

ARTICLE

The Problems and Measures for Small Tourism Town Development in China: A Case Study of Wan Town

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of tourism and urbanization in China, small tourism towns gradually grow toward prosperity. This paper takes Wan Town as an example to analyze the problem and countermeasures concerning the development of small tourism towns in China. There are a series of issues in the process of development of Wan Town, which includes uncoordinated architectural style, inaccurate market positioning, repeated cultural themes, and vulnerable linkage of the industrial chain. Based on the factor analysis, these development issues were classified into three categories: confusing architectural style, repetitive cultural theme, and weak linkage of industrial chain. To achieve the goal of sustainable development of small tourism towns, some countermeasures must be taken which include promoting the development of small tourism towns with the new rural revitalization, strengthening services improvement in small tourism towns, gathering industrial elements related to the tourism industry, and increasing tourism cultural connotation.

Keywords: Tourism; Small tourism towns; Tourism planning; Wan Town

1. Introduction

With the vigorous development of tourism and driven by urbanization, a large number of small tourist towns with distinctive characteristics and beautiful environments have emerged in China. However,

academics have different focuses on the definition of small tourism towns. Meng (2002) believes that small towns that can attract foreign tourists are called small tourism towns ^[1]. Tomoko (2009) believe that most people perceive both positive and negative impacts of tourism ^[2]. Tourism-based small towns

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promote the development of regional economic, and social progress through tourism resource integration, tourism service support, and tourism facilities improvement. At the same time, compared with general small towns, small tourism towns have certain inherent characteristics, such as population mobility due to the function of tourist reception, the orientation of tourism service function, and the development model relevant to the tourism industry. In particular, small tourism towns pay more attention to the creation of cultural landscapes ^[3].

With the gradual development of tourism, from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, small tourism towns have gradually become a mainstream small town development form as an effective way to promote urbanization ^[4]. At the national level, to protect and make use of the characteristic landscape resources of villages and towns, promote the development of the new socialist countryside, and coordinate the development of urban and rural areas, China has vigorously carried out the national famous towns (villages) with characteristic landscapes for tourism, which has tremendously promoted the standardized development of small tourism town.

In the context of new urbanization, small tourist towns have become one of the important types of characteristic small towns in China ^[5]. However, in the process of tourism development, the production-living-ecology space in the small tourist towns of southern Jiangsu presents a problem of imbalance ^[6]. Since the concept of “characteristic town” in Zhejiang Province was presented in 2014, other cities in China have also borrowed and transformed according to their own actual situation, dividing them into different cities and small towns, so that tourism of “characteristic town” can develop rapidly ^[7]. This paper takes Anhui Province Wan Town as an example analysed the problems existing in the development of Wan Town, and puts forward a series of countermeasures for the similar domestic small tourism towns.

2. Methodology and brief description of the Wan Town

2.1 Study methodology

According to the research targets of this paper, the method of the case study was used to analyze the problems of measures in Wan Town. In the study, firstly, we conducted field visits to Wan Town, collected related information and documents on architectural style, commercial operation, cultural theme, industrial chain, etc., and then organized interviews among managers, operators and tourists in Wan Town, they were asked to fill in a questionnaire on relevant issues to systematically understand the different views of stakeholders to the problems and measures of Wan Town in the process of development, and finally a systematic summary and generalisation was carried out to form the main conclusions of the study.

2.2 Case study area

Wan Town is located in Qianshan City, Anhui Province, 3 kilometers away from the main scenic spot of Tianzhu Mountain, which is a national 5A level scenic spot in Anhui Province, China (**Figure 1**). Backing by the mountain and facing the water, closely depending on the famous Three Ancestors’ Zen Temple in Anhui Province and other attractions, Wan Town is a high-quality tourism comprehensive services center that integrates the functions of traveling, shopping, catering, lodging, holiday, entertainment and recreation. Wan Town was designed and developed with the main idea of reproducing the culture of Anhui, and it consists of an ancient theatre, an ancient Anhui food street, tourist goods shopping street, a star hotel, an Anhui culture park, an entertainment center and other business buildings. The first phase of the project covers a total area of about 7 hm², with a total development area of about 60,000 m².

