

## Reflections on the Development Boom of Characteristic Towns

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**Abstract:** In recent years, there has been a rush to build characteristic towns in China. Although the construction of Characteristic Towns in Zhejiang has achieved great success, the construction of Characteristic Towns in the western region is facing great challenges due to the large gap of regional economic development in China. Characteristic towns are beneficial to explorations in the process of urbanization, but they should be planned reasonably and done according to their abilities, and should not blindly be carried out to a large scale.

### 1. Introduction

At the end of 2014, Zhejiang put forward the concept of characteristic towns, which was quickly built into a new carrier of industrial transformation and upgrading, which attracted national attention. In July 2016, the Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Development and Reform, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance decided to carry out the cultivation of characteristic towns throughout the country. Since then, policies and plans have been issued to promote characteristic towns throughout the country. For a time, characteristic towns have spread all over the north and South of the Yangtze River. In the process of urbanization, vigorously promoting the construction of characteristic towns seems to be an optional solution to the local urbanization of rural population. However, the construction of characteristic towns should also take full account of the trend of urbanization in China and the regional industrial base and resource endowment, plan reasonably, and do according to one's abilities, so as to avoid a rush.

### 2. From "Big Strategy of Small Towns" to Characteristic Towns

As early as the early 1980s, Mr. Fei Xiaotong, a well-known sociologist in China, systematically discussed the theory of small town development. He proposed that rural industrialization and the development of township enterprises should be the driving force to promote the development of small towns as the "end of the city and the head of the countryside", so as to form buffer space between big cities and countryside, promote urban-rural integration and relieve the pressure of big cities. In 1998, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China "Decision on Several Major Issues in Agriculture and Rural Areas" put forward that "the development of small towns is a major strategy to promote rural economic and social development", and the development model of small towns has been institutionalized and popularized throughout the country. Although small towns meet the needs of China's development, they are not well developed. There are many phenomena in small towns, such as inadequate infrastructure, backward public services, poor living environment and population outflow. At the same time, many small towns are gradually losing their characteristics, traditional culture and beautiful features.

The rise of small towns with Zhejiang characteristics has undoubtedly explored a new direction and set a new benchmark for the construction of small towns. The National Plan Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan puts forward the idea of "developing small towns with distinctive characteristics, integration of production and cities, and full of charm according to local conditions". In July 2016, the Ministry of Housing, the State Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the Notice on the Cultivation of Characteristic Towns, proposing to cultivate about 1000 small towns with their own characteristics and vitality, such as leisure tourism, business

logistics, modern manufacturing, education, science and technology, traditional culture, beautiful and livable by 2020, leading the construction of small towns throughout the country. There are 1,000 characteristic towns, accounting for about 5% of the country's structured towns. At present, the provinces have also introduced the construction plan and objectives of characteristic towns. In the next few years, China will set off a construction boom of characteristic towns.

On October 13, the Ministry of Housing and Construction announced the first batch of 127 towns with Chinese characteristics, involving 32 provinces and autonomous regions. From the distribution point of view, the number of eastern and southwestern areas is larger. The eastern coastal area has a high level of economic development, and has advantages in industrial base, science and technology, and talent resources gathering. The southwest area has rich tourism resources and unique conditions for the development of cultural tourism industry. From the point of view of type, the selected towns are mainly tourism development type and historical and cultural type, with the number reaching 64 and 23 respectively, accounting for 68.5%. In the future, cultural tourism will be the main trend of the development of small towns with characteristics. However, in the vast central and western regions lacking industrial base and cultural tourism resources, the development of characteristic towns is still very difficult.

### **3. Zhejiang Experience in the Construction of Characteristic Towns**

As a pioneer, Zhejiang has achieved great success in the construction of characteristic towns. Up to now, two batches of 79 Characteristic Towns in Zhejiang have been listed in the provincial establishment list, and 51 characteristic towns have been listed in the training list. After more than a year of construction, Dream Town, Yuhuangshan South Fund Town, Yunqi Town and other characteristic towns stand out and have formed a greater impact in China. Analyzing the development of Zhejiang characteristic towns, we can find that their success is the result of many factors.

Firstly, characteristic towns are not small towns. Planning first ensures "exquisite and beautiful". Zhejiang's characteristic towns are not the towns on administrative divisions or industrial parks, but the development space platform of "production, city, people and culture" which integrates industry positioning, cultural connotation, tourism and certain community functions. The standard of scenic spots above 3A level is used to plan and construct the scenic spots. We insist on planning in advance to realize the optimal allocation and intensive utilization of land, funds and human resources.

Secondly, small towns take characteristic industries as their core and take innovation, transformation and development as their guide. In the past 30 years since the reform and opening up in Zhejiang Province, many regional characteristic industries have been cultivated and a number of powerful economic towns have been formed. Although the competitiveness of these big economic towns and characteristic industries is declining day by day, the foundation is still there. It is relying on the original characteristic industry foundation, focusing on the information economy, environmental protection, health, tourism, fashion, finance, high-end equipment manufacturing and other key industries, to create a new platform for entrepreneurship and innovation, to gather high-end elements of industrial development such as science and technology, talent, to stimulate the vitality of traditional characteristic industries, to form a convergent development of industry, culture and tourism, and to promote the transitional development of characteristic towns..

