

# On the Sustainable Endogenous Growth of China's Small Towns

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**Abstract**—In recent years, with the development of social economy and the support of relevant Chinese policies, China's small towns are witnessing changes with each passing day. However, it is obviously unreasonable to take economic development as the only indicator to measure the small towns' development levels. Under the grand background of market logic and utilitarianism, it is very likely that the development of small towns would appear a formalized tendency, and the key factor of sustainable development—endogenous growth is often neglected. Due to the lack of inheritance and innovation of traditional resources, small towns are void of their own "characteristics", and their prospects for sustainable development are worrying. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply explore the dynamic mechanism for the development of small towns and conduct research and analysis on the internal and external sources of the development to seek the path of healthy and harmonious growth for small towns.

**Keywords**—Sustainable Development, Endogenous Growth, Small Towns' Construction, Soft Resource

## I. FORMALIZED TENDENCY OF SMALL TOWNS' DEVELOPMENT

Senior Saarinen, the American architect once said that "in today's expanding cities, we can't expect to see results other than general messy situation, because the town planning work overly limits its goal to the pursuit of utilitarianism." Driven by the capital accumulation, population concentration, scale effect and radiation-driven effect of small towns, a round of small town construction from bottom to top has swept across the country, with large-scale renovation of villages and towns and the adjustment of their functional layouts. Small towns are invariably being positioned in terms of tools, at the levels of production organization, circulation, and consumption. Grandiose schemes, pushed by complex of catch-up and leap-forward development, explain the formalized tendency of the development of China's small towns.

Small towns have a convergence of architectural language in their construction. With the influence of economic development and unrealistic comparison, the construction of small towns appears to be rapid and chaotic. Since there's no scientific spirit and forward-looking consciousness, the construction lacks long-term planning, which causes visible random buildings, serious land waste, unreasonable layouts and low-level architectures, as Wu Liangyong described constructive destruction as early as in the 1980s: "good architectures are demolished, while bad ones become even worse. Old city sections are damaged, while newly-built sections are messy." The accumulation of buildings in the past has become a consumption across generations, causing a lot of unnecessary losses. In particular, the construction of such small towns often bypasses the duration of traditional culture. Carried out in the built-up areas or the old city sections, the construction features leap-forward development rather than well-ordered progress, at the expense of neglecting or even eliminating the cultural architectural heritage left by history. This splits the inheritance relationship between town construction and town context, and also enables the architectural language to continue the thought of the industrial age. The convergence of architectural language can be seen as the specific representation of the short-sighted behavior driven by economic interests and formalism in the development model of small towns. The town construction cannot fully reflect the local characteristics and traditional customs, and has thus resulted in the phenomenon of "one thousand towns looking alike".

The construction of small towns, with unreasonable structure, fails to combine with industrial advantages, location advantages and resource advantages of the region. In order to have long-term vitality, small towns have to possess pillar industries and economic growth points with comparative advantages. Thus, the relevant industries can be driven forward. However, taking a reflection on the construction of small towns in China, one would find that influenced by the radiance of modernization in urban and utilitarianism under the open market economy, the construction imitates that of the major cities: it unilaterally focuses on becoming bigger and stronger and uses the so-called industrialization and consumerization to replace the traditional advantages of small towns. Consequently, the advantages can not be played to the full. From a micro perspective, it would inevitably lead to the lack of support in small towns' development from the pillar industries. Without sufficient strength for continuous development, the construction is prone to show signs of decline even before prosperity reveals. From a macro perspective, the industrial structure of the construction is similar, and the dominant featured industries are not notable. The phenomena such as repeated construction and waste of resources have sown the seeds for the unsustainable development of small towns.

The construction of small towns cannot play a good role in the interaction between urban and rural areas. As the intersection of both the areas, small towns can not avoid the disappearance of endogenous culture during the processes of personnel flow and open town construction. So in terms of function, it is also difficult to form a role in promoting urban and rural cultures, which show an obvious tendency of being materialized and consumerized. Small towns inevitably become the carriers of the cities' fast-paced, batch-style, and utilitarian culture while transmitting urban material civilization, lifestyle, and production methods to the countryside. Since the consumerized or objectified cultural form is more attractive than the dilapidated old ones,

the original unrepeatable cultural traditions of small towns are gradually marginalized. In addition, the immigrants attracted by the gathering effect of small towns may not promote the development of endogenous culture. On the contrary, due to the heterogeneity of their own lifestyles and living conditions, the exotic cultures the immigrants carry are difficult to find support in the local areas. Therefore, when people focus on small towns and villages and try to use them as the ultimate way to escape from reality, only to find that these backyards of the cities, human's spiritual paradise, are already in jeopardy. They can hardly save themselves.