The reasons why choosing Wan Town as a case in this article are attributed to the significance of developing the small tourism towns in Qianshan City.

Firstly, studying Wan Town can help us fully explore the historical lineage between Qianshan City and the outside world by building some characteristic tourism projects such as “Anhui Cultural Park”, “Ancient Theatre”, and “Wan Mountains Cuisine Street”, etc. The second one is to make Wan Town turn into a comprehensive high-quality tourism service center in Anhui Province, and to improve the taste and grade of tourism services in Tianzhu Mountain Circle. Thirdly, in terms of the architectural design, the overall planning of the ancient town pattern and the buildings with the characteristics of Anhui culture in Wan Town was used to create a small tourist town with a strong cultural heritage. From the perspective of development mode and power mechanism, Wan Town was formed and developed under the joint action of tourism real estate, small town development and scenic area expansion, which belongs to the comprehensive model of small tourism towns.

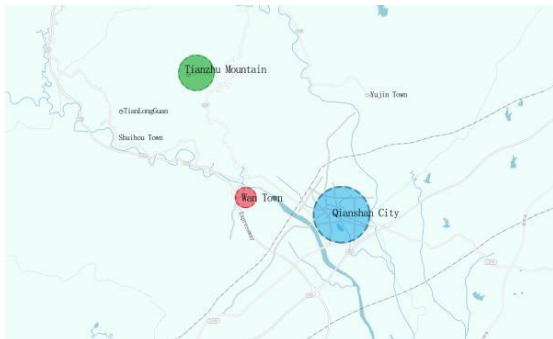


Figure 1. Location of Wan Town in Qianshan City.

3. Typological patterns of small tourism towns

Small tourism towns are an important type of small town. In the process of China’s accelerated urbanization and moving towards the post-industrialization era, small tourism towns have shown vigorous development momentum and great development potential because they can correspond to the changing needs of the market [8]. Small tourism towns in developed countries are generally the most beautiful places in the whole country, Residential function is a unique characteristic of the Disneyization of cultural tourism towns in China [9]. Generally speaking,

small tourism towns are small towns that have richer natural and humanistic tourism resources, which can provide corresponding sightseeing, leisure, business services, and some other tourism economic activities. According to the division of tourism resources, small tourism towns are divided into the following types: natural resources-based small tourism towns, humanities and landscape resources-based small tourism towns, mixed resources-based small tourism towns, and special service-based small tourism towns [10]. In terms of the formation mechanism of small tourism towns, there are four main types of small tourism towns, namely, ancient cultural towns, new type towns, tourism real estate towns, and scenic spot expansion towns.

3.1 Ancient cultural towns

Ancient cultural towns relying on good resource conditions become an important part of China’s village tourism, especially in the Chinese Jiangnan-water-towns. Ancient villages in southern Anhui Province, Shanxi compound, and other representatives of the world’s cultural heritages were typically renowned tourism resources. The art and cultural value of a tourist town is the whole of mankind’s common spiritual wealth. Ancient cultural towns not only have always been a hot spot for tourism, but have also gradually become an important form of tourism as China’s small tourism towns, the strong demand of the tourism market is the main driving force for the development of this type of small tourism town.

3.2 New type towns

The rapid development of tourism often brings certain pressure to the reception of tourism towns, when the old tourist towns can not meet the demand for tourism services. The center of the tourist city generally needs to build new towns to ease the pressure of reception during the peak season. This kind of movement can absorb more rural population into the small towns to work and live. Through the planning of tourism projects and the development of tourism service facilities, the new areas of small

towns are built to become new tourism functional areas, promoting the development of the original small towns while the new areas of the towns become tourism attractions, increasing the reception capacity of the tourist towns, enhancing its cultural charms, and forming brand-new tourist small towns.

3.3 Tourism property towns

Tourism real estate is a rapidly developing mode of real estate, relying on the influence of well-known scenic spots, and Tianzhu Mountain. Tourism property towns have become the most promising type of real estate. Tourism property towns have obvious market-oriented characteristics, such as holiday centers, health bases, shopping blocks, cultural communities, etc. This type of tourism real estate project can be aggregated into small tourism towns after development to a certain scale. The market price of tourism real estate is generally higher than other local commercial property, its premium comes from the popularity of the surrounding scenic spots and the excellent environment. Furthermore, the natural and humanistic attractions of the tourism real estate can create an intangible added value.

