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City profile: Yiwu and the making of a new platform-corridor city. Logistics, digital capitalism, and bottom-up silk road urbanization

Weibo Mi *, Simonetta Armondi, Siyuan Li, Mei Liu, Xinran He, Zhi Lei

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Via Bonardi 3, 20133, Milano, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Yiwu, internationally known as the "world's supermarket" for small commodities, has evolved from a regional trading town into a globally networked commercial and logistics hub. This profile charts its contemporary transformation in the logistics sector and highlights the spatial, economic, and social changes driven by the dual forces of e-commerce and the Belt and Road Initiative. It traces how digitalization and infrastructures have jointly reconfigured the logistics industry space. Moreover, Yiwu's integration into global supply chains represents a distinctive form of bottom-up adaptation to national and transnational strategies, enabled through multi-scalar policy coordination and local entrepreneurial governance. While these dynamics have enhanced the city's global connectivity and economic vitality, they have also generated new spatial inequality pressures. By foregrounding a secondary inland city, the case of Yiwu deepens debates on platform urbanism and infrastructure-led development (ILD), showing how digital platform capitalism and transnational corridor infrastructures co-produce a circulation-led and market-centric urban formation that unsettles conventional ILD models and metropolitan-focused frameworks of platform urbanism.

1. Introduction

Yiwu city, labelled as the "World's supermarket" and the only international inland port city in East China, is dominated by large-scale infrastructures such as wholesale markets, warehouses, and logistic centers, making it a frantic hub on what Knowles (2015) calls the "backroads of globalization".[1] Over the past decade, its logistics industry has grown from a local hub to a pivotal international node within the global logistics network. In the process, the Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter referred to as the BRI)[2] and e-commerce boom provide the new engine to shaped its spatial configuration and social fabrics, through impacting transportation corridors (related to ports, airports, and intermodal transport facilities, etc.), market accessibility, market size and potential growth of the region (Carlucci et al., 2018; Hong, 2007; Oum & Park, 2004).

Rather than presenting Yiwu merely as a rapidly growing logistics hub, this paper advances a broader theoretical argument: Yiwu represents an emergent type of "platform–corridor city". By this term, we refer to cities whose urban transformation is simultaneously driven by digital platform capitalism and transnational infrastructure corridors. In Yiwu case, e-commerce platforms reorganize production, trade, and labor relations, while the BRI restructures territorial connectivity through rail–sea–air corridors. The interaction between these two forces produces a distinctive spatial logic: logistics extended urbanization, nodal polycentricity, and corridor-oriented expansion.

This dual transformation is not simply a story of growth. It reflects a deeper reconfiguration of urban space under contemporary globalization, where digital infrastructures and geopolitical corridors operate in tandem. Yiwu's trajectory, therefore, raises three overarching questions: (1) How do platform economies and global infrastructure reshape the spatial organization of medium-sized cities? (2) How can non-designated cities strategically embed themselves into national geopolitical initiatives? (3) What new inequalities and socio-spatial tensions emerge from digital–logistical urbanization? These are the reasons why

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: weibo.mi@polimi.it (W. Mi), simonetta.armondi@polimi.it (S. Armondi).

[1] The "backroads of globalization" is adopted by Caroline Knowles; and unlike the high-profile trails of globalization, it refers to those off-beat and overlooked topologies, making the everyday life.

[2] The Belt and Road initiative refers to "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road". The overarching framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is "Six Corridors, Six Routes, Multiple Countries, and Multiple Ports" (六廊六路多国多港), which spans the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. The objectives of the initiative mainly include policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bond.

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studying Yiwu deepens and broadens the debates about platform urbanism and infrastructure-led development (Silk Road urbanization).

Methodologically, we primarily employ qualitative analysis, including literature review, geographic information analysis, and policy analysis. The period of study spans from 2013 to 2023, a decade since President Xi first announced the BRI. The data includes urban panel data, relevant government policy documents and speeches, and GIS-based spatial information.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical knowledge on platform urbanism and infrastructure-led development (Silk Road urbanization). Section 3 provides the geographical and historical background of Yiwu, outlining its mercantile traditions, institutional evolution, and strategic positioning within national and provincial development agendas. Section 4 analyzes the metamorphosis of Yiwu's logistics spatial layout from 2013 to 2023, combining POI-based spatial analysis with qualitative policy interpretation. It then examines this transformation through two analytical lenses: first, the role of e-commerce platforms in reshaping circulation, industrial organization, and the expansion of suburban logistics; and second, the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative in restructuring multimodal connectivity and embedding Yiwu into transnational corridor networks. Section 5 discusses the theoretical implications of the case, highlighting how our Yiwu study contributes to the broader debates on platform urbanism and infrastructure-led development. The final section concludes by reflecting on the implications of the platform–corridor model for secondary cities pursuing globalization under digital capitalism.

2. Literature review

2.1. "Platform urbanism" and infrastructure-led development (silk road urbanization)

Platform urbanism has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how digital platforms act as economic and technical actors able to restructure urban space, governance, and economic life. The integration of digital platforms and urban environments is "producing more space in the contemporary cities" (Sadowski, 2020). Platform urbanism, therefore, captures a set of burgeoning ideas about how the increasing ubiquity of platform ecosystems is reshaping urban conditions, powers, institutions, and actors (Barns, 2020). The "platform urbanism", on the one hand, points to the changing relationship between technology, capital, and cities; and, on the other hand, emphasizes a still evolving movement centered on the growing presence and power of digital platforms in cities (Sadowski, 2020). Triggered by this seemingly irreversible expansion of platform logics, the articulation between physical, digital, and social infrastructures is being reorganized across diverse urban landscapes worldwide.

Existing scholarship on platform urbanism has predominantly been technology-centric (Barns, 2020; Caprotti et al., 2022; Caprotti & Liu, 2020; Rose et al., 2021), foregrounding datafication, surveillance, and algorithmic governance, etc., as the primary mechanisms reshaping urban space. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the material infrastructures that sustain platform economies - particularly logistics networks, warehousing systems, transport corridors, and circulation regimes. Yet, as Cowen (2014) mentions, these logistical formations constitute the infrastructural antecedents of contemporary platform intermediation. Operating at the intersection of circulation and social reproduction, platform economies reorganize flows of capital and labor in ways that extend far beyond the digital interface (Mezzadra et al., 2024). Re-centering logistics and circulation allows platform urbanism to be understood not only as a digital governance paradigm but also as a spatial project grounded in infrastructural expansion and territorial integration. For example, through dominant governance over the coordination and control of the circulation of people, goods, and information in digital markets (Xiang, 2025), the state could continuously reorder platform capital in ways that align with multi-scalar political and developmental narratives. In this configuration, the platformized markets are not autonomous arenas but are selectively mobilized and restructured to serve broader state objectives, producing a hybrid model of platform governance that differs from liberal regulatory regimes.

Crucially, this infrastructural emphasis situates platform economies within infrastructure-led development (hereafter referred to as ILD), since they rely on the configuration of both digital and physical infrastructures (Joglekar et al., 2022). ILD has emerged as a global development regime to produce functional transnational territories capable of being "plugged in" to global networks of production and trade (Schindler & Kanai, 2021). It also operates as an industrial strategy that integrates production processes across expansive geographies, stitched together through extensive logistics and transportation networks (Cowen, 2014; Danyluk, 2018; Schindler & Kanai, 2021). Through spatial planning, ILD connects resource frontiers, agribusiness zones, and production nodes to logistics infrastructures, thereby enabling export-oriented growth (Schindler & Kanai, 2021). Within the framework of the BRI, ILD has been conceptualized as a form of "Silk Road urbanization", referring to the massive urban transformations induced by the BRI in the past decade (Apostolopoulou, 2021; Wiig & Silver, 2019). The BRI forges alongside cities into a connected arena for sustaining global production networks, thereby generating new urban geographies (Flint & Zhu, 2019), while simultaneously producing socioeconomic, environmental, and infrastructural inequalities within and between cities (Apostolopoulou et al., 2023). Infrastructure in this context functions not merely as a technical asset but as a geopolitical and territorial instrument that embeds cities into transnational circulation regimes.

Typically, ILD strategies mobilize a combination of large-scale transport infrastructure, logistics hubs, industrial parks, special economic zones, and financial instruments to territorialize development agendas (Schindler & Kanai, 2021; Summers, 2016). For example, under the BRI framework, the 'port-park-city'(PPC) model was pioneered and fine-tuned in Shenzhen, and then has been widely replicated in cities alongside, such as Gwadar (Pakistan) and Kuantan (Malaysia) (Liu et al., 2020; Wang & Olivier, 2006). This model is known as a "full-stream-of-logistics-production-and-urban services" model (a port in the front, an industrial zone in the middle, and a city at the back) (Liu et al., 2020). In this model, port infrastructure anchors adjacent industrial parks, with maritime connectivity driving industrial expansion and export-oriented growth. Through this integration of port and manufacturing, infrastructure becomes a catalyst for urban spatial restructuring, facilitating industrial agglomeration and reconfiguring urban fabrics. Together, these dominant ILD trajectories leave limited analytical space for circulation-centered development strategies, where infrastructure primarily facilitates trade intermediation, wholesale markets, and fragmented commodity flows rather than manufacturing clusters or headquarters concentration.

2.2. International case studies

Comparative investigation thus serves a dual purpose. It situates Yiwu within a global repertoire of ILD strategies while simultaneously revealing the limits of production-centered frameworks. Yiwu's case suggests that medium-sized cities can achieve global integration not only by attracting manufacturing investment but also by intensifying circulation functions.

In this sense, Yiwu does not contradict the ILD literature; rather, it extends it. The city demonstrates that infrastructure-led development in the twenty-first century may be less about industrial relocation and more about reorganizing the geographies of trade, logistics, and digital exchange.

A first instructive case is Duisburg (Germany), introduced by Lim and Limbach (2023), widely regarded as Europe's largest inland port and a principal EU–China rail gateway. The city's post-industrial restructuring from a steel-based economy toward a logistics and rail hub exemplifies

ILD in its classical form. Analysis emphasizes multi-scalar governance coordination among municipal, federal, and transnational actors, iterative spatial planning, and the adaptive reuse of heavy-industrial infrastructure. The core infrastructural asset in Duisburg is a rail–port terminal complex integrated into Eurasian rail corridors. Infrastructure, in this context, functions as a territorial fix for deindustrialization, anchoring new logistics activities onto legacy industrial land.

Cases from the Global South, such as Mekelle (Ethiopia) and Rosario (Argentina), similarly illustrate ILD strategies centered on industrial parks and cargo transport infrastructure (Beyer et al., 2021). In Mekelle, Chinese-backed industrial parks and rail connections were designed to insert Ethiopia into export-oriented manufacturing networks. Rosario's port and agro-logistics complex operate as a commodity gateway linking inland production to global markets. These examples foreground corridor–production park configurations, in which logistics infrastructure supports large-scale manufacturing or commodity exports. The dominant development logic is production-oriented, with strong involvement of state actors and transnational firms.