## II. POSITIONING—INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SOURCES OF SMALL TOWNS' DEVELOPMENT

The motivations for the development of small towns can be roughly summarized into two types: one is internal sources, which refer to all kinds of natural and human elements inherent in the regions, playing a decisive role in the natures, directions and characteristics of the development of towns as well as their functions and scales. The elements mainly include regional resource condition, geographical location, traditional industrial characteristics, community government, community enterprises and individual subjects of the community. The other is external sources referring to various natural and human factors that originate beyond the regions, accelerate or delay the urban development process and affect the natures, directions, characteristics, scales and functions of towns. They mainly include flows of material, information, fund and talent, etc. The external sources can roughly come down to the location relationship between small towns and large and medium-sized cities, and the state's various policies oriented at the construction of small towns. The internal and external dynamics of small towns' development play different roles at different stages of social and economic development in a given region.

Fundamentally, small towns' development is the result of the interaction of the internal and external sources. The internal sources are generally composed of hard resources and soft resources. For the former, natural resources, human resources, and capital resources are essential components. In the traditional economic development, these resources in physical form are crucial to the development of small towns. The soft resources are composed of information resources, technical resources, human resources, knowledge resources, popularity, and relational resources. This kind of resources is the basic function that is endogenous in small towns. They are fluid in dynamic development and would constantly inherit and develop with the social and economic development of small towns. There's a positive correlation between the resources and the development. The soft resources are sensitive to the development of social economy, so they become increasingly important in the development of small towns, and play a key role in the realization of intensive town construction. The superiority of the location condition, one of the major external components, is considered to be pivotal in the economic development of small towns. This is because, under the open social and economic conditions, the geographical position of the location determines the possibility of economic exchanges between small towns and the outside world, and also determines the radiation intensity of the regional economic centers, which in turn affects the perfection factor of market environment of small towns. It most directly affects the ownership of the export-oriented economy or the inward-oriented economy in small towns. In addition, the location relationship would also indirectly affect the construction of small towns by influencing the internal sources and another major external source—indirect effect of policies on small towns' development. It is obvious that good location would attract advantageous resources. And combined with national development strategies and regional actual conditions, policy considerations are likely to favor small towns with superior location conditions.

The dynamic mechanism of the development of small towns is inevitably a process of interaction between internal and external sources. Resources are intrinsic growth, and location and policy bring external growth. "It is essential for the development of each small town to have certain resources in the first place. This kind of resources is the internal driving force for the development, but it is only a potential power at first! It requires certain conditions to be transformed into a direct driving force for economic development." The intrinsic growth of small towns is an objective potential, and only stimulated by the external sources, can the growth be fully exploited at a higher level of development. Under the joint influence of location and policy, two external forces, small towns would inevitably be involved in the regional economic system, the labor division of which requires the driving effect of relevant national policies, but also require small towns to actively carry out transformation of their own economic factors. When various conditions are transformed and improved, higher requirements would be placed on the overall economic environment of small towns, which will promote their economic development. In this process, endogenous growth serves as the internal cause, while the external growth brought by location and policy serves as the external cause of the development of small towns. It is the internal sources that work as fundamental driving force, and the external sources only act through them. However, in the realistic development, the role of external sources is often exaggerated and placed above the internal sources. Such an approach not only dilutes the absorption and transformation of endogenous growth from external sources, but also gradually reduces the development space of endogenous growth in the blind pursuit of the external sources. Traditional resources, especially soft resources can not carry out their own supplements and innovations under the rapid growth of external productive forces and are gradually destroyed. In case of the collapse of endogenous growth, the foundations of the diversification and individualized development of small towns would disappear as well.

Therefore, the important role of the internal sources should be paid full attention in the development of small towns, and the recognition should be achieved that endogenous growth is a prerequisite for the development. Although location and policy can play a role in promoting the development, the economic improvement expected from this must be achieved through the stimulation of the internal sources, the core factor. The endogenous growth, formed in the historical development, is a special resource for small towns. The special resource positioning has broken through the convergence of "one thousand towns looking alike" and is intangible asset that enhances the core competitiveness of small towns. An open, civilized and vibrant small town is extremely attractive to external resources and its agglomeration function and radiation function can be rapidly enhanced accordingly. At this point, the positioning of endogenous growth serves as the charm source for establishing city brand and

attracting investment. Whether the external driving force can become a sustainable driving force for the development of small towns lies in whether the inheritance and innovation of traditional resources can be completed. Only by increasing the integration of external pulling power and endogenous growth, can the originality be established, and the external pulling power transformed into a “characteristic economy” of small towns. Therefore, it can be concluded that the internal and external sources of small towns complement and promote each other.

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