

“Tuocheng Creation Plan”

A Contemporary Development Path of the Millennium Ancient Town in China’s Underdeveloped Regions

Xiaochun Yang, Jianming Wang, Mengxi Niu, Ke Li, Yerui Yin
Shenzhen University

Abstract

Nowadays, the resilience of the Earth, humanity, environment and ecosystems are still under severe pressure. The philosophy of “making no one lag behind” in the “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” should be the target for universal participation across regions. This study selects Tuocheng Ancient Town, which is founded in 214 BC and known as the “Millennium Ancient Town”, as our research object. Being located in the water sources for major metropolitan cities, such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen, Tuocheng Ancient Town has long been an underdeveloped region due to its backward structure of industries. Meanwhile, currently, the ancient dwellings, ancestral halls and temples in Tuocheng Ancient Town are facing the problems of space declining and cultural elements’ losing. In the context of China’s Rural Revitalization and “Typical Town Construction” initiated by Guangdong Province, with multiple problems and obstacles, what are the futures plans for Tuocheng Ancient Town? With little prior research support, firstly, based on the five comprehensive local field surveys, we released the “Tuocheng Creation Plan” originally from the community empowerment perspective. This plan emphasizes the dominant role of the local residents and aims at the development of regional diversity. Secondly, through continuous field surveys, we made efforts to excavate and utilize the original regional resources of Tuocheng Ancient Town, including the local people, culture, land, industry and scenery. And we also carried out some community empowerment practices on the basis of these resources of Tuocheng Ancient Town. Finally, we proposed three fundamental pathways for improvement in line with the contemporary development of Tuocheng Ancient Town: 1) Talent cultivation, aiming at nurturing the local new generation of youth; 2) Community co-construction, aiming at promoting the sustainable development of the town; 3) Civil participation, aiming at boosting the implementation of “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. In summary, this practical research significantly sheds light on the development of underdeveloped ancient towns in China.

Keywords

Underdeveloped regions, Millennium ancient town, Built heritage, People oriented, Community empowerment

How to cite

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THE BACKGROUND OF “TUOCHENG CREATION PLAN”

China has experienced a rapid economic development after the participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, which drives China becomes the world's second-largest economy in nowadays. However, the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022 has caused significant impacts on the global economy and China was no exception. In order to response to this challenge, the Chinese government proposed a new development pattern characterized by the domestic circulation as the mainstay and the mutual promotion of domestic and international circulations. This strategic transformation not only demonstrates the resilience of the Chinese economy but heralds a new trend of integrated urban-rural development in the future as well¹.

FROM “ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT” TO “COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT”: AN URBAN- RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

As early as 1961, the United Nations adopted the resolution of “The United Nations Development Decade”, which recognized that although the transfer of manufacturing industries in developed brought about more than 5% economic growth to the underdeveloped countries, developing countries or the third world countries, it also resulted in significant economic disparities between urban and rural areas and crucial issues such as unequal distribution of economic growth. This economic growth model, which introduces manufacturing factories to drive local employment, is a typical “outward-oriented” economic development pattern. In 1975, E.F. Schumacher proposed another development pattern, which includes five principles respectively are need-oriented, endogenous, self-reliant, ecologically sound and based on structural transformation. In 1976, Japanese scholar Kazuko Tsurumi first coined the term “endogenous development”, she holds the view that endogenous development is based on local cultural traditions and utilizes external knowledge, technology and institutions in order to autonomously create a development model that is suitable for the local natural ecosystem². In 1981, the town of Mishima-machi in Japan initiated the “traditional craftsmanship movement”, which emphasizes both learning from Mishima- machi's traditional culture and actively applying it to modern life. Subsequently, various regions in Japan began to undertake practices of “endogenous regional revitalization”. In 1994, drawing from the practical experience of endogenous regional revitalization in Japan, as well as the concepts of the “Community Architect” in the Uk and the “Community Design” in the US, Taiwan developed the new concept of “community empowerment”, which underscores the holistic nature of culture, industry, environment, education and public administration³.