A related inland Chinese example is the Chongqing notebook computer cluster, where municipal authorities deployed preferential policies, bonded zones, rail freight services, and logistics subsidies to attract global OEMs and relocate export manufacturing inland (Gao et al., 2019). Here, ILD operates through coordinated state intervention aimed at restructuring production geography. Infrastructure and logistics policy serve as instruments for embedding a large-scale manufacturing cluster within global value chains.

2.3. From production-led to circulation-led: the specificity of Yiwu

Despite superficial similarities - such as rail terminals, logistics parks, and corridor integration - Yiwu's development fundamentally diverges from the canonical ILD paradigm along the following four dimensions.

- Yiwu's trajectory is circulation-led rather than production-led.

  Whereas Duisburg, Mekelle, Rosario, and Chongqing revolve around heavy industry, export manufacturing, or bulk commodities, Yiwu's growth is anchored in fragmented small-commodity trade. Its comparative advantage does not lie in large-scale factory production but in aggregating, sorting, and redistributing millions of standardized, low-value items. Infrastructure here facilitates circulation intensity rather than production scale.
- The central infrastructural object is a wholesale market complex rather than a port or industrial zone.

  Yiwu International Trade City functions as a state-owned, spatially concentrated marketplace that predates corridor integration. Unlike port terminals or industrial parks that serve production clusters, the wholesale market operates as a circulation infrastructure—an institutionalized space for price discovery, merchant clustering, and order aggregation. Logistics infrastructure subsequently evolved to support and expand this market-centered ecosystem. In this sense, infrastructure in Yiwu amplifies a pre-existing commercial network rather than replacing an industrial base.
- The dominant economic actors are SMEs and migrant traders rather than multinational OEMs.

  While global logistics firms and cross-border platforms are present, Yiwu's economic dynamism is rooted in small and medium-sized enterprises, family workshops, livestream sellers, and migrant entrepreneurs. The city's global integration emerges from the aggregation of fragmented actors rather than from the coordinated relocation of large anchor firms. This produces a distinctive governance landscape in which local state agencies mediate between dispersed market actors and national corridor strategies.
- Digital platforms play a structurally central role.

  In contrast to classical ILD cases where infrastructure primarily supports manufacturing exports, Yiwu's transformation is deeply intertwined with e-commerce platforms. Digital marketplaces, livestreaming economies, and cross-border online trade have intensified order volumes and restructured spatial demand for warehousing and logistics parks. Infrastructure development is therefore not only corridor-driven but platform-amplified.

3. Situating Yiwu: geographical and historical foundations of its platform–corridor transformation

3.1. Locating Yiwu: a constrained territory and an unofficial node in the BRI network

Yiwu (coordinates: 119°49′-120°17′E, 29°02′13″-29°33′40″N) is a county-level city located in eastern China, situated in the central part of Zhejiang Province (Fig. 1). As of 2023, Yiwu covered a land area of 1105 km^2, with a registered population of 911,520 and GDP of 205.562 billion CNY (Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Geographically, the city is encircled by mountains on its eastern, southern, and northern sides, and bisected by the Yiwu River, which constrains natural accessibility. Administratively, Yiwu is subordinated to Jinhua City and governs eight sub-district offices and six towns, with the eight sub-districts forming the city's core urban area.

Yiwu serves as a pivotal departure point in eastern China for the "China-Europe railway express" (Fig. 2), a flagship project of the BRI. By rail, the overland Silk Road connects Yiwu with West Asia, Central Asia, and Europe; by sea, through Ningbo Port, the maritime Silk Road links the city to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and North Africa. Yet in the policy document "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" released in 2015, 26 key node cities and port cities were officially highlighted, and Yiwu was notably absent. Indeed, Yiwu has never been officially designated as a key BRI node in national-level documents. Nevertheless, the city has proactively aligned itself with the initiative through bottom-up strategies. Local policy narratives have framed Yiwu as a "vanguard of the BRI", using the initiative as a development priority (Summers, 2016) and promoting the shift from a logistics system premised on the "overseas single point" layout to one focused on "global networking" (Yiwu Municipal People's Government, 2021). Reflecting these efforts, in 2023, Yiwu accounted for nearly one-ninth of the total freight volume of all China–Europe Railway Express services nationwide, thereby underscoring its emergence as a crucial urban hub for facilitating external trade under the BRI. Yiwu's success provides a novel perspective on "Silk Road urbanization" beyond official designation and top-down urban reorientation.

3.2. Commercial trajectory: from "Ji Mao Huan tang" to the global platform trade hub

Yiwu boasts a long-standing mercantile tradition dating back to the Song (宋) Dynasty, reaching prominence during the late Qing (清) period. Yet before 1978, due to rigid political and economic policy interventions, its small commodity trade remained low-key. Instead, informal - and often illegal - "walking traders" (Fig. 3) became the dominant mode of exchange (Rui, 2018). A well-known example is the practice of "ji mao huan tang" (chicken feathers for candy), in which peddlers carried sugar on shoulder poles, travelled door to door, and bartered for chicken feathers that were later used as fertilizer or processed and sold through supply-and-marketing cooperatives. This practice became an emblematic snapshot of Yiwu's pre-reform commercial activities.

After 1978, with the advent of the Reform and Opening-up policy,

Fig. 1. The location and administrative division of Yiwu in China.

Yiwu's small commodity seized an opportunity for take-off. Its post-reform trajectory can be broadly divided into four phases (Rui, 2018). Yiwu's first three phases unfolded through a conventional and incremental commercial path, marked by volatility but an overall upward trend. In the first stage (1981–1985), the "Four Allows"[3] policy legalized private trading and enabled the emergence of regulated marketplaces (Fig. 4); followed by the local strategy of "xing shang jian xian" (promoting commerce to develop the county), commerce was elevated to the center of municipal policymaking (Liu, 2014; Rui, 2018). In the second stage (1986–1992), national debates over "socialism versus capitalism" cast doubt on the "Yiwu model", prompting business outflows and a decline in trading volumes (Rui, 2018). This politically induced economic turbulence eased after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour reaffirmed the continuation of market-oriented reforms; in the same year, Yiwu's market was upgraded from the "Yiwu Small Commodity Market" to "Zhejiang China Small Commodity City" (Rui, 2018; Zhen et al., 2016). In the third stage (1992–2014), the Yiwu municipal government implemented an institutional reform in the Futian Market to improve efficiency and specialization by categorizing sub-market spaces by commodity type and leveraging the managerial flexibility enabled by the de jure state ownership of market booths (Fig. 5) (Wu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). This reform propelled Yiwu's rapid expansion and eventually brought the city to its peak by 2014, rendering Yiwu the world's largest small-commodities wholesale center (State Council, 2014). In turn, the trade boom underpinned broader economic gains: Yiwu's GDP increased by approximately 684.5 times between 1978 and 2013 (Fig. 6), as the city shifted from an obscure county town into a globally renowned trading hub.

However, in the fourth stage (since 2014), Yiwu's growth has slowed. Amid external economic turbulence, the inherent limitations of Yiwu's traditional developmental pathway became increasingly conspicuous, manifesting in "the excessive dependence on markets, low level of industrial sophistication, and paucity of alternative drivers," which constrained the city's prospects for further upgrading (Yiwu Planning Bureau, 2015). In response, Yiwu sought to sustain its competitiveness by leveraging e-commerce, streamlined customs procedures, logistics

[3] The "Four Allows" policy refers to permitting (1) rural residents to enter cities to engage in commerce, (2) the opening and operation of urban and rural markets, (3) the trading of industrial goods by rural residents, and (4) long-distance peddling/trading.

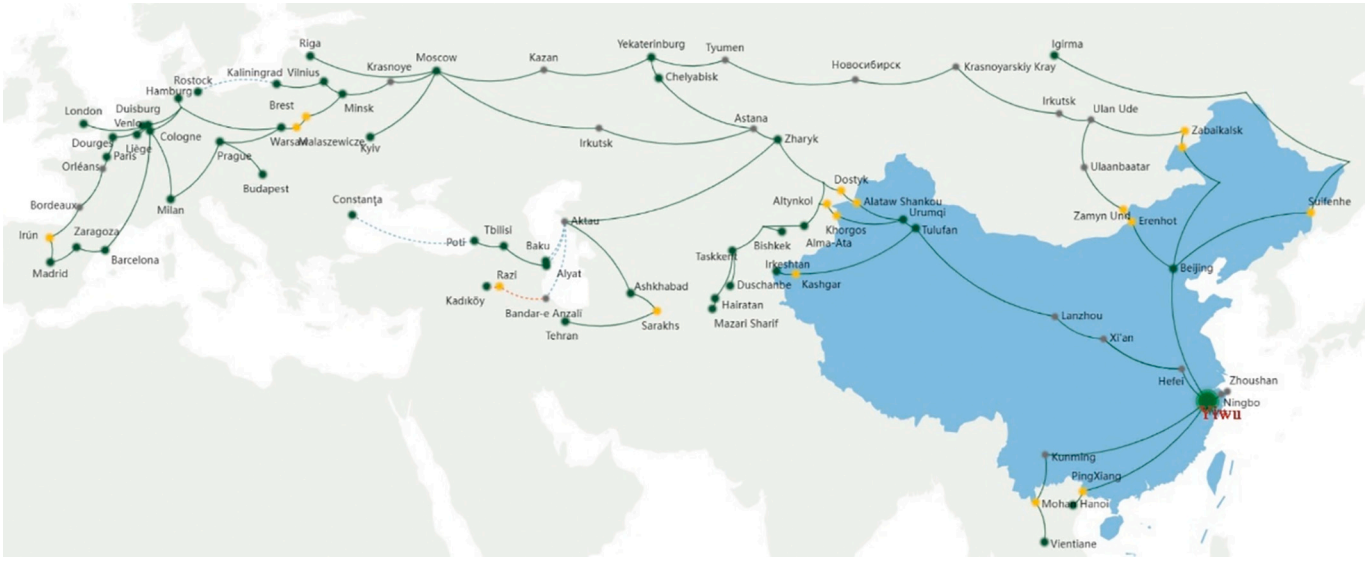

Fig. 2. The core route map of the YXE railway.
(Source: YXE Trading Service Group, 2025, https://www.yixinou.com/en/lines.)

Fig. 3. "Walking trader" in Yiwu.
Source: https://www.cphoto.com.cn/content/article/100385.html.

Fig. 4. The first regulated marketplace.
Source: https://www.cphoto.com.cn/content/article/100385.html.

upgrades, and BRI integration. Over the subsequent decade, the municipal government introduced a series of policies to materialize the pivot.

