

The Experiences and Lessons of Developing Characteristic Cultural Towns in the Western Sichuan Region

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Abstract

The characteristic cultural towns in the western Sichuan region, as carriers of ethnic traditional culture, display rich cultural features and industrial forms. However, a series of problems have emerged during their development. This paper analyzes successful cases and lessons learned from failure through research on several typical cultural towns in western Sichuan. Successful examples, such as Anren Ancient Town, have attracted numerous tourists and external investments due to their profound cultural heritage, abundant tourism resources, and international perspective. On the other hand, Longtan Water Town, as a failed case, despite heavy investments in the urban core area, struggled with a lack of cultural connotation, unreasonable industrial planning, and a deteriorating commercial environment. This led to a small number of visitors, business withdrawals, and ultimately, an inability to survive. The article summarizes the experiences and lessons from the development of characteristic towns in western Sichuan and suggests improvements in cultural integration, industrial diversification, commercial planning, and sustainable development for future cultural town construction.

Keywords

Western Sichuan region; characteristic towns; cultural tourism; industrial planning; rural revitalization.

1. Introduction

Characteristic towns, at this stage, serve as carriers of outstanding traditional ethnic culture, embodying the material culture, spiritual civilization, and developmental characteristics of society in the current era. These towns reflect both the historical depth and contemporary evolution of cultural and societal values. Amid the rapid emergence of characteristic towns across the country, on-site investigations and related studies have revealed both the advantages and challenges inherent in their development [1]. Since March 2018, China has had nearly 20,000 established towns, encompassing over 100 million urban residents. These towns are characterized by their large scale, significant quantity, and extensive coverage. As crucial nodes linking urban and rural areas, small towns bear the critical responsibility of driving high-quality economic development across urban and rural regions. Relevant studies indicate that small towns in China generally face challenges such as weak industrial foundations, pronounced homogeneity, and low-level industrial development cycles. The lack of industrial development momentum has become a significant bottleneck restricting the growth of small towns [2-3].

As of the issuance of the notice, a total of 403 nationally designated characteristic towns have been approved across the country, including 96 characteristic towns specializing in sports and leisure. Notably, these 499 characteristic towns underwent evaluations to facilitate better

planning and development, with underperforming towns subject to appropriate elimination based on the results. Research findings reveal that the majority of these characteristic towns have not achieved sustainable development following the conclusion of the poverty alleviation campaign. On the one hand, this is due to their prolonged reliance on external support, resulting in severely inadequate self-development capacity. On the other hand, many towns have failed to integrate effectively into local rural societies, making it difficult to align with the requirements of rural revitalization [4]. Regarding the topic of promoting the overall development of rural tourism, scholars have conducted multi-dimensional discussions. Some researchers believe that developing rural tourism can help narrow the consumption gap between urban and rural residents [5]. Others suggest that promoting economic development in rural areas plays a crucial role in advancing rural tourism, and rapid economic growth can, in turn, facilitate a cyclical progression of rural tourism [6]. Additionally, rural tourism development can fully leverage the innovation potential of green industries, stimulate active ecological momentum, and utilize mechanisms to promote common prosperity [7]. Furthermore, rural tourism can integrate with fiscal policies to achieve the fundamental goal of improving the livelihood capabilities of local residents.

However, it is noteworthy that among the aforementioned 499 characteristic towns, many face the risk of elimination due to numerous issues arising during their development. Chengdu Longtan Water Town, for instance, tops the list of towns at risk of being eliminated. Situated in an urban area and having incurred an initial investment of nearly 2 billion RMB, the town, once vibrant with iconic "Wupeng boats," now struggles with sparse visitors and declining business activity. Only a few snack vendors remain operational, while most shops have closed down. Longtan Water Town serves as a typical case worth studying. A thorough analysis of its challenges could provide valuable insights and references for the future development of characteristic towns, especially for newly established ones.