THE EXPLORATION OF “COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT” MODE IN CHINA

In China, the similar explorations began with the rural civilian education experiment conducted by Yan Yangchu (1890-1990) in Ding County, Hebei Province, in 1926⁴. This experiment emphasized basic surveys, governance research experiments and the promotion of governance schemes. Meanwhile, during the same period, the educator Liang Shuming (1893-1988)

believed that mass education was a crucial avenue for transforming Chinese society. He believed that only by adapting mass education according to local conditions and the prevailing circumstances could we better address China's societal issues and promote social development⁵. Subsequently, for instance, Chinese artist Qu Yan's "Xucun Project" in 2008 and the "Bishan Project" by Ou Ning and Zuo Jing in 2011, they have been initially dedicated to revitalizing rural traditional culture and awakening the intrinsic vitality of rural residents through various means such as culture, art and education⁶. These projects not only focus on the preservation of material cultural heritage but emphasize the transmission of intangible cultural forms at the same time.

In recent years, the "Songkou Model" in Songkou Ancient Town, Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, has taken the "community empowerment" to new heights. By introducing the "Taiwan Open-dashilar", this model has achieved integrated implementation of "planning design + architectural renovation + community construction". Since 2014, after a decade of sustainable development, this model has gained attention and recognition at the national level and has been promoted and introduced nationwide.

In summary, under the dual impact of globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic, China is actively exploring a new model of integrated urban-rural development with "community empowerment" at its core. This model not only emphasizes economic development but also places strong emphasis on cultural heritage, ecological conservation and social harmony. Therefore, this study selected Tuocheng Ancient Town as the research site, which is a millennium-old town and located in the underdeveloped region with limited financial resources in northern Guangdong Province, China. Building upon the previous domestic and international community construction experiences, aiming at prioritizing the agency of locals, the "Tuocheng Creation Plan" has been proposed. By conducting extensive field surveys and listening to residents and the local overseas Chinese of different age groups, occupations, and cultural backgrounds, we try to propose ideas for the future and development of the ancient town, and summarize contemporary development paths for millennium-old towns in underdeveloped areas of China.

THE PRESENT SITUATION AND DILEMMA OF TUOCHENG ANCIENT TOWN

HISTORICAL CHANGES OF THE PATTERN IN TUOCHENG ANCIENT TOWN

Tuocheng Ancient Town can trace its history back to the Qin Dynasty (221 BC-207 BC) and has a history of over 2,230 years. Prior to 1949, Tuocheng Ancient Town served as the political, economic and cultural center of Longchuan County. In 1991, Tuocheng Ancient Town was recognized as a historical and cultural town of Guangdong Province. In 2009, it was further recognized by the China Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names as a "Millennium Ancient Town" of China's geographical and cultural heritage. (See Figure 1)