For instance, in both the 13th and 14th Five-Year Plans for National Economic and Social Development of Yiwu City[4] (hereinafter referred to as the Five-Year Plan of Yiwu), digital trade has been emphasized as a strategic direction for Yiwu's economic transformation, envisioned as a new instrument for the city's economic growth. In addition, following the launch of China's BRI in March 2015, Yiwu responded quickly by recalibrating its spatial and economic agenda through the Master Plan (2013–2030), promulgated in April 2015. This plan strategically repositioned and upscaled Yiwu as the "World Capital of Small Commodities (世界小商品之都), International Dry Port City (国际陆港城市), and Innovative and Dynamic City (创新活力城市)" (Yiwu Planning Bureau, 2015, p. 36). It explicitly articulated Yiwu's principal urban functions, including serving as "a pilot zone for comprehensive reform in international trade (国际贸易综合改革试点)", "a modern inland logistics hub endowed with port-like services (全国内陆地区具有港口服务的现代物流中心)", "a critical base for industrial transformation and upgrading (产业转型升级的重要基地)", and "a frontier for cross-border e-commerce (跨境电子商务高地)" (Yiwu Planning Bureau, 2015, p. 36). In the new decade, logistics, e-commerce, and the development of commodity information exchange platforms were added to the 2013 master plan (Li et al., 2016). Against this backdrop, this profile seeks to interpret the logistics-industrial spatial evolution of Yiwu in the post-BRI decade, focusing on the BRI, E-commerce, and policy networks.

4. The metamorphosis of logistics industrial spatial layout in Yiwu

Over the past decade (2013–2023), driven by the BRI and the

[4] The implementation period of the 13th Five-Year Plan of Yiwu City is from 2016 to 2020; the implementation period of the14th Five-Year Plan of Yiwu City is from 2021 to 2025.

Fig. 5. Yiwu International Trade City (Futian Market).
Source: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202412/24/WS676a5f8da310f1265a1d4a55.html.

accelerated digitalization of small commodity trade, Yiwu's logistics industry has not only expanded rapidly in scale but also undergone profound spatial restructuring. To capture the characteristics of this transformation, this paper employs Point of Interest (POI)[5] data on the logistics sector in Yiwu and applies kernel density analysis in QGIS. As shown in Table 1,[6] between 2013 and 2023, the number of logistics-related POIs in Yiwu increased by 671%; however, the growth differed considerably across categories. Among logistics nodes, logistics parks and distribution centers at various levels recorded the most significant increases, reaching 367% and 591%, respectively. The number of docks[7] rose from one to two, while major logistics infrastructures such as railway stations and the airport remained constant in number, though their capacity expanded. By contrast, the number of bus stations declined, partly due to the reorganization of the bus transit system[8] and partly because the diversification of transport modes reduced reliance on road-based travel. Among logistics enterprises, warehousing and transportation POIs grew rapidly, increasing by 867%, whereas the number of express and postal service POIs remained largely stable.

Based on the compiled POI data of Yiwu's logistics industry, kernel density analysis was conducted in QGIS to visualize the spatial distribution of Yiwu's logistics sector in 2013 (Fig. 7) and 2023 (Fig. 8). Geographically, Yiwu is bounded by mountains on three sides, which restricts the expansion of logistics activities in the city's outskirts. The Yiwu River, despite running through the urban core, is unsuitable for large-scale water transport and therefore has minimal effect on the spatial configuration of the logistics industry. As shown in the figures below, three key features characterize the spatial transformation of Yiwu's logistics industry.

Firstly, the spatial structure of Yiwu's logistics industry has shifted from a monocentric to a polycentric distribution. In 2013, the highest POI density was concentrated in Jiangdong sub-district, concentrated within the blocks enclosed by Jichang Road, Nanshan Road, Huangyuan Road, and Jiangdong Middle Road. By 2023, however, five major clusters had emerged: Cluster A, the densest, lies between Chengxi and Choujiang sub-district; Cluster B is at the northern end of Jiangdong sub-district, adjacent to Cluster C at the southern end of Futian sub-district; Cluster D is located at Futian sub-district's northern end; and Cluster E lies in Beiyuan sub-district.

A second notable feature is the outward movement of logistics activities, with the agglomeration shifting from the urban core to the periphery. Secondly, the spatial distribution of Yiwu's logistics industry has shifted from the urban core toward suburban areas. In 2013, logistics activities were concentrated along the riverbanks of Jiangdong and Choujiang sub-districts and in the southern part of Futian Subdistrict, forming a core-centred pattern with density gradually declining outward, with the lowest levels in suburban areas. By 2023, however, activities were predominantly concentrated at the peripheries of Chengxi, Choujiang, Houzhai, and Beiyuan sub-districts, as well as along the edges of Futian and Jiangdong sub-districts. While some activities persisted near major commercial centres in the urban core, the overall trend was a clear outward shift toward the suburbs.

Another change lies in the transformation of Yiwu's logistics industry from a centripetal pattern toward an elongated southwest–northeast axis of development. According to standard deviational ellipse analysis, in 2013 (Fig. 9), the ellipse was compact, covering only the south-central part of Choucheng sub-district and the northwest of Jiangdong sub-district; by 2023 (Fig. 10), it had expanded substantially to encompass seven subdistricts and towns, including Choucheng, Beiyuan, Choujiang, Jiangdong, Houzhai, and Futian sub-districts. Moreover, in 2013 the ellipse's major and minor axes were similar, indicating a clustered pattern, whereas by 2023 the disparity between the axes had widened, reflecting a pronounced reorientation toward southwest–northeast axial distribution of logistics activities.

[5] The POI data used in this paper were extracted in real time from Amap (Gaode Map) via Python on July 23, 2025.

[6] The classification standards of the POI data is provided by Amap (Gaode Map), while further refining them in accordance with the parameters stipulated in"China's Logistics Terminology"(GB/T 18354-2006) and "Classification and Evaluation Indicators of Logistics Enterprises" (GB/T 19680-2013), supplemented by relevant scholarly studies on logistics industry categorization. Based on these sources, the POI classification framework for Yiwu's logistics sector is divided into two major categories: logistics nodes and logistics enterprises. Logistics nodes primarily include logistics parks, distribution centers, and freight terminals, with the latter encompassing airports, bus stations, and railway stations (Zhou & Luo, 2024); Logistics enterprises are categorized into two subtypes: express and postal services, and warehousing and transportation services (Guo, 2023).

[7] The docks in Yiwu are inland docks; however, the Taxia Dock and the Moon Bay Dock along the Yiwu River no longer serve freight functions and are therefore excluded from this paper.

[8] Some smaller bus stations were merged into larger integrated bus hubs.

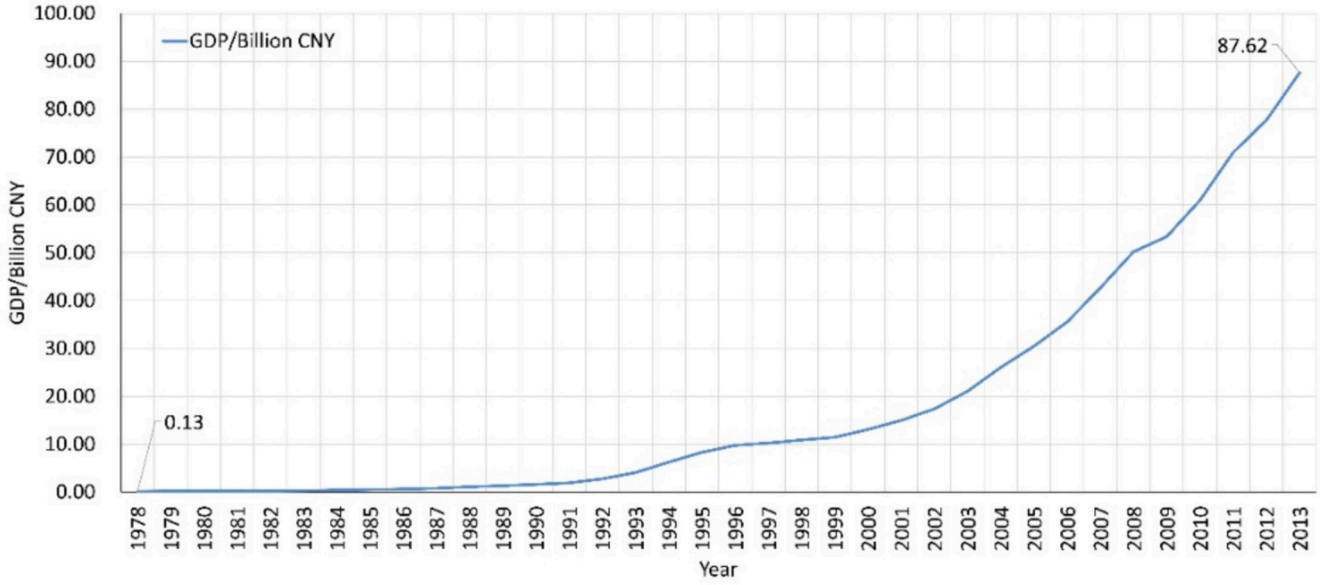

Fig. 6. GDP of Yiwu from 1078 to 2013.
(Source: Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 1978–2013.)

Table 1
The amount of the logistics industrial POIs in Yiwu.

Category	Subcategory	Number (2013)	Number (2023)
Logistics node	Logistics parks	3	14
	Distribution centres	23	159
	Railway stations	2	2
	Bus stations	6	4
	Ports	1	2
	Airports	1	1
Logistics enterprises	Express and postal services	92	88
	Warehousing and transportation	364	3521

5. Unfold the metamorphosis and challenges in the Belt and Road Initiative, e-commerce, and policy network

5.1. In the lens of e-commerce

Over the past two decades, Yiwu has evolved from a traditional wholesale center into a dynamic nexus for online trade. The proliferation of digital platforms has generated unprecedented volumes of small commodity transactions, propelling the dramatic expansion of Yiwu's logistics industry. Concurrently, warehouses, sorting centers, and distribution parks have been progressively relocated to peripheral industrial zones offering larger land parcels and superior connectivity to highways, rail terminals, and freight networks. Taken together, these twin upscale processes and spatial decentralization underscore how e-commerce has reconfigured Yiwu's logistics landscape, facilitating its emergence as a globally embedded hub of trading and distribution.

5.1.1. Scaling up: logistics industry and e-commerce booming in Yiwu

At the core of platform urbanism are digital platforms such as Alibaba, Amazon, and JD.com, which operate not merely as intermediaries of exchange but increasingly constitute the digital infrastructures of urban space and economic life (Leszczynski, 2023). Embedded within urban spatial arrangements, these platforms reconfigure the relational dynamics among consumers, producers, and merchants, profoundly challenging Yiwu's traditional wholesale market (Rui, 2018). Historically, Yiwu's traditional trade model was predicated on the physical marketplace, which served as both an infrastructure for aggregating and categorizing commodity information, while simultaneously offering full-process procurement services. Thus, these advantages yield Yiwu's competitive dominance in convenience and price. However, the platformization of small-commodity trade has displaced this process into the digital realm, enabling consumers to bypass the spatial mediation of the marketplace and engage directly with merchants and factories. In this transition, the territorial and infrastructural advantages that once underpinned Yiwu's market supremacy have been profoundly eroded.