2. Overview of Characteristic Towns in Western Sichuan

2.1. Comparative Analysis of Characteristic Towns in Western Sichuan

A comprehensive survey of ancient towns and characteristic towns within Sichuan Province was conducted, focusing on 20 well-known or highly ranked towns. These towns were analyzed based on factors such as location, distance from Chengdu, scenic area classification, unique cultural features, and distinctive industries. The comparative and statistical results are summarized in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, although Sichuan Province is located in the western region of China, where economic development remains incomplete, the province hosts a significant number of characteristic towns. Each town exhibits unique features, with most of them characterized by distinctive cultural attributes and specialized industrial patterns.

2.2. Analysis of Tourist Preferences for Ancient Towns in Western Sichuan

To address the question, "Which ancient town around Chengdu is worth visiting?" an online survey was conducted to gather opinions from netizens. Each mentioned town was counted as one vote. The towns were ranked based on the number of votes in descending order, with less-mentioned towns grouped under "Others" in the final analysis. The consolidated results are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Ancient and Characteristic Towns in Sichuan Province
(Source: Compiled by the author)

No.	Name	Location	Distance from Chengdu (km)	Scenic Area Level	Features	Reputation
1	Moxi Ancient Town	Luding County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture - Moxi Town	304		Qiang Culture	
2	Shangli Ancient Town	Yucheng District, Ya'an City - Shangli Town	136	4A	Red Culture	A stop on the Long March, part of the ancient Southern Silk Road
3	Lizhuang Ancient Town	Cuiping District, Yibin City	360		Anti-Japanese War Culture	The first ancient town on the Yangtze River
4	Jiezi Ancient Town	Chongzhou City	57	4A	Sichuan Opera Culture	Western Sichuan Water Town, Orchid Town
5	Huanglongxi Ancient Town	Shuangliu District - Huanglongxi Town	40	4A	Ancient Culture	Hometown of Fire Dragon Folk Art, "China's Hollywood"
6	Langzhong Ancient City	Langzhong City, Northeastern Sichuan Basin	329	5A	Red Culture	One of China's four great ancient cities, Hometown of Spring Festival Culture
7	Anren Ancient Town	Dayi County	62	5A	Museum Culture	China's Museum Town
8	Luodai Ancient Town	Longquanyi District	30	4A	Hakka Culture	Blog Town, "China's Hakka No. 1 Town"
9	Pingle Ancient Town	Qionglai City	95	4A	Bamboo Weaving Culture	The First Town on the Tea Horse Road, the First Post Station on the Southern Silk Road
10	Taopingqiang Village	Taoping Township, Lixian County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture	150	4A	Qiang Village Culture	The Living Fossil of Qiang Architecture, The Mysterious Oriental Castle
11	Xilai Ancient Town	Pujiang County	84		Red Culture	
12	Wufengxi Ancient Town	Jintang County, Chengdu City	34	4A	Migrant Culture	
13	Gaomiao Ancient Town	Southwestern Hongya County, Meishan City	188		Liquor Culture	
14	Baiyi Ancient Town	Southeastern Baiyi Town, Pingchang County, Bazhong City	430		Stone Carving Culture	
15	Liujiang Ancient Town	Liujiang Ancient Town, Hongya County, Meishan City	165		Courtyard Culture	
16	Xiaoquan Ancient Town	Jingyang District, Deyang City	75		Virtue and Filial Piety Culture	
17	Luocheng Ancient Town	Qianwei County, Leshan City	146	4A	Temple Culture	China's Noah's Ark
19	Xianshi Ancient Town	Xianshi Town, Zigong City	179		Salt Transport Culture	Fairy Beach
20	Bailu Ancient Town	Pengzhou City	60	4A	Traditional Culture	Sino-French Traditional Style Town

