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The Crux, Root Cause and Governance Path of "Small City Disease" —— A Case Study of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture

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Abstract **Review Article**

Urban diseases refer to a series of acute urban problems that restrict healthy urban development in the urbanization process. As China has urbanized, many small cities have fallen into a development dilemma and even experienced a recession in their urban development. This paper examines "small city disease" in the context of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, and finds that the symptoms of "small city disease" include labor force losses, capital losses, insufficient public service resources, fewer employment opportunities, and the generalization of human feelings in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Then, this paper proposes developing endogenous superior industries, strengthening regional cooperation, promoting system and mechanism reform, and being innovation with regard to cities' approach to urban development, in order to successfully combat the increasingly serious "small city disease".

Keywords: Small City Disease; Governance path; Yi area; Urbanization.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of urbanization in China, the urbanization rate of China's resident population reached 63.89% in 2020. In terms of global urbanization development, an urbanization rate above 50% indicates a period of both sustainable urbanization and concentrated outbreaks of "urban diseases". Rapid urbanization comes with various "urban diseases" which are becoming increasingly serious, including "big city diseases", such as population expansion and pollution caused by excessive factor concentration, and "small city diseases", such as insufficient industrial development and insufficient employment opportunities caused by a large loss of resources. Many scholars have examined China's increasingly serious "big city disease" and highlighted that solving the "big city disease" requires developing several small cities with economic vitality and characteristic functions. However, "small city disease" has seriously restricted small cities' role in function commitment, population closure, and breaking the dual structure of urban and rural areas, while at the same time having an impact on the urbanization process.

Small cities refer to county-level administrative regions where the non-agricultural population in urban and peri-urban areas is concentrated at a certain scale. According to the classification criteria for city size in China's latest urban statistics released by the State Council in 2014, those with a permanent urban population below 500,000 are small cities. From the perspective of administrative divisions, small cities in China predominantly refer to county towns and county-level cities, or non-central urban areas under the jurisdiction of large and medium-sized cities that have a similar status to county-level cities. From a functional perspective, small cities are a type of city. Small cities are not the same as small towns, but rather they are the main carriers of specifics forms of regional economic development, regional employment centers adapted to the urbanization process, and regional social centers realizing lifestyle improvements [1].

China's national new urbanization plan sets out its development policy as "strictly controlling big cities, reasonably developing medium-sized cities, and actively developing small cities". Furthermore, China's national new urbanization plan suggests "speeding up the development of small and medium-sized cities as the main direction of optimizing the scale structure of cities and towns, to strengthen the guidance of industrial and public service resources layout, to improve their quality and increase their quantity". Small cities are not only an effective means of limiting the

malignant expansion of big cities, but also an effective measure for tackling the difficult problem of the dual structure of urban and rural areas. High-quality development among small cities is crucial to smooth urbanization in China [2]. Therefore, this study investigates the symptoms of "small city disease", analyzes problems related to small city development in the Yi region, and puts forward a set of governance proposals at the local government level. This study has important theoretical and practical significance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Domestic research on small cities predominantly covers three topics - small city function understanding, small city development problems, and small city development strategies. In examining the functions of small cities, Zhao Qianjun, Zhang Guoqin and Cui Shenghui suggest looking at small and medium-sized cities and focusing on two major issues – improving their absorptive capacity, and enhancing their development and operational efficiency [3]. Shao Shiguan examine small cities and finds that they are characterized by self-reinforcing migration, which causes them to slowly disappear. At the same time, there is a serious imbalance in the hinterland of small cities in China [1]. According to Gu Shengzu and Zheng Chao, the development of small and medium-sized cities is conducive to avoiding "big city disease" and "rural disease", and enhancing their industrial development can boost their ability to support the population [4]. In terms of the problems facing small city development, Wang Huarong believes that urban poverty in China is mainly concentrated in the small and medium-sized cities in the central and western regions, which are dominated by traditional industries and SMEs [5]. Yang Siming investigates the economic development issues facing small and medium-sized cities, including unreasonable industrial structures, the lagging development of the tertiary industry, and excessive infrastructure debts [6]. According to Gai Wenxue, small cities in the west face four major problems with regard to their development - the serious disjunction between advanced urban facility construction and lagging development in urban industries; the imbalance between the rapid expansion of urban space and the issues surrounding urban population agglomeration; the dislocation between the strategic objectives of urban development and the comparative advantages of urban resources; and the backward and incomplete urban management system [7]; Ren Guangxin notes that the development of small and medium-sized cities in China faces three major problems related to the urban-rural dual economic structure, inappropriate industrial structures, and imperfect infrastructure construction [8]. In terms of small city development strategies, Zhang Ge and He Yongjian divide small cities into three types according to their functions - specialized, central, and transportation, and put forward differentiated development strategies [9]. Liu Siming and Zhou Fei offer an alternative three types - dominant industry-driven, cultural resources-driven, and economic center-based. They also propose four development directions for small cities - scientific planning, leveraging industrial advantages, improving public facilities, and highlighting tourism characteristics [10]. There is little research on "small city disease" in academia, as well as different perspectives on "small city disease". For some, "small city disease" is the result of rapid urbanization characterized by urban traffic congestion, excessive environmental consumption, widening income inequality, and an unreasonable spatial distribution of the population [11]. For others, "small city disease" and "advanced urbanization" lead to issues of oversupply, which involve insufficient employment opportunities, continuous brain drain, and an oversupply of housing [2].