3.4 Scenic spot expansion towns

In recent years, in order to limit the spatial capacity of historical cultural towns, preserving the heritage of historic towns has become an urgent task. Many historical cultural towns and scenic spots have implemented the scenic area expansion plan, this kind of initiative led to the boost of a large number of scenic spot expansion towns. For example, as early as 1958, Lijiang in Yunnan Province, China had established the “protection of the ancient city, another new city” scheme. “Mountain upstream, under the mountain to live” strategy comes from the Huangshan Mountain Scenic Area in Anhui province. China has greatly spawned the development of small tourist towns such as Tangkou Town, and Phoenix Ancient City in Hunan province. China carried out the initiative of building a new tourist town to protect the cultural relics and monuments of the ancient town as

a whole. Scenic spot expansion towns and historical cultural towns complement each other in the field of tourism reception function so the formation of scenic spot expansion towns can improve the configuration of the entire scenic area, and promote the sustainable development of regional tourism.

4. Problems in the development of small tourism towns

China’s small tourism town development has just started, Wan Town, as a typical small tourism town in Anhui province, is also at the exploratory stage regarding how to coordinate the relationship between regional tourist attractions and small town development, there are a series of problems and deficiencies in the process of development.

Based on the interviews and research with government managers, operators and tourists, this paper conducts a factor analysis to the problems of Wan Town in the process of development, and the empirical study found that the key problems existing in the small tourism town include three types, one is the “F1 confusing architectural style”, the second is “F2 repetitive cultural theme”, and the third is “F3 Weak linkage of industrial chain” between the tourism industry and other industries. The eigenvalues of the three types of common factors are 3.546, 2.561, and 4.201, and the variance contribution rate is 34.31%, 33.37%, and 31.28% respectively. The reliabilities of the male factors are all between 0.77 and 0.88, with good internal consistency within the common factors, high sample reliability, and good reliability of the indicator data (Table 1).

4.1 Confusing architectural style

Generally speaking, the architectural style of a tourist town needs to be consistent in order to form a good image for tourists; otherwise, chaotic architecture tends to lead to a decline in the quality of the tourist experience. Wan Town has a comprehensive tourism functions system and can carry out tourism reception, tourism catering, tourism entertainment and other functions thanks to its completed tourism indus-

Table 1. Factor analysis of stakeholders' perceptions of the problems of Wan Town.

Factors	Factor variable	Loading	Mean	Reliability	Eigenvalue	Variance contribution rate (%)
F1 Confusing architectural style	Lack of uniformity in architectural style	0.783	4.21	0.88	3.546	34.31
	Anhui style of architecture is not distinctive	0.694	4.13			
	Architectural iconic elements are not attractive enough	0.682	4.25			
	Architectural style not in harmony with surrounding environment	0.575	3.76			
F2 Repetitive cultural theme	The Tourism catering cultural theme is repetitive	0.874	3.79	0.79	2.561	33.37
	The tourism shopping cultural theme is repetitive	0.793	3.76			
	The tourism entertainment cultural theme is repetitive	0.773	3.65			
	The tourism hospitality cultural theme is repetitive	0.706	3.46			
F3 Weak linkage of industrial chain	Linkage between cultural industries and tourism is weak	0.758	3.72	0.77	4.201	31.28
	Linkage between entertainment industries and tourism is weak	0.745	3.85			
	Linkage between modern service industry and tourism is weak	0.712	4.10			
	Linkage between other pillar industries and tourism is weak	0.689	3.77			

try chain. The main building of Wan Town consists of ancient Anhui food street, ancient theatre, tourist commodities street, star hotel, leisure and entertainment center, etc. The core tourist area adopts the whole Chinese classical architectural style, which is elegant, dignified, and without losing the modern atmosphere, particularly, the Anhui style is the main tone, and the “black tile, white wall, big roof” is the characteristic of these buildings. Adjacent to the new town area are the original residential houses and shops along the street, most of which are self-built two-storey buildings with different styles and scattered distribution. The shops distributed along the road are mainly of Huizhou style, with distinctive features of “pink walls, green tiles, and horse-head walls”. On the whole, the entire town of modern architectural style and Anhui style mixed, not very coordinated, and the visual effect seems out of place (**Figure 2**).