Nevertheless, swiftly perceiving the looming crisis, Yiwu mobilized its commercial acumen and entrepreneurial ethos to strategically cultivate an early-mover advantage within the emergent platform economy. Alibaba was the first e-commerce platform to exert a transformative influence on Yiwu. From as early as 2000, local entrepreneurs actively embraced the platform, signaling Yiwu's early adoption of platform logics. However, before 2010, Yiwu's e-commerce development was mainly driven by e-merchants and local villagers, with the government playing a rather limited role (Qian et al., 2024). A plausible explanation is that the rapid rise of online trade disrupted Yiwu's traditional physical trade, which, given the city's continued reliance on offline transactions, engendered institutional hesitation and policy ambivalence. Accordingly, during this period, local authorities adopted a cautious, wait-and-see approach to large-scale e-commerce promotion.

It was not until 2010, two years after the global financial crisis, that Yiwu officials acknowledged the business miracle unfolding in local villages thanks to e-merchants, while the wholesale marketplace remained in a slump (Qian et al., 2024). Since then, the Yiwu government has orchestrated and institutionalized a set of multi-scalar policy instruments aimed at entrenching the platform economy within the urban economic fabric, thereby positioning the state as a key facilitator of platform-mediated restructuring. At the provincial level, Zhejiang province launched the strategic slogan of “Replacing Markets with E-commerce (电商换市)” in 2013, elevating the vigorous development of e-commerce to a matter of political orthodoxy (Department of Commerce of Zhejiang Province, 2013). In response, the Yiwu municipal government promptly followed suit, promoting the integration of traditional markets with e-commerce and countering widespread pessimistic narratives that predicted the decline of the “world's supermarket” in the digital era (Dong & Wang, 2020). Since the 12th Five-Year Plan of Yiwu, e-commerce has gradually been elevated to a strategic priority; for the first time, the plan explicitly articulated

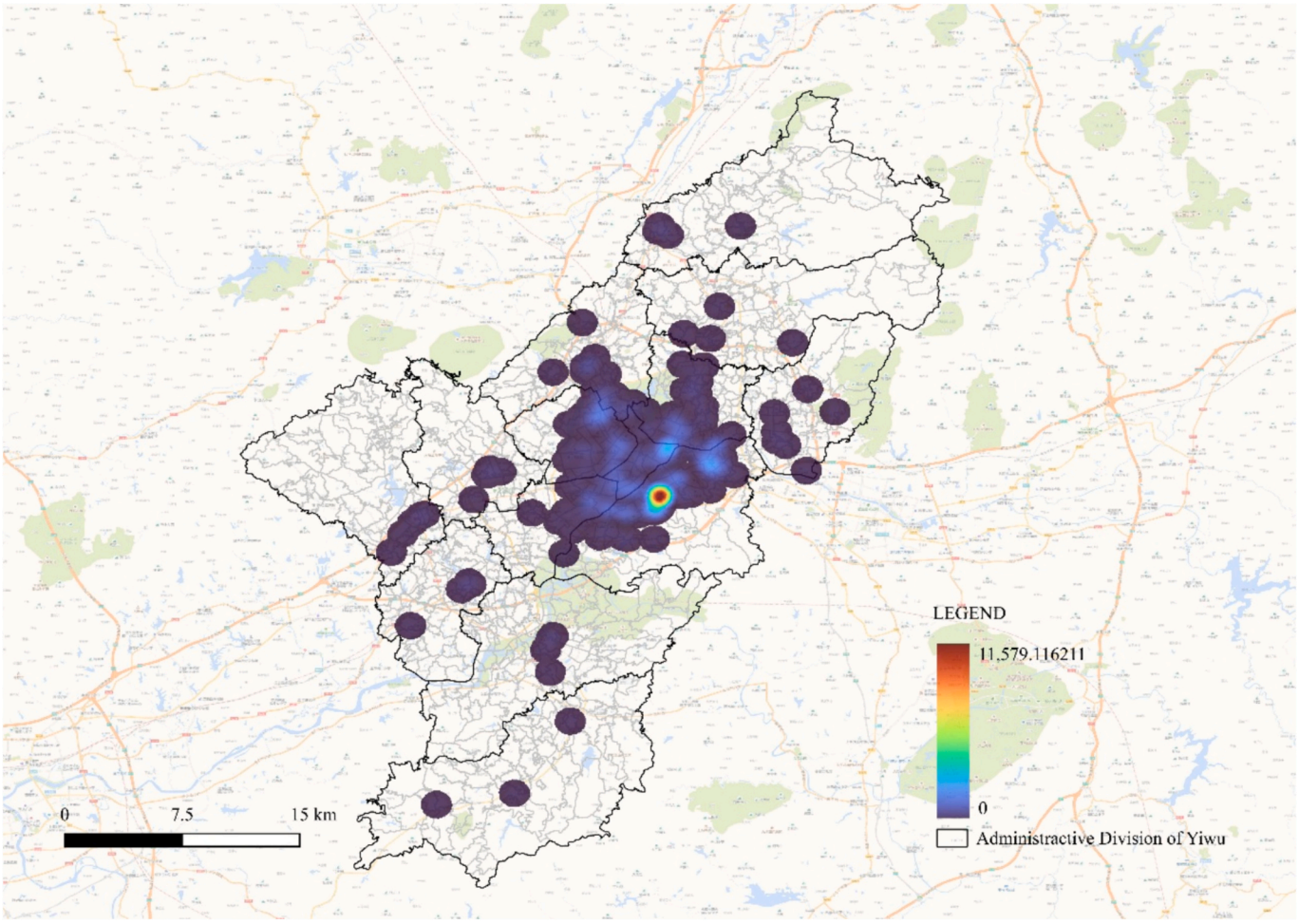

Fig. 7. The spatial layout of logistics industry in Yiwu, 2013.

"vigorously developing e-commerce" as a standalone policy objective (Yiwu Municipal People's Government, 2011). In parallel, the 2013 Yiwu Master Plan (2013–2030) articulated transformation strategies such as "Trade + Internet" and "Logistics + Internet" (Shuyi et al., 2022).

By displacing trade from physical marketplaces into digital networks, platforms generate new scales of circulation and enable the valorization of surplus value on a global scale. In Yiwu, the transition further advanced the upgrading of small-commodity trade and temporarily alleviated the structural pressures of overaccumulation and overcapacity. By early 2023, Yiwu had over 900,000 registered market entities, nearly one-eleventh of Zhejiang province's total and the highest among all county-level regions in the province (Office for Free Trade, 2023). Additionally, it ranked first nationwide in domestic e-commerce merchant density and second in cross-border merchant density (Yiwu Business Newspaper, 2024). As of 2023 (Fig. 11), Yiwu's domestic e-commerce transaction volume reached 321.21 billion CNY, more than quadrupling over the past decade. Export trade likewise expanded remarkably, especially after 2016, with export volume rising from 1335.9 billion CNY to 5660.5 billion CNY, making a 3.2-fold increase. Despite accounting for only one ten-thousandth of China's land area, Yiwu contributed one-sixth of Zhejiang province's and one forty-fifth of the nation's total exports. Intense market competition has further driven logistics costs to record lows: by 2025, the delivery fee for small parcels under 0.3 kg from Yiwu markets fell below 1.5 CNY, the cheapest among Chinese cities (Market Information, 2025). Such low shipping costs not only reduced operational expenditures but also attracted substantial numbers of e-commerce merchants from neighbouring cities, consolidating Yiwu's position as a premier e-commerce hub nationally and globally.

These explosive billions of transaction made by e-commerce requires "things of heft and substance to be shifted through space, and that means people doing the shifting in logistical spaces" (Hill, 2020; Shapiro, 2023). Consequently, the exponential rise of digital orders in Yiwu has imposed unprecedented demands on the city's logistics capacity, thereby catalyzing an explosive expansion of the logistics industry. By the end of 2023 (Fig. 12), Yiwu's annual logistics volume reached 10.58 billion pieces, accounting for 40.2% of Zhejiang Province's and 8% of the national total, ranking second nationwide after Guangzhou. In the same year, cross-border express deliveries reached 48.98 million pieces, while the international mail exchange office processed 5.27 million (Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Since 2014, it has transitioned from traditional less-than-truckload shipping to faster, modern logistics, with well-known couriers such as SF Express, YTO, and ZTO establishing their central Zhejiang headquarters in Yiwu's logistics parks. These government initiatives have proven fruitful (Qian et al., 2024). According to POI-based statistics, the number of logistics enterprises in Yiwu increased from 456 in 2013 to 3609 in 2023, a 6.9-fold increase.

Through platform-based trade mechanisms, capital has extracted unprecedented value in Yiwu, yet without corresponding commensurate improvements in the urban embeddedness or social condition reproduction for logistics workers. The gains from logistics expansions are unevenly distributed among the labor force. Couriers, the industry's largest labor group, exemplify this inequality: in Zhejiang Province, including Yiwu, nearly half are migrants, and over 55% rely on rental housing (Qing Chun Zhe Jiang, 2022). In an interview, Yiwu courier