Table 2. Ranking of Online Survey Results

No.	Town Name	Votes	Percentage of Total Votes (%)	Netizen Comments
1	Huanglongxi Ancient Town	16	12.69	Over-commercialized, "Water Play" Ancient Town
2	Luodai Ancient Town	15	11.9	The First Hakka Town in Western China
3	Anren Ancient Town	13	10.31	The Last Manor in China, a masterpiece of Western Sichuan architectural culture
4	Yuantong Ancient Town	11	8.73	Features ancient stilted buildings, preserving the authentic appearance of old streets with a traditional charm
5	Jiezi Ancient Town	10	7.93	
6	Xinchang Ancient Town	9	7.14	A historic town on the Tea Horse Road
7	Combined Other Towns	52	41.26	
Total number of votes		126	100	

As shown in Table 2, the votes are mainly concentrated in Huanglongxi Ancient Town, Luodai Ancient Town, and Anren Ancient Town, with percentages of 12.69%, 11.9%, and 10.31%, respectively.

3. Investigation and Analysis of the Current Status of Anren Ancient Town – A Successful Case

Anren Ancient Town originated during the Tang Dynasty and has a history of over a thousand years. It is located in Qiongzhou, part of the ancient Jiannan Dao region. Often referred to as a sparkling jewel on the Sichuan West Plain, Anren is renowned for its historical significance and cultural heritage.

3.1. Core Featured Resources

Anren is not only known for its typical Republican-era architecture, but it also houses 27 Liu family manors from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as traditional ancient residences such as the Liu Xiang Residence. In terms of cultural heritage, it is associated with military and political figures such as Liu Xiang and Liu Wenhui. As a result, a significant architectural scale was established during the Republican period, with a well-organized urban plan. Moreover, modern and contemporary efforts to preserve, upgrade, and partially renovate the town have made its core resources and overall layout more rational, with higher-quality resources. The core resources are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Core resources and service forms of Anren Town

No.	Core resource	Style characteristic	Service form
1	Liu Manor	Customs of the Republic of China	Visit and tour
2	More complete Republic of China residence	Customs of the Republic of China	Visit and tour
3	Three old streets (Red Star Street, Shuren Street, Yumin Street) composed of the old town	Folk custom	Characteristic commerce
4	National style Street	Customs of the Republic of China	Film and television shooting, visiting
5	Jianchuan Museum	War of Resistance, folklore, Red Age, Earthquake relief	Visit and tour

3.2. Transportation within the town

The town offers various modes of transportation, including tour buses, rickshaws, and trams. Notably, due to the large size of the scenic area, a dedicated tram system has been built. The tram system, with an investment of approximately 40 million yuan, spans a length of 1.8 kilometers and is the first tram line in the Southwest region. The tram route is shown in Figure 1, while the tour buses are depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 1. Tram Transportation "Wenbo No." Figure 2. Ready-to-Depart Town Tour Bus

3.3. Typical Western Sichuan Architectural Features

(1) Liu Family Manor

The Liu Family Manors, including the residences of Liu Wencai and Liu Wenyuan built during the Republican period, currently serve as the Liu Family Manors. This includes the large mud sculpture "Collection Office", as shown in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3. Liu Family Manor Site



Figure 4. Liu Family Ancestral Residence

Due to its rich cultural heritage, the Liu Family Manor not only boasts a unique architectural style but also incorporates a blend of Eastern and Western cultures. It combines traditional Chinese elements with influences from Western churches and castles. In terms of art, the large mud sculpture "Collection Office" represents the artistic standards of the time and has been recognized both domestically and internationally. Additionally, complementing the Liu Family Manor are three ancient streets—Weixing Street, Yumin Street, and Shuren Street—which connect the manor clusters along both sides of the streets, creating a well-organized and harmonious layout.

(2) Museum Cluster

It is particularly noteworthy that there is a high-standard museum cluster covering 500 acres, led by private enterprises. The museum cluster, as shown in Figure 5, occupies a total area of 500 acres, with a museum building area approaching 100,000 square meters. This development aligns with the current trends in Western countries such as those in Europe and the United States.