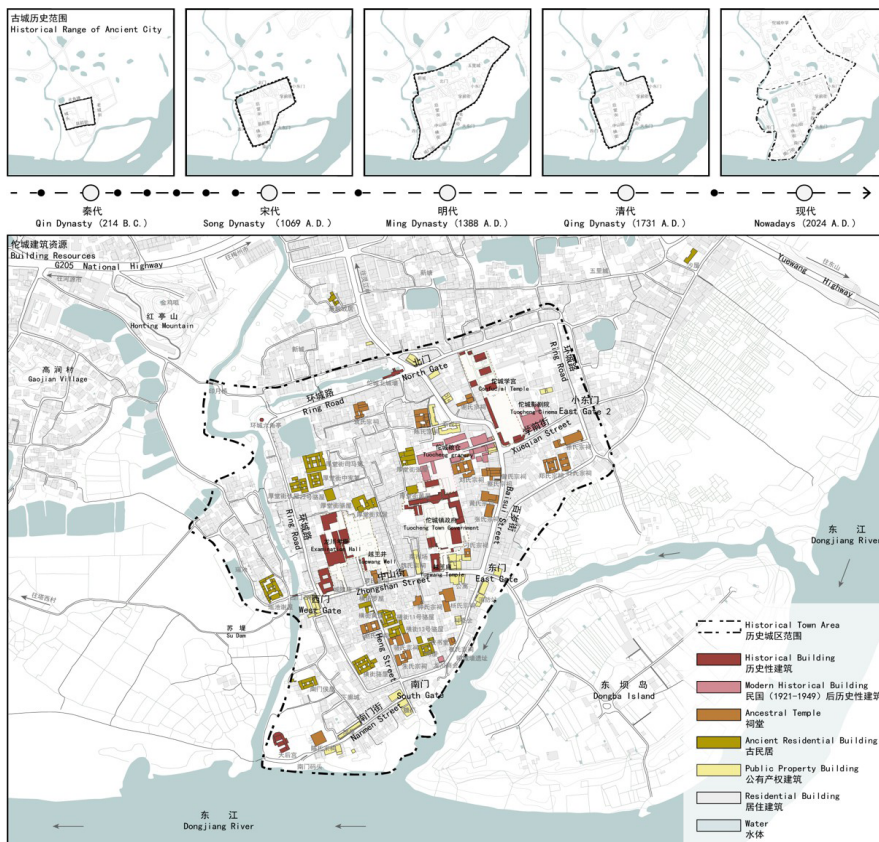


Fig. 1. Historical changes of Tuocheng Ancient Town pattern

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION CHARACTERISTICS OF TUOCHENG ANCIENT TOWN

Tuocheng Ancient Town is located on the southwest side of Longchuan County, approximately eight kilometers from the county center. Currently, Tuocheng Ancient Town covers an area of 36.88 hectares with a population of 8,700 people. Due to its location along the Dong River, where is a water source for major cities such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen, Tuocheng Ancient Town has historically faced limitations in industrial development and is remaining at an economically underdeveloped level. In 2021, the “Longchuan West Station” high-speed railway station commenced operations, which is situated only about 2 kilometers from Tuocheng Ancient Town. According to the “Overall Plan for Land and Space of Longchuan County (2021-2035)” (Phase Results), Longchuan County plans to develop new construction land in the northern part of the county to create a “New Happy City” and leverage the Longchuan West Station to develop a “High-Speed Rail New City” within the Tuocheng Ancient Township area to the southwest.

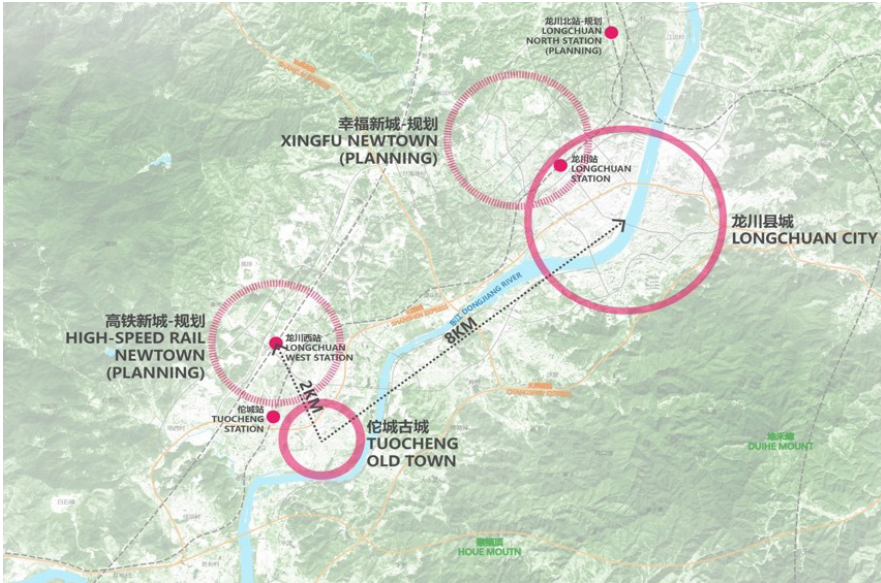


Fig. 2. Spatial planning diagram of Tuocheng Ancient Town, high-speed railway new town and new happy city in Longchuan County

With the further advancement of urbanization in Longchuan County and the construction of the high-speed rail new city, the original “two-city synergy” pattern will be evolved into a pattern of three cities effectively linked. Additionally, it takes only one hour and 16 minutes from Longchuan West High-Speed Rail Station to Shenzhen. Therefore, the protection and development of Tuocheng Ancient Town not only align with the overall spatial plan of Longchuan County, but represents an essential factor in the new development stage of the ancient town as well, which integrates effectively with the economically developed Greater Bay Area of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau (See Figure 2).

ANALYSIS OF PAST IMPLEMENTATION PROJECTS IN THE PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TUOCHENG ANCIENT TOWN

Since 2010, the local government of Tuocheng Ancient Town has been continuously promoting the protection and development of this ancient town, but some projects have some serious problems.

