

The Development History and Prospect Forecast of Characteristic Towns from the Perspective of Planning Rationality

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Abstract Most of the studies on characteristic towns have made policy interpretation and planning convergence as the research focus. There is still a lack of in-depth discussion on the connotation, essence and scientificness of characteristic towns. Starting from planning rationality and the source of characteristic towns, this study summarizes the cultivation process and essence of characteristic towns, looks forward to its development prospects and expounds the connotation, innovation and scientificness of characteristic towns in east China's Zhejiang Province and other places. The study believes that the innovation of the characteristic town Zhejiang model is reflected in the three aspects of industrial choice, space carrier and system design, but there are rational logical faults from the existing cases to the promotion of the whole province, from Zhejiang experience to national promotion. From the perspective of planning rationality, the construction of characteristic towns in China is a development model under the leadership of political rationality. Planners should clearly understand and provide technical rational support to improve the practice of characteristic towns.

Keywords Planning rationality, Characteristic town, Prospect, Forecast

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Remarkable achievements have been made in China's urbanization, and the number of cities and urban residents has increased exponentially. However, rapid urbanization also causes some problems such as the city disease, which have become the limiting factors for the development of urbanization. In this context, a new urbanization development model is needed. The development model of characteristic towns, which conforms to the development requirements of China's "four modernizations", can provide new opportunities for rural development, accelerate the flow and integration of production factors between urban and rural areas, and narrow the gap between urban and rural areas.

From the emergence of characteristic towns in Zhejiang Province in 2014, to the establishment of the list of the first characteristic towns in 2015, to the nationwide promotion of characteristic towns by three national ministries and commissions in 2016, characteristic towns are becoming a great upsurge spreading over the country.

According to the principle of respecting the law, this study explores the ins and outs of characteristic towns from the evolution of characteristic towns and tries to reveal characteristic towns in their true colors, with a view to scientifically developing characteristic towns.

1 The definition and connotation of characteristic towns

The definition of characteristic towns given by Zhejiang Province is development space platforms that are relatively independent of the urban area, that have clear industrial positioning, cultural connotations and certain community functions and that are different from administrative division units and industrial parks^[1]. It can be seen that characteristic towns, which are not limited to the division of administrative divisions and which are spatially independent of the urban area, are generally located in urban fringe areas or townships and perform various functions such as industry, culture and tourism. Under the background of economic globalization, Zhejiang Province has seized the opportunity to change the traditional industrial development path of "block economy", gathered talents, technology, capital and other factors, re-invigorated economic growth points, and turned characteristic towns into innovation and entrepreneurship platforms integrating the industrial chain, the investment chain, the innovation chain, the service chain and the talent chain. Therefore, characteristic towns are a strategic choice to accelerate regional innovation and development, an effective path to promote supply-side structural reform and new-type urbanization, as well as a carrier for industrial transformation and upgrading^[2].

Characteristic towns are towns established on the basis of traditional administrative divisions and with distinctive industrial characteristics. They are an urban development model that realizes the integration between production, life and ecology. Characteristic towns are closely related to small towns. The two are mutually supportive. Characteristic towns are the development direction of small towns, and small towns are the development carrier of characteristic towns. Therefore, characteristic towns are essentially a new urbanization model with clear industrial positioning, cultural connotations and multi-functions relying on the regional characteristic environmental factors such as ecological environment, culture, industry, etc. The "characteristics" of the characteristic towns are reflected in the unique style. The development connotation is to explore the new urbanization development model through the process of sorting, planning and optimizing the regional resource elements.

2 The development history and general situation of characteristic towns

2.1 The "previous life" of characteristic towns: traditional characteristic towns

Before the emergence of today's specific characteristic towns, similar concepts and practical achievements of various characteristic

towns have appeared in various parts of China, such as professional towns in Guangdong, block economy in Zhejiang, and characteristic industrial towns in Shandong.