Figure 5. Jianchuan Museum settlement

The museum cluster is themed around "Collecting War for Peace; Collecting Lessons for the Future; Collecting Disasters for Stability; Collecting Folklore for Heritage." It has already opened 24 exhibition halls and is currently the largest private investment in domestic museums, consisting of twenty small- and medium-sized private museums. It boasts the largest construction scale, exhibition area, and the most diverse collection in the country. To authentically reflect the historical context, some structures, such as bunkers from the Japanese invasion of China, have been preserved at the entrance to the museum, offering visitors a tangible connection to the past.

3.4. Distinctive Arts

Anren Ancient Town has not only focused on the development of traditional arts in its early stages but has also comprehensively supported the development of modern art. For example, it is home to a Sculpture Art Museum and a Modern Painting Art Institute, as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Sculpture Art Museum and Modern Painting Academy

3.5. Comprehensive Analysis

Based on the above investigation, Anren Ancient Town has performed well in several aspects, including its distinctive culture, unique industries, current situation and cultural exploration, as well as future development strategies.

(1) Rich Cultural Tourism Resources

Anren Ancient Town is home to 27 ancient Liu family manors, including the Liu Xiang Residence. The town's collection of Republican-era architecture, much of which was built during the late Qing and early Republican periods, has been well-preserved. Starting in 2003, the Jianchuan

Museum Cluster was developed, comprising more than 30 branch museums in four major categories: the War of Resistance, Folk Customs, the Red Era, and Earthquake Relief. By the end of 2016, 25 museums had been completed and opened.

(2) Distinct International Features and Pioneering Globalization

On July 26, 2017, an event called the "China Anren International Music Festival - Sino-American Rural Music Exchange Evening" was held at the Liu Family Manor Square in Anren Ancient Town. The local government is committed to transforming Anren into a town with a music theme and a global museum town. The 2017 Anren Forum, held on December 15–16, 2017, focused on the theme of "Developing Characteristic Towns" and became a significant forum in China's new urbanization field, attracting experts, scholars, and business leaders from both China and abroad to share theories, case studies, and resources. Additionally, the 2018 Anren Forum, the "New Era and Characteristic Cultural Towns International Conference" (the first Cultural Famous Town Expo), took place from September 27–28, 2018, in Anren, guided by the National Development and Reform Commission and hosted by the China Culture Promotion Association. It focused on the theme of "New Era and Characteristic Cultural Towns."

(3) Underutilization of International Integration Advantages

While Anren Ancient Town has distinct advantages, such as its rich cultural heritage and abundant museums and sculpture art, which serve as high-quality resources for attracting international researchers, it has yet to fully leverage these advantages. There is potential to better utilize international and domestic conferences to enhance collaboration and integration, thereby leading the development of Western Sichuan's characteristic cultural towns. The town should strive to quickly become a leader in both national and international characteristic towns.

4. Current Situation Investigation and Analysis of Longtan Water Town in Chengdu—Lessons from Failure

Longtan Water Town is located in the core area of Longtan Headquarters Economic Zone in Chenghua District, Chengdu. The development of Longtan Water Town began in 2009 with external investments amounting to nearly 2 billion RMB. Covering an area of 220 acres, the town is named after its location within Chengdu's Longtan Headquarters Economic Zone. It was planned with a scale similar to that of Zhouzhuang Ancient Town, incorporating active water resources to create a distinctive district. Initially intended to be a cultural and tourist landmark for Chengdu, it was designed based on the theme of "Along the River During the Qingming Festival." On April 26, 2013, Longtan Water Town officially opened with free entry, marking its operational launch.

4.1. Distinctive Culture

The architectural style of Longtan Water Town integrates a variety of features from the East, West, North, and South, with a primary focus on Suzhou-style garden architecture. Additionally, elements of Sichuan West residential architecture have been incorporated, blending traditional Sichuan culture into the overall design. This combination creates a unique rhythm of cultural fusion.

4.2. Current Issues

Logically, tourist attractions within Chengdu should not face a lack of visitors, given the city's prime location and vibrant population. However, Longtan Water Town is an exception, experiencing significantly low foot traffic, with even local residents in Chengdu being largely unaware of it. Once hailed as Chengdu's "Qingming Riverside Map," it attracted both local and external tourists, but now it stands nearly deserted, with few visitors and empty streets.

