Research on Development and Construction of Characteristic Town

Tianyu Zhang
Jiangnan University, Wuxi 214122, Jiangsu Province, China

Abstract: Characteristic town is an innovative development model of urban-rural integration. These small towns with certain characteristics play an important role in China’s economic transformation and urban-rural integration. Through literature search and field surveys, this article reports the existing theoretical achievements, including the conceptualization, significance of construction, and the research status of local/foreign characteristic towns. Besides, this article provides some practical suggestions towards the existing research problems and some reference for the planning and construction of characteristic towns.

Keywords: characteristic town, research and review, development status, countermeasures

Publication date: September, 2020
Publication online: 30 September, 2020
*Corresponding author: Zhang Tianyu, 313355797@qq.com

1 Introduction

Since the Chinese economic reform, China’s cities had experienced rapid development for more than 40 years. While the urbanization is advancing, many problems had emerged. With the exponential population growth and rapid expansion of urban, these had caused the deterioration to the environment and disappearance of low-cost labour and land resources. Simultaneously, with the continuous improvement of infrastructure construction, the geographical disadvantage of small towns is no longer a constraint to development, while the value of their landscape resources and special industries is constantly highlighted. Therefore, in the context of new urbanization, special attention had been focused on small towns.

Since the construction of characteristic towns in Zhejiang Province started in 2015, characteristic towns have gradually gained people’s attention, setting off a wave of construction. State ministries and commissions have issued relevant policy documents to guide the construction of characteristic small towns. The challenges of characteristic town constructions have also attracted the attention of the academic community. The study of the challenges faced in characteristic town constructions is a complex and huge project. Researching from different angles, scholars have enriched the theoretical basis of characteristic town construction. By combing through relevant literature, this article analyzes the connotation of a characteristic town, reviews the development and construction experience, and proposes countermeasures, expecting more in-depth research in future.

2 Connotation and significance of a characteristic town

2.1 Connotation of a characteristic town

The construction of characteristic towns was first succeeded in Zhejiang Province and recognized by the national leaders, and the Zhejiang experience was promoted nationwide. However, there are differences in the understanding of characteristic towns in various sectors of the societies. Therefore, the study of the connotation of the concept is crucial to the sustainable development of characteristic towns in future.

In the process of urbanization in Zhejiang Province, it has gradually formed massive economy as a feature, small and medium-sized towns as a spatial platform, and regional development characteristics of production and urban interaction. As far as the whole country is concerned, the economic level of each province and the disparity between urban and rural development is large, and the primary consideration is to promote the
integrated development of urban and rural areas and to
develop small towns with special characteristics as one
of the means of urbanization. Different perspectives are
also reflected in defining the concept of a characteristic
town: Zhejiang Province considers a characteristic town
to be an innovative development platform that integrates
industrialization, culture, tourism and socialization,
which is distinctive from administrative and industrial
units, while the national policy states that characteristic
towns principally are the organizational towns. There is
an obvious discrepancy between the two definitions of
a characteristic town. To standardize the construction
of special small towns and clarify their connotations,
the state ministries and commissions have issued two
articles emphasizing that characteristic small (city)
towns include the two forms of characteristic small
towns and characteristic small cities[3]. The definition
achieves the separation of special small towns from
the concept of special establishment small towns from the
conceptual and theoretical level, which is of milestone
importance for the development of characteristic towns
in China.

Academics have also researched characteristic towns
through different perspectives. According to Longbao
Wei and others, a characteristic town is a practical
and innovative result of exploring the development of
new towns, with distinctive industrial characteristics,
the combination of functions, small and exquisite
space, flexible and innovative mechanisms, and other
unique characteristics[3]. Xiaozhang Wang argued that
the existing fundamental conditions and historical
traditions are the prerequisites for the characteristic
town construction. Also, the characteristic town is a
regional community of social life, which is a unique
form of life-based on the natural integration of people’s
living and ecological standards [4]. Many scholars have
researched the development and elements constitution
of characteristic towns, which is of great significance in
enriching the significance of characteristic towns.

2.2 Significance of the construction of a
characteristic town

As a novel innovation, the role characteristic towns
are not well known for the people. Therefore, scholars
have conducted an in-depth exploration of the value
and significance of the construction of characteristic towns.

In industry, characteristic towns have the role of
accelerating industrial innovation and upgrading,
optimizing industrial layout, and promoting the
sustainable development of local industries. With the
new concept of innovation, green technologies, open-
minded, humanity, and flexible and innovative enterprise
growth, characteristic towns can also accumulate high-
end production factors to enhance innovation and brand
competitiveness, and at the same time enhance industrial
connotation through the exploration of local historical
and cultural elements to achieve the mutual integration
of both industrial orientation and cultural connotation.

