

# Sustainable Development of Cultural Tourism Towns in China

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## Introduction

With the implementation of Rural Revitalisation policies, there has been a proliferation of cultural tourism towns recently in China aimed at resolving urban-rural imbalance, bolstering the local economy, and promoting sustainable economic growth, which could be to some extent regarded as a new strategy for social governance and effective path for rural areas to achieve sustainable development.

However, cultural tourism towns are prone to challenges that have adverse impacts on their sustainability such as real-estatisation and environmental degradation (Wang & Li, 2019), since it is a long-term project involving large investments. The China Housing Development Report (2017-2018) released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences shows that some cultural tourism towns developed real estate projects in the name of characteristic towns, leading to serious ecological damage. These issues are particularly evident in Sichuan Province. Located in the southwest of China, Sichuan Province owns unique cultural resources and rich tourism resources but a weak cultural industry base and fragile ecological environment, which is highly representative among provinces in China. The problems existing in the sustainable development of cultural tourism towns in Sichuan province may also appear in other provinces. Thence, taking the Sichuan Province as an example could give beneficial enlightenments to other places facing similar problems. The objectives can be summarised as follows: 1) Understand the current situation and the dilemma of sustainable development of cultural tourism towns in China; 2) Examine the sustainability of cultural tourism towns in Sichuan province; 3) Provide comprehensive solutions to the sustainable development of cultural tourism towns in China.

For this purpose, the literature review would be used to analyse the relevant literature and identify the research gap. In the case study of cultural tourism towns in Sichuan Province, questionnaire surveys and interviews will be used to determine the factors that affect the sustainability of cultural tourism towns; thus, establishing the evaluation index system. The application of this evaluation system could indicate their current situation and weak spots of sustainable development. This research consequently would propose detailed countermeasures and suggestions.

## Literature Review

### **Cultural tourism towns**

The exploration of cultural tourism towns can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century when Marx put forward the concept of “urban-rural integration” in his *Critique of Political Economy* (Qu, 2019). He put forward the scientific thesis that “an important aspect of the history of modernity is the urbanization of the countryside.” The development of urban-rural integration is the ultimate direction of the evolution of human relationships between urban and rural areas (Sun, 2019). Academic research on cities and towns is mainly from the perspective of economics and geography. Economists argue that urbanisation is an inevitable trend with economic growth, which has an impact on traditional rural towns. Rural populations gradually accept urbanisation and trigger changes in socio-economic structures and rural lifestyles (He,

2006). Geographers prefer to discuss the impact of various factors in the scope of architecture and sociology, such as the impact of urban population share, population density, and building density on the development of urbanisation. Plentiful research on urban and rural planning, development of tourism sectors, and structural transformation of the economy has been conducted.

In the aspect of the interrelation between economy, tourism, and society, Yang (2016) indicated that tourism should play a leading role in regional economic development, forming a construction pattern with sustained innovation capacity. Sheng (2016) indicated that the core element of the development of cultural tourism towns is innovation. A good industrial ecology must be formed to enhance the regional economic growth and the level of sustainability. In the case of Gangkou Town of Zhongshan City, Yang (2018) explored its planning method for building a cultural town, proposing that a sustainable town should be planned by its policy, resource endowment, and the will of locals. Joun et al. (2020) argued that tourism may constitute a gateway to economic sustainability in less-developed regions through the revitalization and balanced development of local structures.

For the assessment of cultural tourism towns, Visvaldis (2013) conducted a case study of Valmiera town and provided an approach for selecting indicators to assess its sustainability level based on 15 key indicators. Wei (2016) introduced the advanced experience of cultural tourism towns in developed countries and denoted that the current evaluation criteria for cultural tourism towns are relatively narrow, suggesting setting different evaluation criteria for different types of towns. Chen (2017) analysed the experience of developing tourism towns around the world. She considered that the prerequisite for the development of cultural tourism towns is introducing appropriate and feasible assessment methods. An evaluation index system was established for the sustainable development of tourism cities based on the SDGs (Gao, 2021). 221 tourism cities were evaluated, and their sustainable development paths were designed accordingly. Stoica et al. (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of cultural tourism in Bucharest and Paris to identify the main aspects of sustainable cultural tourism, focusing on the situation in Bucharest to identify ways to improve the promotion and capitalization of cultural tourism and increase sustainability.

These studies reveal that the construction of cultural tourism towns is the core driving force for optimizing the supply-side structure and implementing new urbanization, that culture and tourism are inseparable from towns, and that accelerating the improvement of the evaluation index system of cultural tourism towns is a major issue at present.

### ***Sustainable development of cultural tourism towns***

The construction period of a cultural tourism town is long with high initial investment, which is closely related to the survival of local enterprises and the livelihood of residents. A timely assessment of the development of cultural tourism towns will help to uncover problems in the actual construction, and timely adjusting policies; thus, avoiding falling into the “Growthism” Trap (Zhang, 2013). In terms of the evaluation of cultural tourism towns, Wang (2019) screened 18 evaluation indicators by applying grounded theory to evaluate the development level of the first 127 cultural tourism towns in China. To judge the development potential of characteristic towns, Zhuang (2018) established an evaluation system for the comprehensive development potential of cultural tourism towns and ranked the top towns with the highest potential by utilising the Delphi method. Li et al. (2021) investigated the cultural sustainability of Jeju Island, noting that there is a strong relationship between collaboration and cultural sustainability. The above studies established evaluation models for qualitative analysis based on the current situation or development potential of cultural tourism towns by filtering relevant indicators, but there is no integration and further discussion of such indicators specifically at the level of cultural tourism.