Overall, academics believe small city development is of great strategic significance to modern urbanization. They point out those small cities face issues like having a single industrial structure, traffic congestion, and inadequate urban infrastructure construction. They also put forward strategies for small city development, such as developing superior industries, scientific urban planning, and rational urban construction. However, the academic research on small cities is still small relative to that on "the economic growth engines of" big cities and "the peripheral" small towns, especially in terms of the "small city disease". The research on small cities does not reflect the characteristics of small cities. Small cities differ from big cities in their economic connotations, urban development characteristics, and urban problems, as a result of differences in size and urbanization stage. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the symptoms and causes of "small city disease", so as to understand their relation with urbanization development stage and the spatial characteristics of small cities. Moreover, this paper suggests a set of differentiated measures to combat "small city disease".

3. Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture - "small city disease" analysis

Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture is located in the southwest of Sichuan Province in China and is one of 21 prefectures in the province. The city has an area of 60,400km^2, with 2 county-level cities, 14 counties and 1 autonomous county under its jurisdiction. According to the seventh population census, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture has a permanent population of 4.8583 million. Liangshan Prefecture is a minority autonomous prefecture in China that contains 14 ethnic groups, including the Yi, Han, Tibetan, Hui, Mongolian, Miao, Lisu, Dai, Naxi, Buyi, Zhuang, Bai, Man, and Tujia. According to the statistical bulletin on national economic and social development in Liangshan Prefecture in 2019, there are 3,039,700 ethnic minority individuals in the prefecture, and they account for 57.25% of the total population.

The largest minority ethnic population is the Yi population – which stands at 2,858,800 and accounts for 53.84% of the total population. This paper analyses the problems facing the development of Liangshan Prefecture from the perspective of "small urban diseases" at the prefecture level.

3.1 Labor force losses

According to urbanization theory, once the urbanization rate exceeds 30%, the urbanization process begins to accelerate. In China, the population flows associated with rapid urbanization are large scale, and high frequency, going from rural to urban agglomerations, and from small and medium-sized cities to large cities. These flows have led to large population outflows from small cities in China.

Such population outflows can be seen in the year-end difference between the resident population and the registered population, as shown in Table 1. In 2000, the population of Liangshan Prefecture experienced a net inflow, but in 2010, 2015 and 2019, there was a net outflow. From 2015 to 2019, population change slowed, but Liangshan Prefecture still experienced a net outflow. Looking at Sichuan Province as a whole, there was a net population outflow in 16 cities and states in 2019, 17 cities and states in 2015, and 14 cities and states in 2000. Based on the absolute population outflows from cities and states, the net population outflow in 2019 is substantially higher than in 2000. From 2010 to 2015, population outflows from cities and states diverged. In all states except for Deyang, Yibin, Ziyang and Liangshan, population outflows continue to accelerate, while population outflows from other cities and states have dropped slightly. At the same time, there has been a large population inflow from Chengdu. In 2015, over 2 million moved from Chengdu, roughly equivalent to four small cities' worth of people. From 2015 to 2019, population outflows in each city and state decreased slightly, while population inflows to Chengdu decreased slightly. Currently, population flows large mirror labor force flows. Large population outflows in small cities lead to a large loss in the local labor force. Li Xiaoyang *et al.* use a panel model to show that labor outflows, on the one hand, reduce GDP below potential when there is constant capital investment, and on the other hand, damage the human capital structure [12]. Large labor force losses in Liangshan Prefecture prevent small cities from driving economic development, lead to an empty economy, and create an urban development bottleneck.