In regional development, the significance of
characteristic towns is to enhance regional economic
growth, promote industrial clustering and economic
vitality, and enhance regional cultures. Characteristic
towns break the boundaries of administrative units,
providing a wide space for coordinated regional
economic development. According to Shihao Sheng,
a characteristic town is a new form of industrial
organization that integrates the innovation, production,
sales and service of unique industries. It is highly
integrated into various development factors, which
accelerates the transformation and development of
regional industries[6].

As a national strategy, the construction of small
towns is an important element in connecting the city and
the countryside. The current research on characteristic
towns is mostly focused on the theoretical elaboration at
the macro level yet it is lack of a systematic theoretical
framework. The deepening of the research in the
planning and construction of characteristic towns also
play a great role in building the theoretical framework
of the characteristic small (city) town system.

3 Theories and Research Practices of
Foreign Characteristic Town

3.1 Relevant theoretical studies

Although there is no such concept of a characteristic
town in oversea, its research on small towns has been
involved for a long time, and the theoretical research
has been relatively mature. From the analysis of related
theories, it can be seen that most of the research is
based on the theory of urban development, which focus
on history and humanities, environment and society,
sustainable development and other fields to carry out
specific research for small towns.

In the 19th century, the British were trying to find
a living environment that combined the advantages of
urban and rural areas due to the deterioration of the
urban environment[6]. Howard initiated the theory of
“Garden Cities”, designing a kind of functional self-
sufficiency, beautiful living environment, convenient
transportation of small towns, urban-rural integration
model of development to crack the social structure of
urban-rural separation[7]. In addition to the “Garden
cities” theory, in the 1920s, in response to the problems facing in town-building, British architects introduced the concept of satellite cities, emphasizing the satellite function of small towns to central cities. After World War II, the British government initiated a program of new towns, emphasizing the work-life balance in small towns. These theories and initiatives have stimulated the vitality of small towns, greatly promoted the development of small towns in Europe and the United States, and played an important role in the construction of China’s characteristic small towns and the exploration of integrated urban and rural development ideas. The theory of “industrial clusters” was first proposed by Michael Porter, who argued that the sharing of resources and collaborative division of labour among enterprises can reduce operating costs to achieve considerable economy of scale. From the feature of the characteristic town, it mainly forms an industrial cluster based on a certain dominant industry. The characteristic town is a spatial collection of industries, and its construction and development must be based on the advantages of its special industries, while the theory of “industrial clusters” provides the theoretical support for the construction of characteristic towns and provides a scientific theoretical basis to drive the regional economy.

3.2 Research on the Practice of Foreign Characteristic Towns

Unique positioning is the distinctive feature of foreign small towns, and the construction of small towns is also relatively mature and perfect, and the emergence of various types of small towns has provided valuable experience and reference for the construction of China’s characteristic towns.

Wolfsburg is a famous German car town where the headquarters of Europe’s largest car manufacturer, Volkswagen Group, is located. By promulgating relevant legal system and providing technical support, the government has created a space for the development of automobile manufacturing research and development, and successfully built a brand of characteristic town featuring automobile manufacturing, automobile research and development, large-scale automobile production, industrial production packages, lifestyle and tourism experience.

The most well-known of the foreign tech towns is Silicon Valley, and there are several very critical elements to its success. Firstly, the world-renowned universities around Silicon Valley have formed close partnerships with local businesses. Secondly, Silicon Valley’s strong marketing and drive for innovation have caused its success. Finally, excellent industrial production and infrastructure support also support the long-term stable development of Silicon Valley.

Known as the “Hedge Fund Capital”, the small town of Greenwich has attracted more than 500 hedge fund companies with its advantages of rapid internet speed and location. In addition, the town’s beautiful environment, convenient infrastructure and transportation, and excellent living environment have attracted many high-quality talents, while favourable tax policies are also the reason for many enterprises and talents to settle down.

Annecy is known as the most beautiful town in the French Alps. Besides utilizing its natural resources, the full exploitation of historical and cultural resources, the vigorous development of tourism, culture and sports industries have driven the development of the town. Since the tourism industries are linked to many aspects, it is also necessary to fully promote the development of other supporting industries besides focusing on the main tourism industries.

The development of characteristic towns in Western countries has been accumulated over a long period, and their success is no coincidence. They share many common features, such as a long history and distinctive characteristics, developed economy, unique industries; beautiful and completeness of the environment, which is worth learning from our country. First of all, Western governments actively guide the development of small towns through innovative ideas and various policies. The technologies, policies, and budgets play a vital supporting role in the construction of small towns. Secondly, accurate industrial positioning is also the key to the core competitiveness of a characteristic town, focusing on unique industries and creating a complete ecological chain of characteristic industries to ensure the town’s distinctiveness. Then, the utilization of historical, cultural resources and protection of the environment is the link that cannot be neglected in the construction of a characteristic town, which is the most unrepeatable resource of every characteristic town.

