured both relocated industries and workers, with the migrant worker share in central and western regions increasing by 6.5% between 2009 and 2022.
7. The "strong provincial capital" strategy concentrates opportunities in regional centres, elevating capitals like Chengdu to innovation hubs that attract high-tech professionals.

8. Such development pattern faces criticism for creating development challenges in smaller cities, leading to resource depletion in non-capital cities as job opportunities concentrate in major urban centres.
9. Proponents argue that strong provincial capitals can eventually generate spillover effects to surrounding cities through industrial relocation when facing development bottlenecks.
10. China has made significant progress in balancing eastern and inland regional development, while the emerging spatial inequality within provinces presents the next opportunity for policy innovation.