Compared with the present characteristic towns, traditional characteristic towns have many shortcomings in the industrial level and institutional structure, but their development routes are consistent with today's characteristic towns'. From this type of development model, you can see the outline of today's characteristic towns. However, as the development enters a new normal, these traditional characteristic towns focusing mainly on labor-intensive industries have encountered the problems of the lack of innovation ability and the contradiction of the integration between the industry and the city.

2.2 "This life" of characteristic towns

Despite the traditional characteristic towns still in their infancy, the emergence of Zhejiang's characteristic towns has really triggered the attention of all walks of life on the concept of characteristic towns. In October 2014, Zhejiang officially proposed the concept of characteristic towns; since Zhejiang proposed the strategy of constructing characteristic towns in January 2015, characteristic towns have quickly attracted the public's attention and discussion, and Zhejiang has become a model for the construction of characteristic towns. In April 2015, the Zhejiang Provincial Government issued the *Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Planning and Construction of Characteristic Towns*, and clearly proposed the strategy of constructing characteristic towns. In June 2015, Zhejiang

announced the list of the first 37 provincial-level characteristic towns. In January 2016, the list of second characteristic towns was officially released. In Zhejiang, characteristic towns have rapidly risen from a concept to an important carrier for transformation and upgrading in less than two years. At present, there are 79 characteristic towns being constructed in Zhejiang, and a relatively complete planning-assessment-evaluation system has been formed^[3].

In 2016, the country successively introduced a number of policies related to characteristic towns. Among them, in the *Notice on the Cultivation of Characteristic Towns*, it is proposed that by 2020, 1,000 unique and vibrant characteristic towns will be cultivated^[4]. At present, the cultivation and construction of characteristic towns are mainly based on the experience and practices of Zhejiang's characteristic towns.

After sorting out the relevant events and main contents in the rise of the characteristic towns (Table 1), it is found that the evolution of the characteristic towns is mainly divided into three stages: ① the attention and research stage, which aims to find out what is "characteristic towns" and in which characteristic towns are studied and promoted as the government work content; ② the planning and construction stage, in which relevant policies are introduced to guide and constrain the construction of the first characteristic towns and in which the planning and construction goals and main tasks of characteristic towns are clearly defined; ③ the improvement and promotion stage, where the

problems in the planning and construction of characteristic towns are improved.

2.3 The "afterlife" of characteristic towns: the promotion of the national characteristic town model

The national characteristic town model is the absorption and promotion of the experience of the characteristic towns in Zhejiang and other places in the context of the new urbanization. From July 2016, the three ministries and commissions put forward the *Notice on the Cultivation of Characteristic Towns*. In October of the same year, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development announced 127 first characteristic towns. By 2020, 1,000 characteristic towns will be built nationwide and will be used as a new drive for the construction of small towns. The first characteristic towns are mainly tourism-oriented characteristic towns, so the significance of the characteristic towns in resolving the population pressure and industrial pressure of large cities is insufficiently reflected, and the excavation of industrial characteristics and industrial driving of existing towns is not in-depth^[5]. In consideration of the problems of the first characteristic towns, the construction of the second characteristic towns emphasizes that the characteristic towns should implement and reserve a number of high-quality and highly-motivated industrial projects, and clearly defines the recommended proportion of characteristic towns dominated by tourism culture industry does not exceed 1/3.

In December 2017, the four ministries and commissions jointly issued opinions and