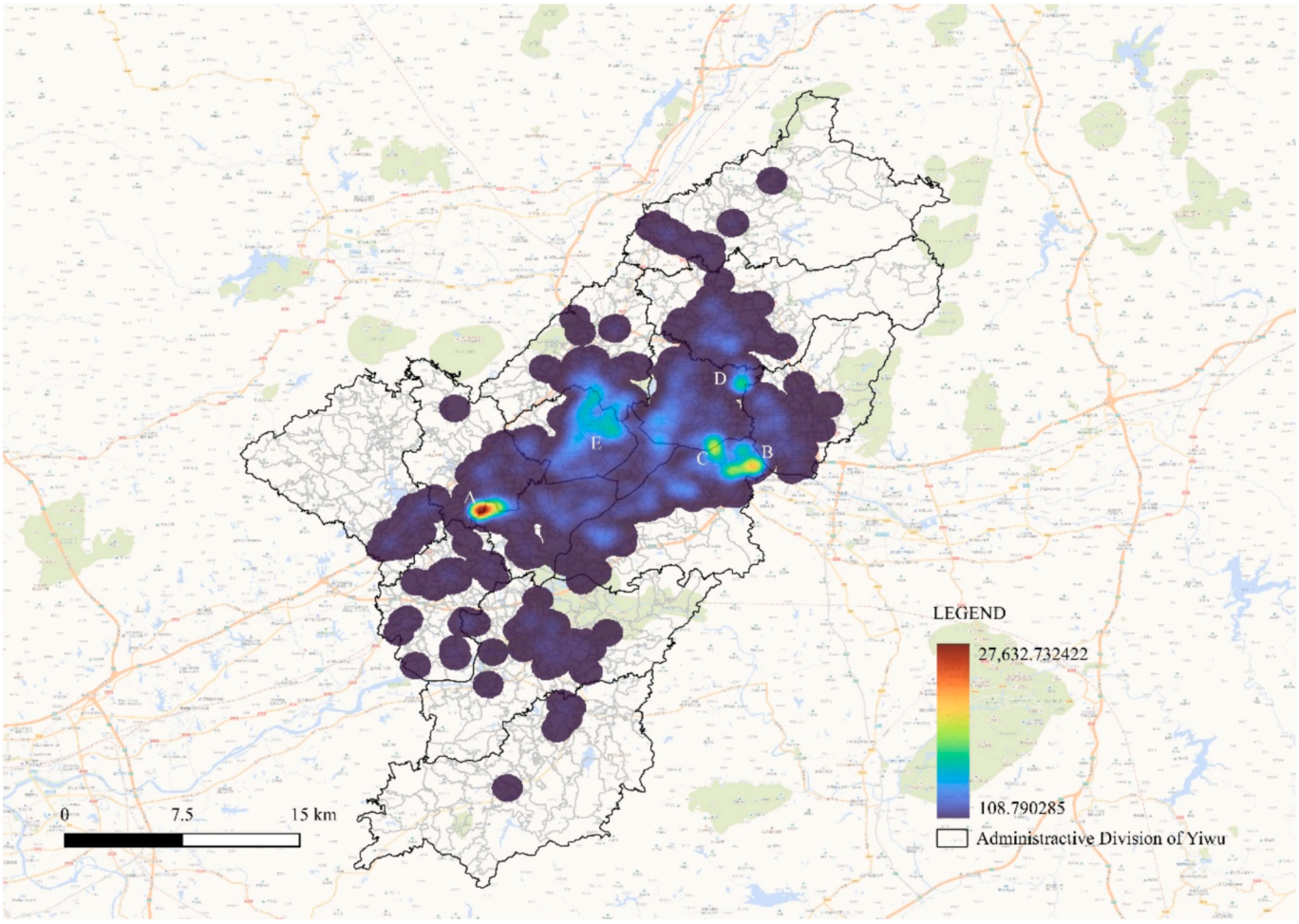

Fig. 8. The spatial layout of logistics industry in Yiwu, 2023.

Jiale Hou reported that, despite years of work, he remains burdened by a mortgage on his hometown outside Yiwu and intends to eventually return (Qing Chun Zhe Jiang, 2022). This phenomenon is closely tied to Yiwu's high cost of living, which is out of step with its administrative status as a third-tier city. For example, as of the end of 2023, Yiwu's average housing price was about 2.8 times that of Chongqing, a "new first-tier" city in China; by contrast, Yiwu's average wage was only around 50% of Chongqing's (Chongqing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2025).[9] This case underscores a paradox: although Yiwu has emerged as a "gold rush" frontier for capital accumulation, logistics workers encounter formidable barriers to permanent settlement, often harsher than in other peer cities.

In Yiwu, digital platforms function as a new urban infrastructure, accelerating e-commerce and logistics, integrating the city into global supply chains, and driving its urban expansion and spatial reproduction. Yet this process can be interpreted as an e-commerce-driven rearticulation of the contemporary 'enclosure movement': historical expropriations were grounded in direct land appropriation, whereas contemporary forms are platform-mediated and displaced onto the digital realm. Through the commodification of services, platforms enact what scholars have termed "digital enclosures" (Andrejevic, 2024), subtly yet pervasively expanding the terrain of value extraction from the urban scale to global networks. In this sense, Yiwu exemplifies the dynamics of platform urbanism (Barns, 2020), where the infrastructural logic of platforms simultaneously enables new trajectories of urban growth and entrenches mechanisms of dispossession.

5.1.2. Extended urbanization of the logistics industry in Yiwu

Under the platform economy, the digitalization of economic relations and the networking of economic activities exert a disruptive influence on the spatial organization of traditional industries (Jin, 2021). Regarding Yiwu's small commodity trade, the rise of e-commerce has not merely transformed transaction modes but also reshaped its structural composition and spatial distribution. This platformization exerts systemic impacts across the entire economic cycle, including production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, thereby fundamentally reconfiguring industrial dynamics and urban spatial patterns (An & Yang, 2020).

Digital platforms recast production into spatial networks that transcend locality, characterized by a hybrid production geography rather than a single, local bounded manufacturing base. This reconfiguration has redefined Yiwu's role within the broader realm. On the one hand, the specialization of production has rendered the traditional "Qian Dian

[9] The housing price is calculated by dividing the 2023 total sales value of residential commercial housing by its total sales area, as reported in the statistical yearbook. Wage data are based on the average wage of urban residents.

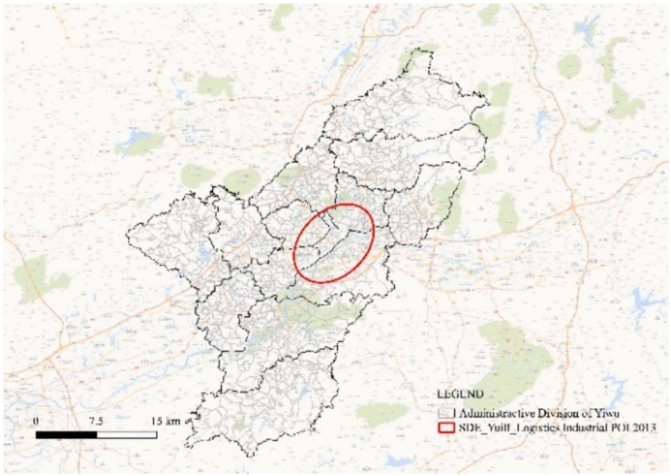

Fig. 9. Standard deviational ellipse analysis of Yiwu's logistics industry in 2013.

Hou Chang" (前店后厂)[10] model increasingly obsolete (Fig. 13). Manufacturing activities have increasingly clustered in expansive industrial parks located on the suburban fringe (Fig. 14), such as Yiwu Economic Development Zone, Yixi Industrial Park, Yinan Industrial Park, Yibei Industrial Park, Beiyuan Industrial Park, Yiting Featured Industrial Park, and Dachen Featured Industrial Park. On the other hand, beyond serving as a producing site, Yiwu has gradually operated as a coordinative node, engaged in securing overseas orders, sourcing raw materials, and organizing production processes, while labor-intensive processing is frequently externalized (Wei, 2020). For instance, in 2017, Yiwu formalized a 500 million CNY processing agreement with Luoyang (Feng, 2017); by 2023, eleven Yiwu enterprises contracted with processing brokers in Lin'an for a total of 1.1 billion CNY (District Overseas Chinese Association, 2023). These dynamics, processing outsource and industrial park agglomeration, outline the spatial effects of platform-mediated coordination, namely the decentralization of production and its suburban relocation.

Deriving from industrial restructuring, the logistics sector, as the supportive infrastructure of Yiwu's small commodity trade, has undergone pronounced spatial decentralization. Capacity and accessibility limitations at traditional wholesale markets and urban logistics nodes spurred the suburban relocation of large-scale logistics parks and warehousing facilities. It not only reduces land costs but also augments connectivity, accordingly, improving efficiency in both domestic distribution and cross-border freight. In the Master Plan of Yiwu City (2013–2030), logistics and warehousing zones are explicitly designated outward (Fig. 15), strategically integrated with expressways, railway freight stations, China–Europe freight train terminals, and the airport. This trajectory signifies its transition from local service to global supply-chain integration, thereby sustaining the long-term expansion of e-commerce and small-commodity trade.

At the transactional level, digital platforms foster diverse modalities of electronic sales, such as live streaming. The logic of online sales directly materializes in Yiwu's physical spaces. For platform-based retail, merchants no longer need to invest heavily in constructing elaborate "gardens of consumer choice" (Cochoy, 2007); instead, a small dark room (Fig. 16) combined with extensive warehousing facilities (Fig. 17) often proves more effective. Concurrently, prime urban locations ceased to be a prerequisite for attracting customers, as platform traffic and online visibility now supersede the locational advantages. In this context, urban cores are substantially devalued, driving merchants to set up live-streaming sites in more affordable areas. The strategy minimizes exorbitant rental expenses and channels capital into acquiring online traffic and enlarging storage capacity, thus maximizing returns.

By recoding consumer behavior, digital platforms redefined the rationalities of value and space production, further propelling the relocation of logistics spaces toward the fringe. This shift exemplifies the spatial materialization of platforms as urban infrastructure. A notable manifestation is the proliferation of 'Taobao Villages', e-commerce-based rural community clusters (Wei et al., 2020). Lower land costs have drawn online merchants and livestream sellers to Yiwu's periphery, fostering China's largest Taobao Village cluster, counting 225 villages by 2023 (Fig. 18) (Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The rise of "Taobao Villages" has fueled peripheral urbanization and shifted logistics and warehousing outward, entrenching Yiwu's logistics decentralization.

A representative case is the Beixiazhu village, widely acknowledged as "China's first livestreaming village" (Fig. 19). The village illustrates how digital trade has reshaped the spatial clustering of logistics and warehousing. Initially, the establishment of the Beixiazhu freight market in 2010 attracted a limited number of small-commodity merchants and logistics firms. However, the scale of both trade and logistics industries remained modest, and by 2013, the village was still relatively inactive (Fig. 20). The turning point came in 2017, when the rise of "wei shang (微商)",[11] coupled with the village's proximity to Yiwu International Trade City, drew increasing numbers of online merchants and logistics operators (Shu & Tang, 2020). Subsequently, Beixiazhu ascended to a nationally prominent e-commerce hub, cementing its reputation as "China's first livestreaming village". By 2020, the village hosted more than 4500 livestream-based businesses, dispatching over 600,000 parcels per day, with shipments surging to 4–5 million during peak events like "Double 11" and "Double 12" (Lv, 2020). The enormous order volumes further incentivized the agglomeration of logistics and warehousing enterprises (Fig. 21), while the proliferation of street vendors and inventory operators turned Beixiazhu into what has been described as an "Inventory Village" (Qian et al., 2024).

However, while the multifaceted process of extended urbanization has objectively improved the transportation connectivity of peripheral

[10] "Qian Dian Hou Chang (前店后厂)" model refers to "front shop, back factory", which means shop owners set up stalls in small-commodity wholesale markets to receive orders, while simultaneously renting premises nearby to establish workshops or factories for processing and production. In this way, trade and manufacturing are integrated.

[11] Weishang (micro-business) represents a new form of commerce grounded in the mobile internet, using social media applications as its primary tools, organized around individuals, and sustained through social networks. Its principal platform is WeChat.