We will take “Sudi(苏堤)” in Tuocheng Ancient Town as an example. As historical and cultural landscape, it is recorded that Sudi(苏堤) was built during the Song Dynasty (960 AD - 1279 AD) by the official and literati Su Zhe for the purpose of flood control. Currently, along the Sudi(苏堤), due to the local government’s temporary response to China’s policy in the protection of 1.8 billion mu of arable land, the vegetable gardens were previously managed freely by the ancient town residents have been requisitioned by the local government and converted into paddy fields with new irrigation facilities. This behavior has resulted in severe damage to the historical and cultural landscape of the Sudi(苏堤)⁷.



Fig. 3. Previous wrong case of “Sudi(苏堤)” in Tuocheng Ancient Town

During our field investigations, our research team identified this issue and promptly reported it to the Longchuan County Housing and Construction Bureau of Tuocheng Ancient Town, the higher-level administrative unit of Tuocheng Ancient Town. We recommended that they should immediately stop all construction projects within a 50-meter radius of the “pavilion” (a historical resting and tea-drinking area for passersby) on the Sudi(苏堤). Additionally, we suggested that they have to invite heritage conservation experts to conduct a current assessment of the Sudi(苏堤) and propose specific conservation measures. Although our recommendations have been adopted by the county government, the landscape damage already incurred cannot be entirely restored (See Figure 3).

This case shows many problems. First, it reflects a lack of in-depth investigation and research by the planning and design team regarding the project’s location, thus, they overlooked the local historical and cultural characteristics, folk beliefs and other local features. Second, it also highlights the issues in supervision, communication and coordination among local governments, planning and design teams, and construction parties. Third, Furthermore, the government failed to actively involve local residents neglecting the principle of “people-oriented” in governance. This erroneous case serves as a reminder that the protection of Tuocheng Ancient Town requires comprehensive consideration of various factors to ensure scientific planning and effective implementation.

PRACTICE AND THEORETICAL SYSTEM CONSTRUCTION OF “TUOCHENG CREATION PLAN”

In response to the national “Rural Revitalization”⁸ strategy and the “Hundred Million Project”⁹ of Guangdong Province, Tuocheng Ancient Town urgently needs to address the main issue of how to balance the protection, development and utilization of local resources while guiding local residents’ participation and fostering enthusiasm among youth and other talent

resources to contribute to hometown construction. It is crucial for this town to introduce a development approach of “multi-subject co- construction and sharing” involving enterprises aligned with sustainable development goals.

This study is based on regional revitalization practices carried out in various countries and “community empowerment” projects undertaken at different times in China. It employs continuous on-site field investigations to unearth local resources and explores a “community empowerment” model suitable for the integrated urban-rural development of underdeveloped areas in China. Through the pilot project implementation, the aim of this study is to foster talent development and community co-construction in the long run.

CLARIFICATION OF THE OVERALL GOAL OF “TUOCHENG CREATION PLAN”

During the initial phase of our field investigation, it is essential to clarify the overall objectives of implementing “Tuocheng Creation Plan” in Tuocheng Ancient Town. Our objectives encompass the following five aspects: 1) Empowering local residents as active participants; 2) Restructuring the network of local resource relationships; 3) Revitalizing the “material+immaterial” landscape tourism ecological system of traditional local pilot projects; 4) Establishing a mechanism for heritage conservation at the local level; 5) Promoting the orderly inheritance of local cultural heritage. Based on these five objectives, our aim is to foster talent development and facilitate the ecological co-construction of the community in the future.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CORRESPONDING EVALUATION MECHANISM FOR THE RESOURCES OF “PEOPLE, CULTURE, LAND, PRODUCTS AND LANDSCAPE”¹⁰

Tuocheng Ancient Town is an “energy complex” constructed from the five elements i.e. “people, culture, land, products and landscape”. This study established a basic objective evaluation mechanism for implementing field investigations and local resource surveys in Tuocheng Ancient Town (see Table 1). Through comprehensive survey, we make the effort to identify, understand and assess various potential resources in this local area. On the basis of these undertakings, by taking external knowledge, technology, systems etc. as reference, we try to gradually activate the network of resource relationships and create a development approach which is suitable for the local natural ecosystem. We summarize this development approach in three steps: “current regional status -comprehensive regional survey - regional activation”.