4.2 Repetitive cultural theme

A cultural theme is the soul of a small tourism town, novel tourism theme can increase the attrac-



Figure 2. Confusing architectural style in Wan Town.

tiveness of a tourism town and popularity. Wan Town tries to promote the “Anhui culture” revival and adapt to the role of the Tianzhu Mountain Scenic Area service center. However, the cultural theme of Wan Town is seriously homogenised with the surrounding scenic spots and tourist facilities, and has not formed its own distinctive features (**Figure 3**). Tianzhu Mountain Scenic Area has successfully become a world Geopark and the national 5A scenic spot, Qianshan City, Wan Gong Square, Wan cultural style park and other tourist attractions are making Wan culture as their cultural theme. Therefore, Wan Town also needs to be characterised by the theme of

Anhui culture, drawing on and absorbing elements of Hui culture to create a representative tourism node, so that Wan Town can improve tourist satisfaction and crack the difficulty of the similarity of tourism cultural themes.



Figure 3. Repetitive cultural theme in Wan Town.

4.3 Weak linkage of industrial chain

Small tourism towns development has different dynamic mechanisms, local advantageous industries can directly support the development of small tourism towns. As a comprehensive industry, the development of tourism towns requires the support of agriculture, handicrafts and tertiary industries, and the formation of a complete industrial chain is crucial to the sustainable development of small tourism towns. However, at present, the industrial chain of Wan Town has a relatively low degree of association, and it is difficult to build a complete industrial supply chain, so it is necessary to strengthen the allocation capacity of industrial factors. Qianshan City, where Wan Town is located, is a famous tourist destination in China, where natural sightseeing and cultural experience tourism are both developed, and leisure and holiday tourism is under rapid development. As the most important tourist town in Qianshan City, Wan Town has gradually become the main business centre of catering, entertainment, and accommodation since it was put into the market in 2010. But other projects have not yet played the expected roles, 35% of the tourist commercial street is in an inactive state, and the current tourism industry chain is relatively short.

In particular, the low linkage between tourism and other industries has seriously affected the sustainable development of Wan Town (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Weak linkage of industrial chain in Wan Town.

5. Measures for the development of small tourism towns

5.1 Integration with the development of new rural areas

The development of a new socialist village is a major historical task in the process of China's modernization. Many regions across China are exploring various ways of building new socialist countryside through the model of small tourism towns relying on their resource advantages. The tourism industry utilizes the "tourism to promote agriculture" scheme to participate in the development of new socialist villages actively at the same time. Many vigorously small tourism towns played a comprehensive role in the overall coordinated economic and social development. New rural development is one of the important driving forces for the development of small tourism towns, not only can expand the tourism market effectively but also can help to implement the national "three rural" policy to obtain government preferential subsidies and support. Integrating the resources of tourism towns and neighbouring areas to form a pattern of complementary advantages is conducive to extending the industry chain of small tourism towns and enhancing its core competitiveness.

5.2 Docking the spatial pattern of town expansion

Under the background of rapid urbanization, spatial expansion of major towns becomes inevitable. Docking the regional town planning scheme, integrating the development of tourism towns with town expansion, optimizing the functional structure and spatial layout of tourism towns through building new small tourism towns, tourism service centers, tourism real estate and other forms, while increasing the attractiveness of the tourism towns themselves. Wan Town is spatially located in Qianshan City, the 105 National Highway is closely linked to the two tourist towns, in the new round of town planning in Qianshan City, Wan Town will undertake the spillover of Qianshan City's tourism function. After about 10 years of development, Wan Town will definitely become a regional tourism service centre, which will greatly improve the tourism product system of Qianshan City and optimize the structure of regional tourism services.