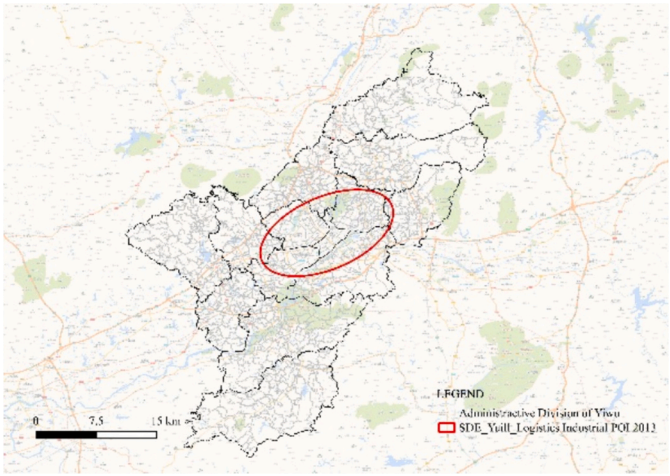

Fig. 10. Standard deviational ellipse analysis of Yiwu's logistics industry in 2023.

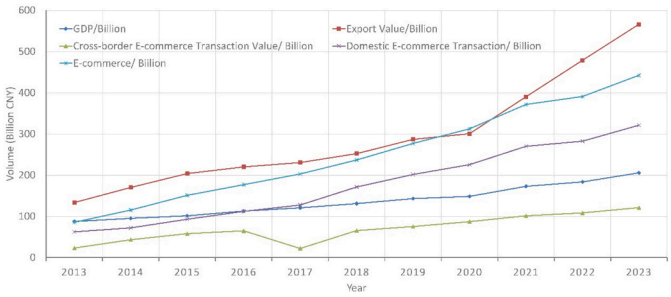

Fig. 11. Value of GDP, export, and e-commerce trade from 2013 to 2023.
(Source: Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2013–2023.)

areas, these gains in efficiency have not translated into corresponding improvements in residents' quality of everyday life. On the contrary, rapid increases in rents and the cost of living have far outpaced enhancements in infrastructure and public services. Migrant workers are thus forced to navigate rising living costs alongside the scarcity of public resources, compelling them to relocate even further to more remote areas.

Under the logic of the platform economy, Yiwu has achieved rapid extended urbanization of its logistics spaces over an exceptionally short period, undoubtedly enhancing the city's overall operational efficiency and facilitating smoother geographic integration of cross-border e-commerce and global supply chains. Nevertheless, this process has not been devoid of costs. Within platform rationalities, the functional value of central urban spaces to the platform network has gradually waned, giving rise to typical urbanization challenges, such as difficulties in the reuse of existing stock. A prominent example frequently cited in government documents is the repurposing of the "Si Ceng Ban" (四层半)[12] buildings. These residential units once formed the primary spatial units of Yiwu's urban center, serving not only as micro-workshops for small commodity production and storage but also as living spaces for numerous migrant workers. According to statistics, within Yiwu's central urban area, "Si Ceng Ban" structures account for over 70% of residential land, historically serving as important "capillaries" of the small-commodities economy and incubators for the survival of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (Yiwu Planning Bureau, 2015). Yet, the emergence and relocation of large-scale industrial parks and centralized logistics storage spaces have diminished the functional relevance of central "Si Ceng Ban" units, rendering their reuse and renewal pressing concerns.

Thus, the extended urbanization of logistics in Yiwu represents not only a narrative of economic efficiency but also a form of urban inequality reproduction. It reveals a central contradiction within platform urbanism: when the maximization of logistics and e-commerce efficiency is prioritized in urban governance, urban space is simultaneously reorganized into highly efficient nodes serving global circulation, while at the same time generating increasing pressures and fractures in the local economic and social dynamics.

5.2. *In the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative*

The progressive implementation of the BRI has created unprecedented opportunities for China's logistics sector, fostering industrial upgrading and enlarging its market reach for enterprises (Sun, 2017). As one of China's most critical strategies to strengthen external trade and economic linkages, it has been evident to significantly impact logistics systems (Zhan & Feng, 2018). One central objective of the BRI is to enhance connectivity across regions and modes of circulation (The State Council, 2015). Although Yiwu is not designated as a primary node city in national-level planning documents, it has actively responded to the

[12] The "Si Ceng Ban" (四层半) refers to a unique urban village redevelopment model in Yiwu, characterized by "homestead resettlement and multi-story vertical housing." The buildings feature pitched roofs, giving rise to the distinctive four-and-a-half–story vertical form. Functionally, Yiwu's "Si Ceng Ban" represents a vertically mixed-use residential typology with loft spaces, essentially constituting low-cost live-work units primarily oriented toward rental-based commercial activities. Each unit is owned by a single household: the ground floor is typically rented out as a shop, workshop, or logistics warehouse; the middle floors are used for offices or residential purposes, while the upper floors are occupied by the original village residents.

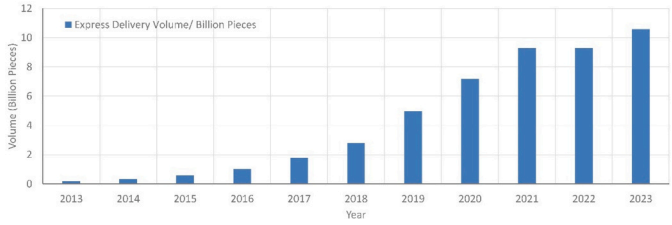

Fig. 12. Express delivery volume in yiwu from 2013 to 2023.
(Source: Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2013–2023.)

Fig. 13. The small workshop of the storefront.
Source: https://www.cphoto.com.cn/content/article/100385.html.

initiative through a bottom-up approach, particularly by reshaping its logistics modalities and spatial layout. This response has spurred infrastructure upgrading and the reconfiguration of logistics networks. Spatially, as demonstrated by the kernel density maps presented in Section 2, Yiwu's logistics infrastructure has evolved from a monocentric to a polycentric distribution pattern over the past decade, while its orientation has shifted from "northwest-southeast" to "southwest-northeast".

5.2.1. *Reshuffling of the logistics system and spatial patterns*

Over the past decade, Yiwu's spatial transformation has followed a distinct phased trajectory. The agglomeration pattern of the logistics industry has gradually shifted from a market-centered dispersion to a hub-based layout oriented around transportation nodes (Zhu & Zhou, 2017). Before 2013, Yiwu's logistics system was primarily concentrated around the Jiangdong Freight Market (Fig. 22), reflecting a single-core structure reliant on small traders and road transport. The period from 2013 to 2014 marked a pivotal turning point: the commencement of YXE railway operations laid the groundwork for a multimodal system integrating rail, air, and road. In this phase, the establishment of the Highway Logistics Hub and Yiwu Airport's opening as an international entry port catalyzed the transition from a monocentric to a polycentric layout. By 2021, the "Yiwu-Ningbo-Zhoushan" (hereafter referred to as Yi-Yong-Zhou) corridor strategy was officially designated as a core development axis within the provincial spatial framework. This further reinforced the southwest–northeast orientation of logistics expansion and facilitated the formation of a node-supported networked layout (Zhang & Zhuang, 2024).

The empirical foundations of this spatial evolution can be observed

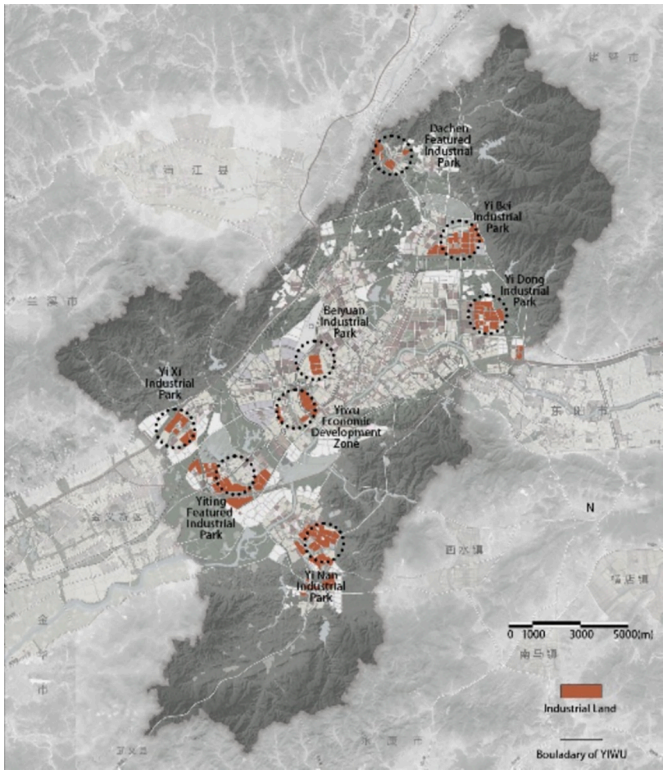

Fig. 14. Highlighted industrial land of The Master Plan of Yiwu City (2013–2030).
(Source: The original map is from the Yiwu Planning Bureau, but the highlighted figure is edited by the author.)

through multidimensional data. By 2023, the YXE railway had launched 25 international routes, extending its reach to 50 countries, with 1580 trains operating annually and transporting 130,000 TEUs. Rail-sea intermodal transport handled 85,900 heavy containers (Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Yiwu's rail freight volume reached 4.4872 million tons, nearly tripling since 2016 (Fig. 23). Air freight volume hit 29,800 tons (Fig. 24), representing a 7.6-fold increase from 2013 (Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024). These statistics not only demonstrate the diversification of transport modes but also reflect a leap in the synergy between logistics organization logic and spatial form.

As logistics flows and transport organization capabilities improve, demands for spatial restructuring grow correspondingly. The earlier market-oriented configuration proved insufficient to accommodate the complexity of multimodal transport and high-volume operations, prompting a transition to more efficient, hierarchically structured spatial arrangements. Against this backdrop, the number of logistics parks in Yiwu increased from just 3 in 2013 to 14 in 2023. These are primarily concentrated across three major zones: Yiwu West Station (the departure points of the YXE railway), the Highway Logistics Hub, and

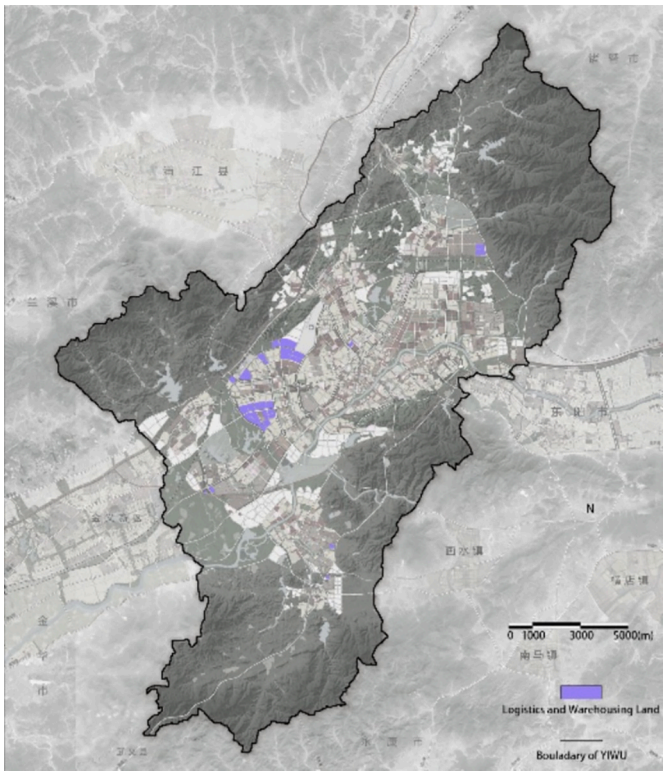

Fig. 15. Highlighted logistics and warehousing land of the Master Plan of Yiwu City (2013–2030).
(Source: The original map is from the Yiwu Planning Bureau, but the highlighted figure is edited by the author.)

the Airport Zone. Consequently, Yiwu's logistics spatial structure displays distinctly multi-centered and multi-tiered characteristics (Qi et al., 2016).