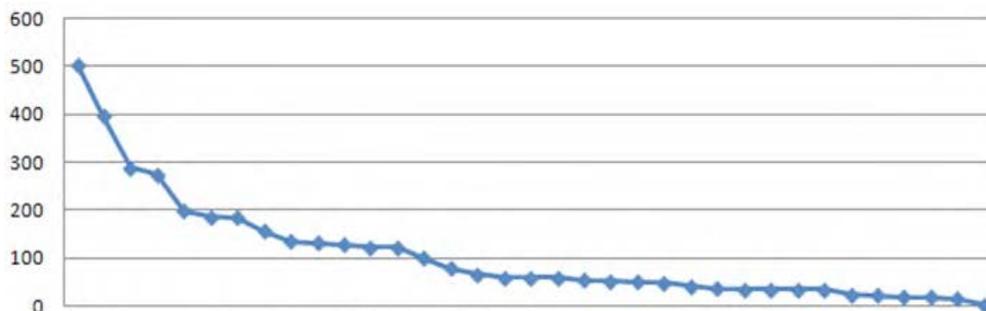
Thirdly, the construction of small towns is guided by the government and guided by market operation. The construction of small towns with Zhejiang characteristics adheres to the guidance of the government, the main body of enterprises and the market-oriented operation. Priority is given to the national and provincial reform pilot projects. For acceptance of unqualified double inverted provincial reward land use indicators. At the same time, we should relax the approval conditions of market participants, simplify the approval process and do a good job in service. Government guidance provides a good institutional guarantee, while market-oriented operation injects vitality into the development of characteristic towns.

#### 4. The development of small towns with special characteristics can not become the mainstream of urbanization in China

Our country is in the rapid development stage of urbanization, and the task in the future is still very arduous. The National New Urbanization Plan (2014-2020) puts forward that by 2020, the urbanization rate of the permanent population will reach about 60%, and that of the registered population will reach about 45%. In the future, the main battlefield of urbanization will still be cities, especially the super-large, super-large and large cities along the eastern coast. The population of the central cities in the West will usher in a period of rapid growth. However, the population growth of small cities, especially small towns, is still not optimistic, and it is difficult to shoulder the task of absorbing floating population and realizing local urbanization of rural population.

(1) Population will still gather in big cities, and the population loss in small towns will be irreversible.

The history of world urban development shows that the agglomeration of population to big cities is the inevitable trend of urbanization. Because big cities have obvious advantages in economic, cultural, medical, educational, public facilities and other social resources, they constantly attract more and more people. China is no exception. From 2009 to 2014, the population of 35 first-and second-tier cities increased by 37.78 million, of which the top 15 cities increased by 30.1 million people, accounting for about 80%; the latter 20 cities only increased by 76.8 million, accounting for about 20%, as shown in Figure 1. Most of the latter 20 cities are provincial capitals, sub-provincial cities or cities with separate plans. Judging from the situation of prefecture-level cities, from 2009 to 2014, among 232 prefecture-level cities with complete permanent population statistics, 85 cities, accounting for 36.6%, decreased by 13.14 million; 147 cities, accounting for 63.4%, increased by 22.17 million.



Note: Data are from local government Statistical Bulletins or census data (unit: 10,000 people).

Figure 1: Population changes in first-and second-tier cities in China from 2009 to 2014

Because of the unbalanced allocation of public resources, the characteristics of population agglomeration to super-large and mega-cities will be more obvious, and this trend will not change in the short term. According to the "China's floating population development report 2016" issued by the National Health and Family Planning Commission on October 19, 2016, China's floating population increased from 11.54 million in 1982 to 247 million in 2015. According to the report, the sustained growth trend of China's floating population will not change. The total number of floating population will increase to 282 million, 307 million and 327 million in 2020, 2025 and 2030, respectively. During the 13th Five-Year Plan period, China's floating population will continue to gather along the rivers, coasts and major transportation routes, and the population of mega-cities and mega-cities will continue to grow.

With the population moving to big cities, especially megacities, many small and medium-sized cities are losing their population. The trend of population loss in small towns will remain irreversible for a long time to come. Therefore, the development of Characteristic Towns in the western small towns with lost population and lack of popularity will face enormous challenges.

(2) It is difficult for small towns to realize local urbanization, and it is not appropriate to develop small towns with characteristics blindly.

In recent years, with the rapid development of the economy in the central and Western regions,

as well as the increasing support of relevant national policies, the population inflow in the major cities in the central and western regions has accelerated.

Therefore, even the near urbanization of the rural population in the central and western regions should be carried out around the urban agglomerations centered on the provincial capitals of Chongqing, Chengdu, Xi'an, Wuhan, Changsha, Hefei and Zhengzhou. It is unrealistic to hope that the local urbanization of the rural population in the central and western regions can be achieved through the construction of characteristic towns.

## 5. Suggestions on the Development of Small Towns

Characteristic towns are an integral part of China's urbanization construction and an effective way to promote the coordinated development of urban and rural integration. Developing Characteristic Towns in better-funded areas provides a new way of thinking and mode for the development of small towns, and injects vitality into the upgrading of traditional industries and the development of traditional culture. However, characteristic towns can not become the mainstream of urbanization. Especially in the central and western regions where the basic conditions are poor, the construction of characteristic towns faces many difficulties. If we do not take into account the differences in regional development and the actual conditions of the vast number of towns, we will not be able to form characteristics through innovation, but will lead to homogeneous construction, resulting in a situation of one-sided and vicious competition among thousands of towns, and waste a lot of social resources.

## 6. Conclusion

For the vast number of small towns, in addition to choosing pilot projects to explore the construction of characteristic towns, the main energy should be laid on the basis. On the one hand, we should protect the ecological environment, history and culture, and keep the green mountains, green waters and nostalgia. On the other hand, through government investment, infrastructure will be gradually improved to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas. At the same time, the state should speed up the system reform to clear up the obstacles that affect the flow of urban population to cities and towns, gradually attract urban population back to small towns, and inject vitality into the development of small towns.

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