4 Challenges and Countermeasures for Domestic Characteristic Town Construction

4.1 Challenges

Compared with the successful experience of developed countries in the construction of characteristic towns, the practical achievements of local characteristic towns are more worthy of our reflection. Most scholars take
Zhejiang’s characteristic town construction experience as a research reference, and the whole country has also followed Zhejiang’s experience to launch characteristic town planning and construction. After 5 years of development, the construction of a characteristic town has been successful. Characteristic towns conform to the development requirements under the new economic normal and have an excellent development, but they also encounter some problems in the current development.

4.1 Inadequate construction system

Regarding the construction of the characteristic town, the country and provinces have also issued many guiding documents for the construction of characteristic towns, but many other towns lack systematic in-depth research, resulting in vague positioning and lack of unique characteristics. Those reasons are the lack of experience in small-town planning and construction techniques, absurd small town management and operation, and unscientific development and construction patterns in our country. The problems are embodied in the following aspects: The town has no highlights and lacks characteristics, the functional space is a patchwork and separated, lacking integration, insufficient cultural excavation and lacks connotation.

4.1.1 Unclear positioning of industries’ specialities

The differences in geography, culture, economy, and industry between different towns have created the characteristics of each town and determined the differences in the development positioning and planning of the town. Scholars have studied the industrial types of characteristic town from different perspectives, which plan and develop the town accordingly. Based on the town’s unique resources, social needs, economy, ecology and long-term layout, Xindong Yu divided the industries in the characteristic town into three categories, which are the combination of resource endowment, social demands, and resource demands, that provides ideas for industrial positioning[11]. The other scholars have proposed classification methods from the perspectives of the nature of the industrial base, industrial driving force and industrial output, but no relatively unified and perfect industrial classification has been formed so far at the policy level. If the positioning of special industries is not clear, it will be difficult to build a special industrial system and space on which the town can survive, and the town will lose its core competitiveness in the development.

4.1.2 Insufficient Development Momentum

In the early stage of promotion of characteristic towns, the whole country started the construction from top to bottom. Some regions do not take into account the actual situation, or, to cope with higher-level inspections, do not explore in-depth into the characteristic connotations and the objectives. They apply the development patterns of other small towns, rashly and quickly starting planning and construction to obtain policy and financial support. This leads to various practical problems in the later stages of construction and hampering the development of small towns.

4.1.3 Inadequate construction system

Regarding the construction of the characteristic town, the country and provinces have also issued many guiding documents for the construction of characteristic towns, but many other towns lack systematic in-depth planning and construction. After 5 years of development, the construction of a characteristic town has been successful. Characteristic towns conform to the development requirements under the new economic normal and have an excellent development, but they also encounter some problems in the current development.
development environment for enterprises.

References

[1] Zhao PP, Ding Y. Characteristic town creation and its planning and design features analysis in Zhejiang province[J]. Planner, 2016, 32(12): 57-62.

[2] Zhang LP. Analysis of the theoretical and practical context of the development of China’s characteristic small towns[J]. Research World, 2018(6): 3-7.

[3] Wei LB, Shi XJ. Some Reflections and Suggestions on the Construction of Zhejiang Special Town[J]. Zhejiang Social Science, 2016(3): 28-32.

[4] Wang XZ. Characteristics and Generalities of Characteristic Small Towns[J]. Zhejiang Social Science, 2016(3): 46-47.

[5] Sheng SH, Zhang WM. Characteristic town: a form of industrial space organization[J]. Zhejiang Social Science, 2016(3): 36-38.

[6] Lu WF. A preliminary exploration of rural urbanization in Britain since 1851- taking small towns as a perspective[J]. Social Science, 2017(4): 153-167.

[7] Gao XG, Lu QH. The ideological value of Howard’s idyllic city theory and its practical revelation--Rereading the Idyllic City of Tomorrow[J]. Planner, 2013, 29(11): 105-108.

[8] Yang ZY, Cai JM, Fu CW. The inspiration of industrial cluster theory to urban planning construction in China[J]. Urban Planning, 2012, 36(12): 60-68.

[9] Li PX. Evaluation of the development level of Foshan science and technology innovation special town cluster based on diamond model[J]. Business Economics, 2018(5): 37-38-79.

[10] Li L. The triumph of small industrial towns: the winning secret of Germany’s industrial townships[J]. Beijing Planning and Construction, 2017(03):24-30.

[11] Yu XD. The industrial positioning of a special town[J]. Zhejiang Economy, 2016(8): 21.