OVERVIEW OF THE 9 FIELD INVESTIGATIONS IN TUOCHENG ANCIENT TOWN

The key to the development of culture or civilization lies in three aspects respectively are “region”, “history” and “symbiosis with the nature”, they are all inherent in traditional ways of people’s daily life. Since August 2023, our research team has conducted 9 continuous on-site field surveys in Tuocheng Ancient Town, and we identified a large number of potential resources there.

Target evaluation mechanism model of “Tuocheng Creation Plan”		
“Culture is life”	“Community empowerment” practice goal	Overall effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Bricolage” ● Emphasis on thinking patterns that inspire imagination and creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Centered on residents and inhabitants ● Pursue the activation of latent local resources ● Aim for the participation of the entire region and all residents ● Propose initiatives related to basic needs ● Enhance natural ecology ● Aim for cultural independence ● Promote a sense of overall identity within the local community ● Rooted in skills that local residents can engage in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Starting point: Regional life and cultural survey (utilizing all five senses) ● Transform the concept of “having nothing” into “having everything” (resources = treasures) ● Regional revitalization is “for ourselves”, never “for external visitors” ● “Endogenous creativity” is the foundation of regional revitalization ● It’s crucial to fully utilize the region’s identity ● Develop “short-term, mid-term, long-term” development plans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The culture of the region is born in the everyday life 		

Table 1. Evaluation ideas of the basic goals of endogenous “Tuocheng Creation Plan”

Through investigations into historical architectural resources, intangible cultural resources and natural ecological resources, we believe that despite the abundant potential resources within Tuocheng Ancient Town, there are currently numerous issues within the resource co-ordination and local governance mechanisms. We summarize these issues as follows: 1) The present urban appearance of Tuocheng Ancient Town fails to showcase the profound cultural heritage of this thousand-year-old ancient city; 2) There are barriers between the historical building identification mechanism and the implementation of protection measures; 3) The excavation and activation of both material and intangible cultural resources throughout the entire area are not prominent; 4) Local public participation needs to be strengthened and guided; 5) Local characteristic resources have yet to meet the demands of the cultural tourism market; 6) The collaboration mechanism among the government, experts, enterprises and local residents is not robust enough; 7) Ecological environment management along the Dongjiang River and the quality of daily water supply for residents in the ancient town are difficult to guarantee.

CO-CREATION: INITIATED “TUOCHENG CREATION PLAN”

Regarding to how Tuocheng Ancient Town can achieve sustainable development with a focus on local characteristics while also considering cultural tourism, based on the perspective of “endogenous community empowerment”, our research team proposed the “Tuocheng Creation Plan” and outlined ten phased objectives. Currently, the “Tuocheng Creation Plan” has been incorporated into the scope of protection and development by the Longchuan County Government, which indicates that local governments are beginning to recognize the need to shift from the previous “outward-oriented” development model relying heavily on rapid introduction of external capital to a development approach focused primarily on endogenous regional development (see Figure 4).