Table 1 The development history of characteristic towns

Time	Related event	Main content	Meaning
October 17, 2014	The 1 st Aliyun Worldwide Developer Conference	When visiting Cloud Town, Li Qiang, then Governor of Zhejiang Province, publicly appreciated and encouraged the construction of small town in Hangzhou.	The concept of characteristic towns was first mentioned in Zhejiang.
October 30, 2014	The 1 st World Internet Conference	It proposed that Zhejiang would build a series of characteristic towns to create a more dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem.	The construction of characteristic towns was included in the government's work.
January 2015	Two Sessions	In the <i>Government Work Report</i> , characteristic towns were proposed as a keyword.	The construction of characteristic towns was upgraded to strategic layout level.
April 22, 2015	Announcement of the <i>Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Planning and Construction of Characteristic Towns</i>	The concept of characteristic towns, as well as the overall requirements for planning and construction, the creation process, policy measures and organizational leadership were clarified.	It guided and promoted the planning and construction of characteristic towns.
June 4, 2015	Official announcement of the list of the first provincial-level characteristic towns in Zhejiang Province	37 towns in 10 districts and cities in the province were included in the list of the first characteristic towns.	The establishment of provincial-level characteristic towns was officially launched.
June 24, 2015	On-site Promotion Meeting for Planning and Construction of Characteristic Towns	It issued the <i>Guidelines for the Establishment of Characteristic Towns in the Province</i> , formulated the <i>Procedures for the Establishment and Cultivation of Provincial-level Characteristic Towns</i> , and carried out the preliminary selection of the establishment and cultivation lists of the second provincial-level characteristic towns.	It further clarified the objectives and main tasks of the planning and construction of characteristic towns, and the characteristic towns officially entered the full implementation stage.
January 29, 2016	Meeting for Accelerating the Construction of Characteristic Towns	The list of the second provincial-level characteristic towns was officially launched, and 42 towns were included in the list.	It accelerated the construction of characteristic towns.
May 26, 2016	Joint Meeting of Planning and Construction Work for Provincial-level Characteristic Towns	10 characteristic towns were identified as provincial demonstration towns.	It gave play to the leading and demonstrative role of characteristic towns.

regulations to promote the construction of characteristic towns and small towns. The ten key tasks of the construction of characteristic towns were clarified, including accurately grasping the connotation of characteristic towns, following the law of urban development, focusing on creating distinctive features, effectively promoting the “integration of production, life and ecology”, clarifying the boundary between the government and the market, implementing the system of establishment and compliance, and strictly preventing the tendency of real estate, strictly saving and intensifying land use and strictly maintaining the red line of ecological protection.

2.4 Construction goals of characteristic towns

Under the guidance of the policy, the development goals of the future characteristic towns can be summarized as the following four aspects. ① Focusing on characteristic industries and promoting transformation and upgrading. Industry is the soul of the development of small towns. Characteristic towns focus on the “7+1” industry, and merge the traditional industry into the historical classic industry as a supplement. ② Emphasizing the construction of “beautiful towns”. Another important feature of characteristic towns is their innovation in the space carrier: characteristic towns are an innovative development platform that gathers characteristic development elements, especially the construction of “beautiful towns”. According to the function positioning of the town, the individual design of the architectural style is strengthened, and the brand building and image shaping are enhanced, so that the multiple functions are organically unified in form^[6]. ③ Market-oriented operation with enterprises as the mainstay. The construction of characteristic towns emphasizes changing the original working mode of the government taking on all things in the operation mechanism, implementing the system of “government-led, market-oriented operation with enterprises as the mainstay”, and emphasizing the proportion of social capital investment in the assessment and quantification^[7]. ④ Flexible institutional supply and strict assessment. In terms of institutional supply, characteristic towns have made drastic innovations, including adopting the “establishment and compliance system” model in assessment as well as lenient admission and strict identification to form a competitive mechanism. In terms of policy support, “prior to grant” is shifted to “post-event settlement”, that is, land indicators and financial return rewards will be given to qualified characteristic towns that

have passed the inspection, and land indicator deduction will be given to those failing to meet the planned targets within the specified time. The quality of the construction of characteristic towns is ensured through a series of strict rigid indicators.

3 Planning rationality of national characteristic towns

3.1 Experience inheritance: to be, discussed construction base points because of obviously different geographical conditions

Zhejiang experience is an important part of the national characteristic town model. However, as mentioned above, characteristic towns in Zhejiang are a blueprint model that has yet to be verified, and there is not enough rational support from the case to the promotion of the province^[8]. From the Zhejiang model to the national model, this interpretation is even more problematic^[9]. On the one hand, Zhejiang and other places have huge differences in terms of population resources, infrastructure, environment, etc. On the other hand, the development stages of different places are not the same, and compared with Zhejiang, which is generally in the post-industrial period, the town development in the central and western regions are far behind. It is thus necessary to discuss the construction of the characteristic towns in the country based on the experience of Zhejiang.