In terms of the evaluating sustainability of cultural tourism towns, Wang (2017) constructed a framework for the sustainable development of China's cultural tourism towns, arguing that there are mainly problems of inexplicit development roles, insufficient produce powder, and unclear weighting of subjects. Sun (2016) indicates that the sustainable development evaluation indicators of cities should reflect the development level of the economy, environment, and society. Thus, she selected 24 evaluation indicators to assess the sustainability of 277 cities of different scales, using the fully arranged polygonal integrated graphical method. Guo (2019) utilised the Delphi method to calculate the weight of sustainable development indicators of athleisure towns but did not assess them.

In summary, while the research on the integration of cultural tourism and cultural tourism towns is in its early stages, "cultural and tourism resources are the essential properties of cultural tourism towns; cultural tourism towns are crucial practices of culture and tourism" (Sheng, 2016), which has reached a consensus in the academia and is gradually becoming a hot topic. Although there is plentiful literature on the assessment of cultural tourism towns, the main theories and research methods are mainly derived from the evaluation system of cities, which lacks relevance for towns. The toughest problems cultural tourism towns face is real-estatisation, ecological damage, and waste of resources, which cause unsustainable development. The research focus should establish a targeted sustainable evaluation index system, based on the actual situation of the region, and provide a widely applicable evaluation methodology; nonetheless, there is a lack of research in this respect.

## **Research Methodology**

This research would adopt a mixed-method research methodology to address the research questions. A mixed-method study is one in which the researcher incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis in a single study (Creswell, 1999), which enables researchers to understand complex phenomena qualitatively as well as to explain the phenomena through statistical analyses. Hence, the mixed method is the preferred design for this research.

Literature review, as a research method (Snyder, 2019), is utilised to analyse the relevant literature on cultural tourism towns. Through the collection and analysis of documentation, reports, press, and journals, current research focus and future research trends in this field could be denoted. The author could have a holistic view of the status quo of cultural tourism towns in China. The research gap, thus, can be identified by summarising existing research findings. Furthermore, clarifying the theoretical concept of cultural tourism towns, is essential, since it is an interdisciplinary concept, involving architecture, economy, public management, and the environment. This research could define the research object from the perspective of regional and urban governance. Based on the literature review, this research attempts to take one cultural tourism town in the Sichuan province of China as an example to conduct a case study:

Firstly, SWOT Analysis method would be used to qualitatively examine the existing problems of Sichuan's cultural tourism towns; Secondly, based on second-hand data, a first-hand data collection technique will be conducted. Stakeholders, including the government, locals, tourists, and local enterprises, will be invited to attend in-depth interviews. These semi-structured in-depth interviews contain open-ended questions about the changes the cultural tourism towns bring to the local livings and enterprises, tourists' experiences when they visit the towns, the government's attitude towards the balancing between economic growth and environmental protection, as well as the bottleneck of sustainable development of cultural tourism towns. Therefore, the author could clarify the concerns and interests of all parties, and the most important problems about cultural tourism towns. The data were then transcribed and analysed using a conventional content-analysis methodology. Questionnaire surveys will

be employed to ascertain the overall attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of locals and tourists on the sustainability of cultural tourism towns. Consequently, the author will have a holistic view of the level of people's satisfaction with cultural tourism town's facilities, events, values, environment, and existing problems; Thirdly, based on the feedback gained from interviewees and respondents, the author will screen the factors that affect the sustainability of towns as comprehensively as possible and eliminate duplicate indicators, forming a sustainability evaluation index system of cultural tourism towns; Lastly, by employing the established evaluation index system, the evaluation results can reflect certain problems in the sustainable development of cultural tourism towns in Sichuan Province, which provide solid data support for subsequent countermeasure research. This research hopes to diagnose the status and problems of sustainability of Sichuan's cultural tourism towns; hence, putting forward targeted countermeasures. These recommendations and strategies also provide a good reference for the other cultural tourism towns in China, which makes the research have significant practical value.

### Significance of the study

Cultural tourism towns are a very recent phenomenon arising from urban and rural development in China. The supporting policies are not always perfect. Some obstacles have emerged to limit its sustainable development. There is a dearth of an evaluation index system to assess the sustainability of cultural tourism towns and comprehensive solutions to these problems. To fill the gap, this research will analyse the factors that jeopardise the sustainability of cultural tourism towns and present feasible solutions. Importantly too, findings from this research will have global significance in the context of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, "by 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products"<sup>1</sup>.

(Word count: 1996)

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Tourism Related SDG. Retrieved February 10, 2024 from <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/sustainable-tourism>

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