5.3 Strengthening the supporting service function of tourism

The small tourist town is an important support way and guarantees for the development of tourism resources. A fully functional small tourist town is not only the gathering and dispersing place for tourists and the concentration of tourism facilities, but also the organizational center of regional tourism resources development^[11]. Wan Town had planned to develop a series of tourism-supporting projects including hotels, leisure and entertainment centers, cultural display halls, tourism shopping malls, and these functional facilities need to be further strengthened. As the hometown of Huangmei Opera, relying on the cultural advantages of Qianshan City, Wan Town has great potential to build Anhui Huangmei Opera tourism, culture, and entertainment center by using the facilities of the ancient opera house. At the same time, it can combine intangible cultural heritage resources such as Qianshan black pottery and Shu Mat making to increase the functions of tourism com-

modity design and production as well. By supporting all elements of tourism services, Wan Town will be built into a service center that can meet the needs of tourists and local residents for leisure, experience, shopping, entertainment, etc. Through special planning and high-quality development, it will be formed into a small tourism town with a comprehensive supporting capacity.

5.4 Promote the gathering of relevant industrial factors

The development of small tourism towns needs industrial support, following the principle of "adapting to the market, relating to local conditions, highlighting characteristics and giving full play to advantages", strengthening, optimizing, and revitalizing the relevant industries, building characteristic industrial chains, constructing an economic system with comparative advantages, and promoting the interaction between the small tourism towns and the cultivation of industries is the best path to promote the sustainable development of the small tourism towns. Wan Town strengthens the government's guidance and service function, actively attracts investments, has played the fundamental role of the market in resource allocation and formed a diversified and multi-channel investment pattern. When talents, capital, transport and other industrial elements gather in the small tourism town, the development of the small tourism town will usher in a historic opportunity.

5.5 Digging deep into the regional cultural connotation

The main feature of small tourism towns different from general small towns is that they have distinctive tourism images. Small tourism towns gathered excellent characteristic cultural landmarks and landscape facilities. For example, the ancient villages in southern Anhui, a world cultural heritage site, are renowned in the world for "the depth of cultural connotation, the image of exquisite, creating decorative"^[12]. Cultural experience is one of the important driving forces for the development of small tourism

towns, on the contrary, the lack of local characteristics of small tourism towns, is bound to be “one side of a thousand towns”, and it is difficult to form a tourist attraction. Wan Town in architectural style, spatial layout, urban design, overall image and other aspects of the distinctive characteristics of the Anhui culture. In a word, small tourist towns are the result of the interaction between urbanization and tourism in the new period ^[12,13]. Driven by the development of cultural towns, the development of new towns, the protection of scenic area resources and the development of tourism real estate and other forces ^[14]. The small tourism town has developed rapidly, and has gradually become an important carrier of village tourism. However, China’s tourism town development is in its infancy stage with unique development motivation and type mode. Digging deeper into the cultural connotation of the region and enhancing the cultural attraction of tourist towns is important for the long-term development of tourism towns.

6. Discussion and conclusions

With the rapid development of urbanisation and the tourism industry, many developing countries are vigorously pursuing the development strategy of small tourism towns. The strategy of building small tourism towns will have a comprehensive long-term effect on the coordinated economic and social development of the region. On the one hand, putting forward to small tourism town strategy can enhance the attractiveness of tourism destinations and optimize the investment structure of the tourism real estate market. On the other hand, due to the unscientific planning and design, many shortcomings have emerged one after another in the development course of many tourism small towns, which need to be realized through the strategies of industrial linkage, thematic unity, and stylistic coordination to achieve the sustainable development of small tourism towns in developing countries.

In recent years, with the rapid development of China’s urbanization, a large number of small tourist towns have been developed around many tourist scenic spots, and these small tourism towns have

improved the tourism service functions of reception, shopping, entertainment during the peak season, and played an irreplaceable role in the overall development of regional tourism. At the same time, some small tourist towns have some problems because of irrational planning schemes and ineffective management measures, such as architectural style inconsistency, homogenization of tourism and cultural themes, and weak industry chain association. Facing these problems and challenges, local tourism management authorities need to take some strong measures, including integration with the development of new rural areas, docking the spatial pattern of town expansion, strengthening the supporting service function of tourism, promoting relevant industrial factors, digging deeply into the regional cultural connotation etc. The case study of Wan Town can bring about some inspiration for the development of small tourism towns in developing countries, which is the main research significance of this paper.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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