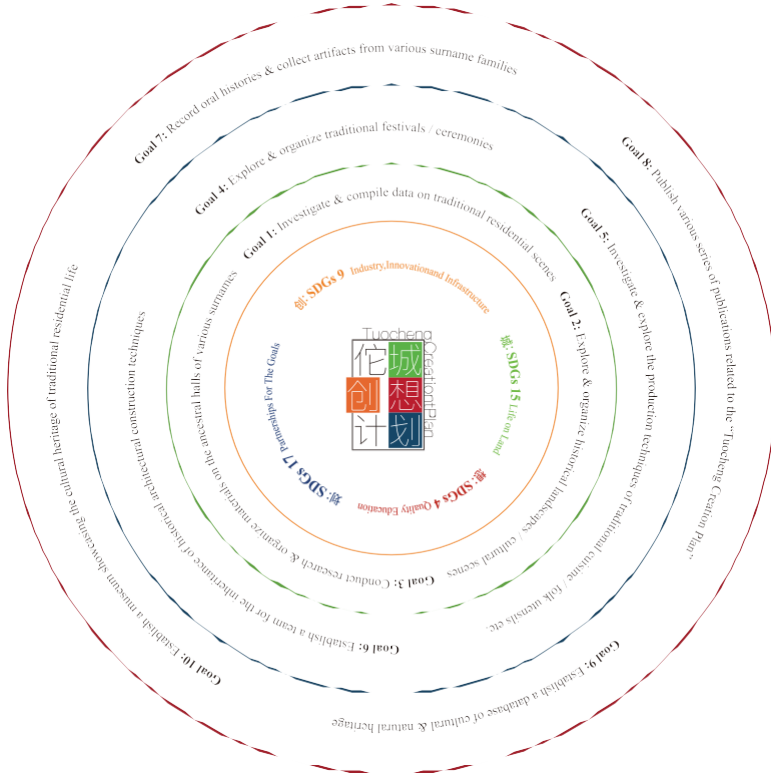


Fig. 4. The logo and ten stage objectives of “Tuocheng Creation Plan”

RECASTING THE LOCAL RELATIONSHIP NETWORK

Based on the basic objective evaluation approach of “endogenous community empowerment”, our research team designed the “Longchuan Eight Scenic Cotton Bag” series of cultural and creative products at extremely low cost. Through this product, we aim to present a conceptual framework of utilizing local resources and integrating various types of resources among different stakeholders, such as the local government officials and local youth. The elements of the “Longchuan Eight Scenic Cotton Bag” present eight cultural and natural landscapes that have been beloved by local residents in Longchuan since ancient times, which can be used to serve as a medium to guide tourists in exploring these places. The development model of this series of cultural and creative product has the potential to reshape the network of local resources encompassing “people, culture, land, products and landscape” (see Figure 5).

In addition, our research team also concurrently advanced the following initiatives: 1) Facilitating the development of study tour programs for local returning youth; 2) Assisting local governments in collecting old photos and artifacts; 3) Uncovering the stories of owners’ families of ancient dwellings to promote their restoration and revitalization; 4) Providing

first-hand materials for the production of the documentary “Oral History of Overseas Chinese Families”; 5) Recommending stories featuring old street shops and handicraft workshops in Tuocheng Ancient Town to local television stations.

We believe that the aforementioned methods can continuously activate the cultural resources of Tuocheng Ancient Town. Simultaneously, throughout the process of nationwide participation, we continuously listen to and record suggestions from local residents regarding the current living conditions in Tuocheng Ancient Town and their expectations for future development, which presents a “bottom-up” participatory planning approach.

“TUOCHENG CREATION PLAN”: THE DRIVING FORCE OF THE PARTICIPATORY URBAN DESIGN OF TUOCHENG ANCIENT TOWN

In China, urban planning and design are often controlled by the government and with insufficient involvement from the local residents. Tuocheng Ancient Town faces a similar issue, especially under the current development plan of the tri-city layout in Longchuan County, i.e. “Happiness New City - High-Speed Rail New City - Tuocheng Ancient City”. The sustainable conservation and development of Tuocheng Ancient Town is an urgent need.

According to the target evaluation mechanism model of the “Tuocheng Creation Plan”, our research team selected pilot projects to guide resident participation. We have established a coordination model between the government, enterprises and the public, facilitating efficient two-way communication of information from both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives. This practice aims to balance multiple factors such as the historical and cultural heritage of the ancient town with modern life, urban-rural integration, human resource integration, introduction of high-tech technologies alongside ecological conservation, government policy formulation, and the real needs of local residents.

This model not only stimulates the “energy complex” characteristics of Tuocheng Ancient Town but also highlights the significant role of “Tuocheng Creation Plan” as a participatory urban design approach in the sustainable development of this ancient town. We firmly believe that it provides a new path for the contemporary development of millennium-old towns in underdeveloped areas in China and facilitates genuine multi-party participation and win-win outcomes (see Figure 6).

CONCLUSION

This field investigations and practical projects fully reflect the significant importance of adopting the “endogenous community empowerment” model for the protection and development of Tuocheng Ancient Town where is located in the underdeveloped areas. Under this model, as key facilitators, the researchers have successfully established a three-tier efficient linkage mechanism between the government, enterprises and local residents. This mechanism tries to transform China’s previous government-dominated governance approach into a multi-party collaborative and progressive model led by “government guidance and assistance from local talents”, with “expert guidance and citizen participation” as the main thread, and “enterprise investment and operational management” as the support. The above-mentioned are the core values to be echoed and constructed by “Tuocheng Creation Plan”.