Furthermore, this spatial restructuring has triggered broader reconfigurations in the city's overall spatial structure and living environment. The relocation of logistics facilities not only alleviated land and traffic pressure in the urban core but also spurred the expansion of residential and service functions along key transportation corridors. For example, the areas surrounding Yiwu West Station and the Airport have witnessed a surge in residential clusters and commercial service facilities, exemplifying an emerging spatial order in which industry, infrastructure, and daily life functions are nested and interlinked around key nodes. This indicates that Yiwu's spatial transformation has entered a more complex

Fig. 16. The small livestreaming room.
Source: http://taihaizazhi.com/index.php?s=/Home/Article/detail/id/488.html.

Fig. 17. The extensive warehousing room.
Source: https://news.zgyww.cn/system/2020/04/24/010185523.shtml.

stage characterized by node-centered structural reorganization and the reintegration of spatial functions.

5.2.2. Multi-level policy coordination and spatial transformation

Unlike many cities reliant on top-down mission-driven initiatives and resource allocation, so-called "policy dividend" cities, the reconfiguration of Yiwu's logistics space emerged from an entangled, blurred interplay of national strategy, provincial deployment, and proactive local initiatives. Yiwu leveraged its existing market mechanisms, logistics networks, and administrative capabilities to pioneer local-scale transformation within the broader BRI framework. By aligning with provincial-level corridor strategies, it embedded local experience into higher-level developmental logics, demonstrating strong policy sensitivity and adaptive capacity.

At the provincial level, Zhejiang launched the Yi-Yong-Zhou corridor as a strategic initiative to integrate the BRI, the Yangtze River Economic Belt, and the regional integration agenda of the Yangtze River Delta. It was introduced during the 13th Five-Year Plan period and reaffirmed in the 14th Five-Year Plan; this strategy has become a core driver of spatial restructuring in the province. Its spatial configuration is based on a "dual-core" structure (Fig. 25), the Ningbo–Zhoushan and Jinhua–Yiwu, designed to bridge inland and maritime territories and connect dry ports with seaports through an east-west development corridor (Zhejiang Provincial Development and Reform Commission, 2021a). The emphasis of this strategy lies in establishing an integrated multimodal transport system, enhancing transport efficiency, and strengthening global supply chain integration through high-level open platforms. Under this framework, Yiwu was engaged as a national logistics hub focused on commerce and trade services, forming a land-sea coordinated hub network with the port-centric functions of Ningbo–Zhoushan Port (Jiang & Wang, 2017). Policies such as "Four-Port Linkage" and "Rail-Sea Intermodal Transport" have driven a transition in Yiwu's logistics spatial structure from a market-centered configuration to a hub-oriented layout concentrated around strategic new infrastructure nodes, accompanied by industrial restructuring at the urban scale.

More importantly, Yiwu has not been a passive recipient of top-down strategies; rather, it has actively embedded its local advantages into

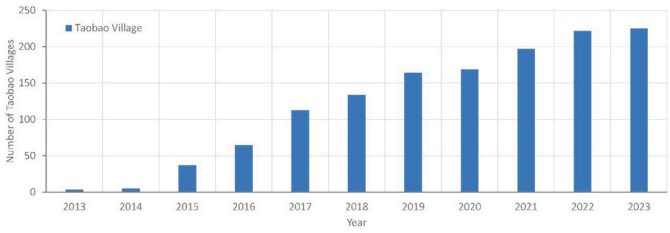

Fig. 18. The increase of the Taobao Village in Yiwu from 2013 to 2023.
(Source: the Ali Institute and Yiwu Planning Bureau, 2013–2023.)

higher-level initiatives. During the 13th Five-Year Plan, Yiwu positioned the YXE railway and the Yi-Yong-Zhou corridor as key instruments for external connectivity, branding itself as a "vanguard" of the BRI. Entering the 14th Five-Year Plan, Yiwu further elevated a strategic network of YXE Railway and Yi-Yong-Zhou as the core of its outward-facing development. This network has driven a transformation in trade models from fragmented to clustered, market organization from stationary to digital, and logistics systems from the single overseas node to globally networked platforms, which also catalyze the restructuring of urban spatial configurations.

This process was further promoted in the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Logistics Industry in Zhejiang Province (Fig. 26). The plan explicitly calls for the development of key infrastructures such as the Jinyong Railway and the Ningbo-Zhoushan corridor, while

Fig. 19. The Beixiazhu Village.
(Source: https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250817A0322D00.)

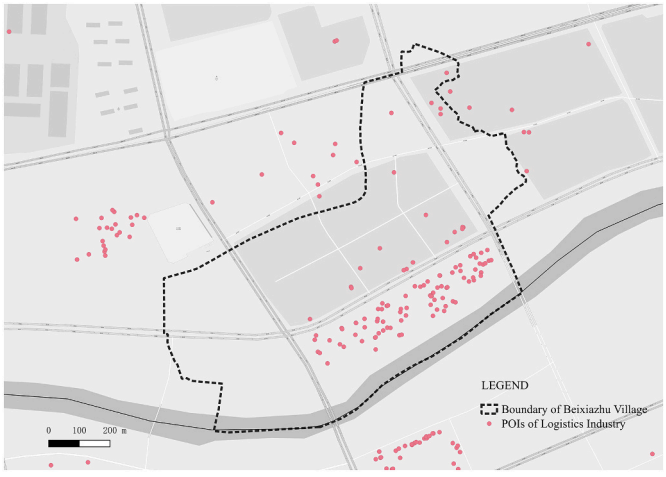

Fig. 20. The logistics industry POIs of Beixiazhu Village in 2013.

Fig. 21. The logistics industry POIs of Beixiazhu Village in 2023.

promoting port-to-port coordination and improved intermodal logistics capacity (Zhejiang Provincial Development and Reform Commission, 2021b). It also puts emphasis on standardization, digitalization, and green transformation of logistics systems, thereby providing institutional support for Yiwu's logistics upgrading. Concurrently, policy documents also require the relocation of logistics nodes toward railway hubs and customs zones, which further contribute to the extended urbanization of logistics spatiality.

Therefore, Yiwu's transformation has been incremental rather than instantaneous (such as in other Chinese cities), shaped by the evolving interplay of diversified infrastructure, multi-scalar policy interventions, and proactive local agency. The period from 2013 to 2014 marked the formative stage of corridor development; by 2019, Yiwu was officially recognized as a Four-Port Linkage Demonstration City (Yiwu Municipal People's Government, 2019), signifying a shift from physical agglomeration to organizational integration. The 2021 launch of the 14th Five-Year Plan consolidated institutional embeddedness and multi-level coordination mechanisms. Since then, Yiwu's development has advanced from a localized experiment into an institutionalized, standardized international strategy.

6. Discussion

In summary, Yiwu's spatial restructuring illustrates a trajectory of bottom-up adaptation intertwined with multi-scalar institutional coordination (Table 2). This can be conceptualized through three interacting mechanism: (1) the reconfiguration of cross-border capacity via local market practices and logistics hub clustering; (2) the spatial-functional restructuring driven by provincial corridor strategies through territorial division of labor and policy coordination; and (3) the dynamic interaction between the aforementioned two, fostering co-evolution of corridor formation, multi-scalar spatial transformation, and everyday socio-economic life. Thus, Yiwu is emblematic not only as a case of localized manifestation of the BRI, but also of how inland Chinese cities can re-position themselves within national and global supply networks through bottom-up institutional integration, nodal restructuring, and corridor embedding.

We argue that Yiwu contributes at least five distinctive elements to platform urbanism and infrastructure-led development debates:

1. A non-port, market-centric global logistics city.
   Yiwu shows that a county-level, inland city can become globally central by building and governing wholesale market platforms and logistics infrastructures, rather than ports or SEZs (Belguidoum & Pliez, 2015; Bellandi & Lombardi, 2012; Ding, 2009; Rui, 2018; Sun & Perry, 2009; Wu et al., 2016). This specificity challenges port- and headquarters-centric narratives of global cities.
2. Infrastructure-led development built around circulation, not production.
   Infrastructure investments and planning focus on markets, logistics parks, exhibition venues, and cross-border commerce zones, making circulation the primary development vector. Existing ILD cases seldom foreground such circulation-led, small-commodity infrastructures (Henneke, 2020).
3. Platformized state power via market governance.
   Yiwu's state-owned market and logistics infrastructures allow the local state to exercise "logistical power" – controlling actors through the facilitation and ordering of circulation (Xiang, 2025). This offers a concrete, infrastructurally grounded view of authoritarian governance through markets, rarely as clearly articulated elsewhere.
4. Co-articulation of physical, digital, and social infrastructures.
   The case shows how physical wholesale markets, digital platforms (e-commerce, livestreaming, cross-border platforms), and transnational trader communities are jointly produced and governed (Liu & Si, 2022; Qian et al., 2024). This triad is particularly useful for theorizing platformized logistics cities.
5. A path-dependent, secondary-city globalization model.
   Comparative work positions Yiwu as an alternative to Shenzhen-style FDI manufacturing and Nanning-style mega-project models: a market- and SME-led globalization routed through infrastructure and local governance (Wang et al., 2019). This last element enriches debates on state rescaling, national corridor strategies (BRI), and the role of secondary cities in global production networks.

7. Conclusion

Yiwu's transformation is not merely a local success story. It represents a broader mutation in the spatial logic of globalization. The convergence of e-commerce platforms and transnational corridors has produced a new urban formation: one where digital infrastructure reorganizes production and trade, while geopolitical strategies reterritorialize circulation routes.

Yiwu demonstrates three broader lessons. First, medium-sized cities can achieve global prominence through strategic niche specialization in logistics and trade. Second, digital platforms and physical infrastructure

Fig. 22. The Jiangdong freight market.
Source: https://www.cphoto.com.cn/content/article/100385.html.