3.2 Model architecture: obvious choices in the innovation kernel and subtle differences in the concept of practice

The national characteristic town model has obvious choices in the use of Zhejiang experience. In addition to the differences in the space carriers mentioned above, this choice is also concentrated on the two levels of industrial form and assessment^[10].

At the level of industrial form, one of the major drawbacks of the traditional model is the low end of its format. Although the Zhejiang experience is also focused on “characteristics”, its core innovation lies in the emphasis on strategic emerging industries. The national characteristic towns will take the cultural tourism industry with regional characteristics as the absolute focus.

In terms of the form of assessment, the national characteristic towns have abandoned the assessment method of the “establishment and compliance system” in the Zhejiang experience and adopted the “listing and nominating system”, which made the whole promotion process return to “fighting for resources”. It is difficult to achieve the gradual cultivation of the

region itself.

The choice between the two kinds of empirical innovations essentially reflects the difference in the practical concepts between the two models at the present stage: the characteristic town model of Zhejiang emphasizes high end and cultivation, while the national characteristic town model stresses grass-roots units and orientation. In other words, the Zhejiang model is a “phased assessment” cultivation of the future strategic industry, and the national model is the “result recognition” guidance for local characteristic industries.

3.3 Promotion scale: risks of blind construction

The three ministries and commissions plan to build 1,000 national characteristic towns by 2020, which means that by 2020, there will be 1 characteristic town in every 3 prefecture-level cities in China. Such large-scale and high-efficiency construction is essentially the investment and waste of a large number of social resources in the short-term declaration of small towns.

4 Prospect forecast of characteristic towns from the perspective of planning rationality

4.1 Characteristic town construction with both innovation and blindness

Throughout the evolution of characteristic towns, innovation and blindness can be found throughout it. On the one hand, from individual cases to the Zhejiang model, from the Zhejiang model to the national model, there are obvious logical faults in the promotion of two rounds of characteristic towns; on the other hand, the characteristic town model has indeed created huge innovations in space carrier, industrial form, system supply and other aspects. The traces of political rationality dominance can be easily found under the promotion logic of paying attention to new concepts but neglecting irrationality and attaching importance to short-term advancement results but lacking long-term planning and operation^[11].

4.2 The political rationality of the planning and the “rash advance” of the characteristic town construction

There are rational issues in planning. Political rationality, economic rationality, social rationality and professional rationality are the basic four rationalities. They respectively propose four dimensions of requirements to the planning scheme: ① to satisfy political demands; ② to adopt economic analysis methods; ③ to meet social needs; ④ to coordinate with professional

technology and logic. From the perspective of the development ecology at the present stage, development appeals are supreme, political rationality often takes the initiative in planning, and slogan construction becomes the norm. The blueprint's goal makes economic rationality, social rationality and professional rationality give way to the development appeals. In this short-term top-down approach, the risk of investment in social resources rises. From the development status of characteristic towns, both the Zhejiang model and the national model are unverified development models with top-level advancement and expansion. To some extent, this is a big step in the construction of lack of rational support.

4.3 Realistic ecology and promotion posture in the planning field

Generally speaking, urban planning does not exist without politics and ideology. It is precisely because the professional practice of urban planning conforms to the national goal of "clearness, simplification and abstraction" that modern urban planning becomes a policy tool for controlling society^[12].

In the process of urbanization, the vigorous promotion of urbanization led by political rationality similar to the characteristic town construction is conducive to the real promotion of the construction of new industrial spaces and

the renewal of towns while ensuring the core construction concept. Therefore, for these new development models that are still not perfect but whose core ideas are worthy of recognition, planners should supplement and correct them in a complementary manner in the technical rationality of planning, so as to achieve a comprehensive and rational balance when these models are truly implemented.

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