(1) Scarcity of Tourists and Closure of Businesses

Despite its prime location in the bustling city center, Longtan Water Town attracts few visitors, even on weekends. As a result, many businesses have shut down, and only a few remain open, with poor profitability. During visits, only three businesses were still operating. As shown in Figure 7, the situation was dire, with low customer traffic and limited business activity.



Figure. 7 Few tourists at the scene

(2) Damage to Buildings and Facilities

Due to the low number of tourists and businesses, and the absence of visible management staff, many of the buildings and facilities have suffered significant damage. As shown in Figure 8, the lack of maintenance and attention has resulted in the deterioration of structures and amenities, further contributing to the site's decline.



Figure 8. Damage to buildings and facilities

4.3. Lessons Learned

(1) Newly Created Urban Replica Architecture Lacks Character

Although considerable effort was put into creating the replica architecture, the buildings appear somewhat rigid, with many of them having similar, monotonous styles. As shown in Figure 9, the lack of architectural diversity and uniqueness resulted in a somewhat dull and uninspiring aesthetic, failing to capture the charm that authentic historical architecture might offer.



Figure 9. Identical buildings

(2) Poor Cultural Integration and Confusion

Dragon Tan Water Town is marketed as "Qingming Riverside Garden," with each sign displaying the label "Chengdu • Qingming Riverside Garden." However, both literature research and on-site inspections reveal that there is no cultural content related to this theme within the park. The essence of a characteristic town lies in its culture, yet the park only offers empty slogans, leaving its cultural identity hollow. This lack of cultural depth weakens its vitality, making it prone to decline without proper attention. Such an unclear cultural foundation leads to confusion in subsequent cultural preservation and development efforts, causing potential conflicts and fragmentation in its cultural identity. An unclear cultural focus also negatively impacts the development of industries and commercial activities, ultimately leaving both consumers and businesses uncertain.

(3) Unreasonable Business and Commercial Planning

Due to the lack of a solid cultural foundation, the industries that were supposed to be built around these cultural themes have become directionless, leading to a lack of a clear focus for the local economy. This undermines the potential for developing a distinct and sustainable industrial landscape.

(4) Unfavorable Business Environment

Constant disputes and lawsuits between the investors, management, and businesses, coupled with far fewer visitors than expected, have created an unfavorable business environment. High rental costs and operational expenses have further exacerbated the situation, making it impossible for businesses to sustain operations. Consequently, most of the businesses have chosen to leave.

5. Conclusion

In contemporary China, with the advancement of infrastructure, the development of characteristic cultural towns in the western Sichuan region has been rapid, bringing great vitality to rural revitalization. Throughout this process, there have been both positive experiences and valuable lessons learned.

(1) The western Sichuan region is rich in cultural tourism resources, and many of its characteristic cultural towns have done an excellent job in leveraging these resources, excelling in unique cultural and industrial aspects. These towns have successfully engaged in deep cultural exploration by combining their inherent characteristics.

(2) Many characteristic cultural towns have distinct international features, with some even leading in internationalization. These towns attract high-quality resources, including foreign

researchers, making them valuable cultural hubs. However, there is still a need for enhanced domestic and international collaboration and integration.

(3) Some towns have overly noticeable traces of construction, with newly built, imitation ancient architecture displaying somewhat rigid and overly similar styles. In some cases, towns that introduced external cultural elements failed to integrate them effectively, resulting in a lack of cultural depth and authenticity. This undermines the towns' vitality, making it difficult for them to maintain long-term relevance.

(4) Several towns suffer from poor business and commercial planning, with an insufficient ability to generate sustainable revenue. These towns lack a central industrial focus, leading to weakened local economies. Moving forward, there should be a focus on aligning development with each town's unique characteristics, strengthening construction efforts, and improving the business environment.

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