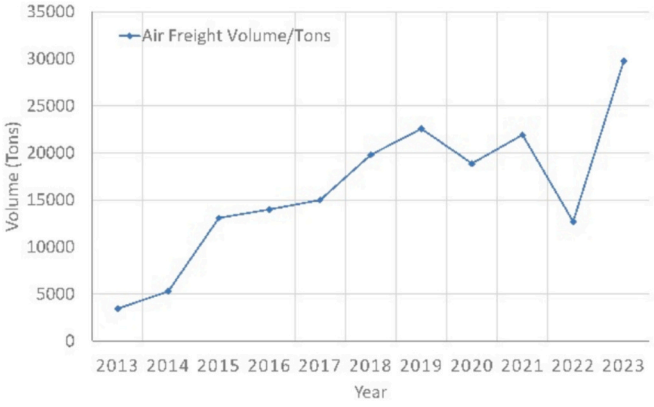

Fig. 23. The air freight volume from 2013 to 2023.
(Source: Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2013–2023.)

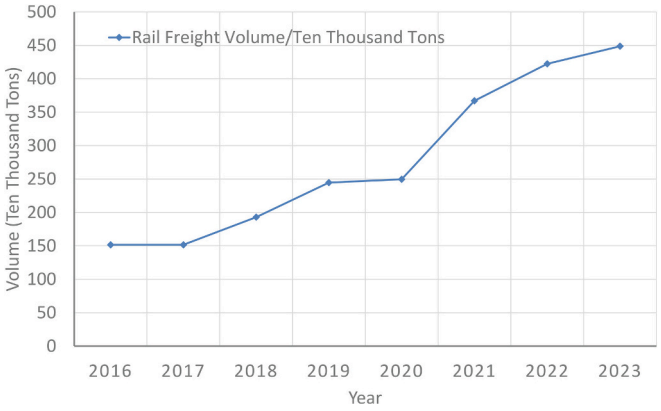

Fig. 24. The rail freight volume from 2016 to 2023.
(Source: Yiwu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2016–2023.)

must be analyzed together rather than separately. Third, efficiency-driven logistics urbanization tends to intensify socio-spatial inequality unless accompanied by redistributive and environmental policies.

The case of Yiwu demonstrates the intricate entanglements between digitalization, logistics space reconfiguration, and infrastructural geopolitics. On the positive side, digitalization has elevated Yiwu from a local trading hub into a globally connected logistics node, embedding it into both national and international circulation networks. Concurrently, the BRI's infrastructural corridors reinforce Yiwu's outward orientation, making it a key node in transnational supply chains. Despite Yiwu's absence from official BRI node designations, its achievement also exemplifies a bottom-up adaptation to the BRI with multi-level policy coordination. Yet the transformation has also entailed considerable costs. The proliferation of warehouses, logistics parks, and Taobao villages across the urban periphery illustrates how platform capitalism reorganizes spatial hierarchies and redefines everyday geographies of work and life. While these developments enhance the efficiency of global commodity flows, they simultaneously intensify spatial inequality, housing precarity, and labor segmentation, revealing the ambivalent social consequences of digital–logistical urbanization.

Nevertheless, Yiwu's future development hinges on how it negotiates the tensions between expansion and sustainability. Logistics has become a vital infrastructure supporting its commerce-oriented economy, but the city's enduring competitiveness will depend less on scale and more on quality - on the transition toward greener, smarter, and more inclusive forms of urban growth. Challenges such as land scarcity, environmental degradation, and overreliance on external demand have begun to test the limits of its success.

In this sense, Yiwu's experience resonates far beyond China. As cities worldwide seek integration into global supply chains, the challenge will not only be connectivity, but also sustainability and social justice. The platform–corridor model enhances opportunities for growth, yet it simultaneously redefines the urban question in the age of digital capitalism.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Weibo Mi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft,

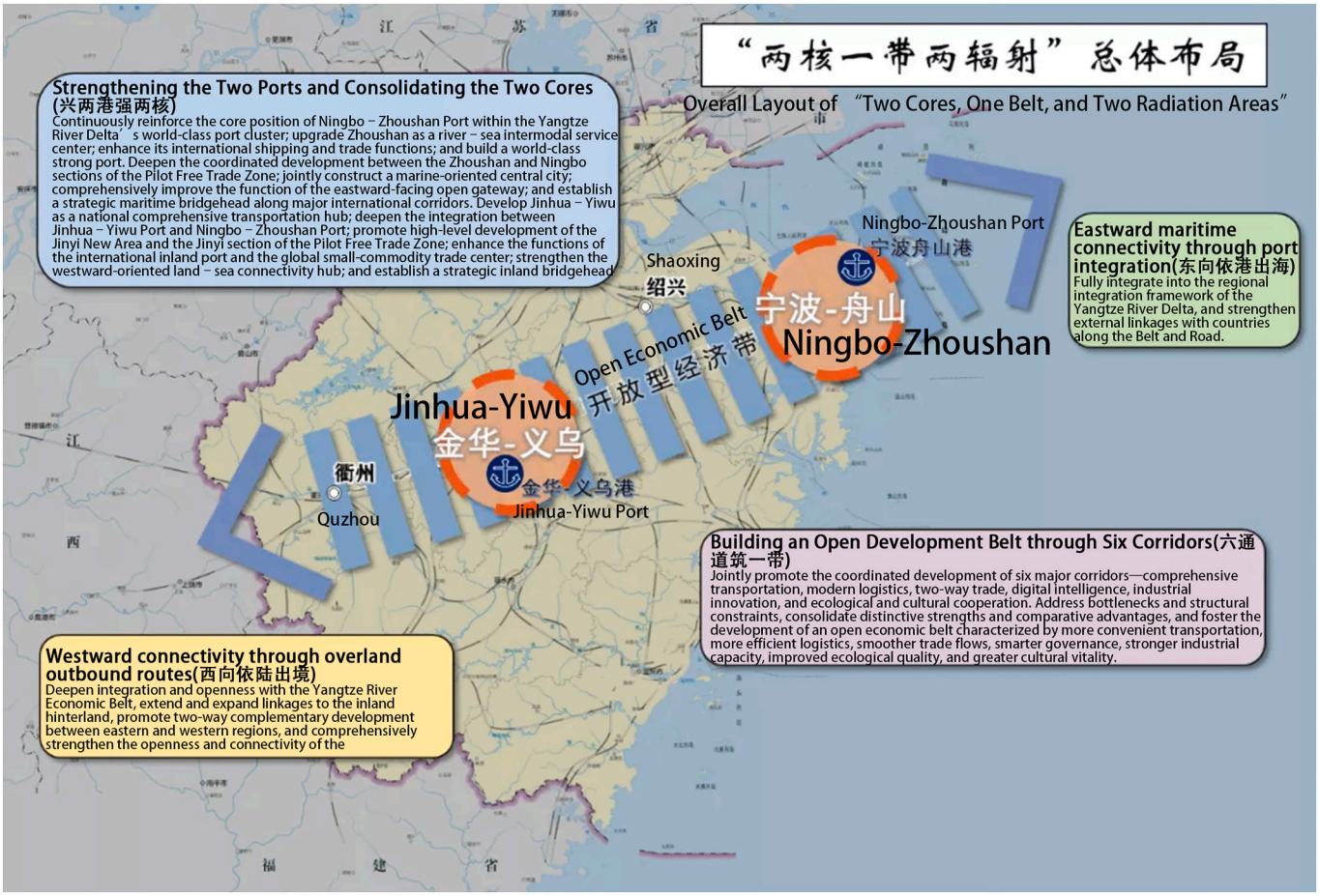

Fig. 25. Overall layout of “two cores, one belt, and two radiation areas”.
(Source: Zhejiang Release, 2021.)

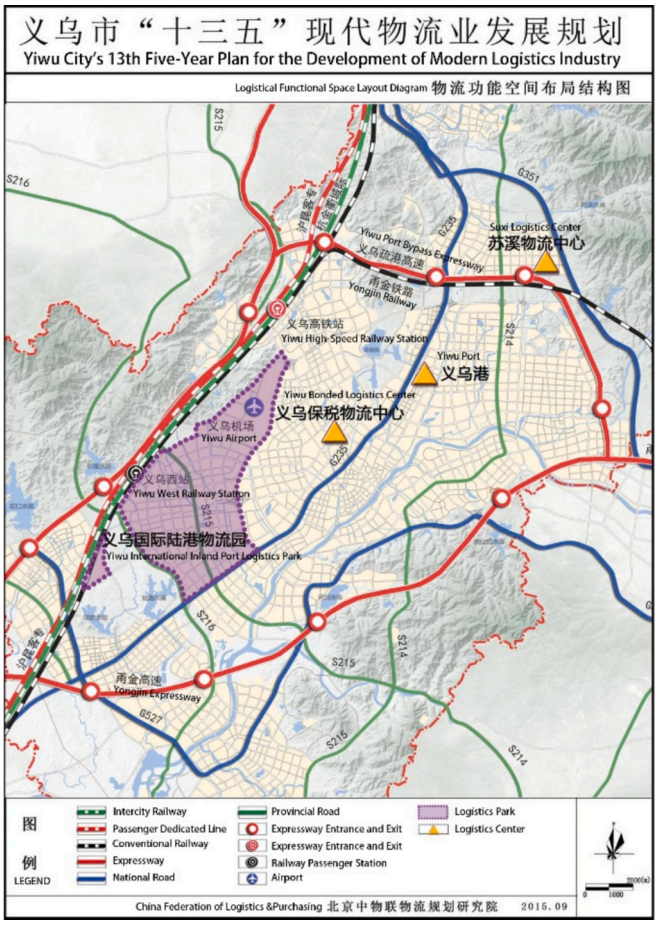

Fig. 26. Yiwu City's 13th Five-Year Plan for the development of modern logistics industry.
(Source: China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing, 2015.)

Table 2
Major Zhejiang Provincial and Yiwu Municipal planning documents related to logistics and BRI.

Level	Year	Document title
Provincial level	2021	14th Five-Year Plan and 2035 Vision Outline for Zhejiang Province
	2021	14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Yiwu-Ningbo-Zhoushan (Yi-Yong-Zhou) Open Corridor
	2021	14th Five-Year Plan for Modern Logistics Industry Development in Zhejiang
	2024	Overall Plan for Deepening Comprehensive International Trade Reform in Yiwu
Municipal level	2021	14th Five-Year Plan and 2035 Vision Outline for Yiwu City
	2022	Yiwu Modern Logistics Industry Development Plan (2021–2035)
	2023	Key Tasks for Yiwu's High-Level Opening-Up and Reform
	2024	Yiwu Implementation Plan for Building a Pilot Zone for Opening-Up and International Trade Reform

Visualization, Software, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Simonetta Armondi:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Siyuan Li:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Mei Liu:** Conceptualization. **Xinran He:** Conceptualization. **Zhi Lei:** Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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