Through the practice of this model, this research summarized three fundamental paths for the contemporary development of Tuocheng Ancient Town: firstly, emphasizing talent cultivation and actively nurturing a new generation of youth in the ancient town in order to inject fresh vitality into it; secondly, strengthening community empowerment to promote the sustainable development of the ancient town and to ensure the continuation of its historical context; finally, promoting public participation which can support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In summary, this research and practical case of Tuocheng Ancient Town not only provide strong support for its sustainable development but also offer significant reference value for the development of ancient towns in other underdeveloped areas in China.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The content of this study is based on field investigations, and the figures and tables in the article were drawn by the authors’ team.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Professor **Xiaochun Yang** has long been being committed to the protection and revitalization of urban and rural historical architectural heritage in high-density metropolitan areas. Dr. Jianming Wang, during his study abroad in Japan, he was mainly focusing on the research field of “endogenous regional revitalization”, especially on on-site field investigations and practices. He is a postdoctoral fellow at Shenzhen University at present. Dr. Mengxi Niu is a young scholar majoring in international cultural communication, she is responsible for the English writing of this research.

ENDNOTES

¹ Accelerate the construction of a new development pattern with domestic circulation as the main body and domestic and international dual circulation promoting each other (studying and implementing the spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China), People’s Daily Online. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2020/1125/c1001-31943814.html>

² Kazuko Tsurumi. *Endogenous Development Theory*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1989.

³ Kiyoshi Miyazaki. *The Flower of Human Heart*. Chiba: Published by Kiyoshi Miyazaki Research Office, 1996.78

⁴ Ding Hongrui, Wang Xuan. Exploring the path of Chinese path to modernization rural construction from Yan Yangchu's experience. *Journal of Mount Huangshan University*, 2022. 70-74

⁵ XIANG Deping, ZHANG Kun. *Theory and Practice of the “Rural Construction School” and Its Inspiration for Rural Revitalization*. Beijing: Journal of China Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition), 2023.138-151

⁶ Yan Qu. *Art Rural Construction: The Third Path of Rural Construction in China* [J]. Guangxi: *Ethnic Art*, 2020.14-19/ Yuan Sui. “Bishan Plan” and Art Rural Construction[J]. Beijing: *Minyi*, 2020.37-41

⁷ In the second year of the Yuanfu era of the Northern Song Dynasty (1099), Su Zhe was exiled to Huazhou as a Beijia and went to Xunzhou (with its capital in Tuocheng). He once lived in Dongshan Temple and later lived in the west of Baiyun Bridge in Aohu. He closed his door and wrote the “Brief Records of Longchuan”. During this period, he led the people to build a levee in the east of Aohu Lake to fight against drought. Later generations named this levee Sudi() in memory of him. *Longchuan County Local Chronicle Compilation Committee, Longchuan County Chronicle*, Guangzhou: Guangdong Provincial People's Publishing House, 1994. 37

⁸ In 2021, the Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization and Accelerating Agricultural and Rural Modernization. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-02/21/content_5588098.htm.

⁹ In 2022, Decision of the Guangdong Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China on Implementing the “High Quality Development Project of Hundred Counties, Thousand Towns, and Ten Thousand Villages” to Promote Coordinated Development of Urban and Rural Regions. http://www.gd.gov.cn/gdywdt/gdyw/content/post_4100997.html

¹⁰ Honorary Professor Kiyoshi Miyazaki of Chiba University in Japan summarized and proposed the basic idea of community building around local resources of “people, culture, land, products and landscape” in the long-term “endogenous regional revitalization”, and summarized the corresponding evaluation goals. Kiyoshi Miyazaki. *The Flower of Human Heart*. Chiba: Published by Kiyoshi Miyazaki Research Office, 1996.9

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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1 Painted by Yerui Yin.

Figure 2 Drawing by Ke Li.

Figure 3 On March 24, 2024, Zhiyong Su and Jianming Wang used drones and Apple phones to shoot.

Xiaochun Yang, Jianming Wang, Mengxi Niu, Ke Li, Yerui Yin
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Figure 4 Painted by Yerui Yin and Jianming Wang.
Figure 5/6 Shooting and drawing by Jianming Wang.