Table-1: Difference between Permanent Resident Population and Household Registered Population of Cities and States in 2000, 2010, 2015 and 2019 Unit: 10,000

region	2000	2010	2015	2019
Chengdu	102.1	255.7	237.7	155.8
Zigong	-7.4	-58.1	-50.4	-27.9
Panzhihua	9.0	10.1	12.6	13
Luzhou	-53.7	-80.5	-77.2	-75.7
Deyang	-0.4	-27.6	-38.7	-28.4
Mianyang	-3.8	-80.5	-68.3	-43.7
Guangyuan	1.8	-62.5	-42.3	-31.2
Suining	-11.7	-56.2	-52.1	-43.4
Neijiang	-5.2	-55.2	-46.5	-38.2
Leshan	-5.8	-29.8	-27.7	-22
Nanchong	-51.5	-123.8	-105.9	-79.9
Meishan	-23.2	-54.1	-54.1	-42.8
Yibin	-22.2	-91.8	-103.1	-94.1
Guang' an	-28.9	-145.6	-142.7	-133.7
Dazhou	-45.5	-138.7	-135.1	-84.5
Ya'an city	4.9	-4.2	-2.8	1.1
Bazhong	-14.1	-59.6	-46.7	-33.7
Ziyang	-18.4	-134.6	-146.8	-91.9
A'ba	3.9	0.0	1.6	4.6
Ganzi	1.4	3.1	7.3	10.2
liangshan	2.1	-25.6	-44.9	-38.1

Data sources: data from the fifth national population census, data from the sixth national population census and the 2019 national economic and social development statistics bulletin of various cities and prefectures in Sichuan province.

3.2 Insufficient public service resources

Large-scale, high-quality public service resources are often used by cities as a measure of their image and competitiveness. Thanks to economies of scale and allocative efficiency in public service resources production, the scale and quality of public service resources allocation in large cities should be

better than those in small cities. However, China's centralized agglomeration model of excessive public service resources has led to a large deficit in important public service resources, such as education and medical care, in small cities. Li Zhongjian *et al.* state that large cities have over 80% of China's high-quality medical resources, such that 80% of common diseases can be fully treated in a hospital every year, but they have to go to large cities for treatment instead of looking for a long way to go [13].

Public service resources in Liangshan Prefecture, such as education and medical care, are inadequate. In terms of educational resources, China's "211 universities" are distributed across six prefecture-level cities, except the municipalities directly under the central government, and the provincial capital cities. Elite junior and senior high schools are clustered in major cities and their centers. In 2016, the three high schools in China's Top 100 High Schools from Sichuan Province were all located in Chengdu City. Chengdu City and Mianyang City, the national key high schools in Sichuan Province, cover 33% of the province. Most national key high schools in other regions are also located in the centers of large and medium-sized cities. Liangshan Prefecture lacks high-quality educational resources. In terms of medical resources, according to the China Hospital Competitiveness Report, 95 of the top 100 hospitals in 2015 were located in municipalities directly under the central government and in provincial capital cities, while the remaining 5 were from densely populated prefecture-level cities (Qingdao, Suzhou, Xuzhou, Dalian and Wenzhou). No hospitals from the top 100 list are located in Liangshan Prefecture. The concentration of public service resources in big cities has exacerbated "big city diseases", such as traffic congestion and housing shortages. However, the lack of public service resources in small cities hinders their ability to create a livable, business-friendly environment. The inability to regenerate and maintain resources has exacerbated the polarization between large and small cities.

3.3 Insufficient employment opportunities

As China's economic growth has slowed and its industrial structure undergoes change, the employment capacity of small cities is shrinking. The gap between the number of people who need to be resettled and re-employed and the number of new urban jobs is huge. The number of jobs is insufficient and the employment situation is worrying. The absolute number of registered unemployed people in China has been increasing, from 8.39 million people in 2005, to 9.26 million in 2013, and 9.45 million in 2019. Since 2000, the registered urban unemployment rate in China has been stable at around 4%, below the 7% level at which most modern economies generally begin to show concern. However, given statistical nuances surrounding the definition of unemployment in China, the registered urban unemployment rate does not reflect the true unemployment level in cities and towns. According to Ding Renchuan *et al.*, the true urban unemployment rate in China peaked at 8.8% in 2005, based on an adjustment coefficient obtained from the fifth population census data using linear regression [14].

They note that, based on survey data from small cities in Liangshan Prefecture, employment opportunities and the employment capacity of government departments and public institutions are very limited. At the same time, the industrial sector is unable to effectively absorb employment due to its poor industrial efficiency, while the tertiary sector mostly depends on the active services sector. Due to rising labor costs, firms are unwilling to hire more workers, meaning that there are few employment opportunities and a worrying employment situation in small cities. Furthermore, due to the queuing effect of unemployment, low-income groups struggle more in their job search. Fewer employment opportunities in small cities cause urban poverty to become a long-term issue, which generally leads to an increase in income inequality. When the number of unemployed groups reaches the threshold, unemployment poses a greater risk to social stability, causing urban crime and other issues to increase.

3.4 Low rate the capital utilization

In classical and neo-classical economics, capital is an essential input that leads to economic growth. According to Rostow's theory of economic growth stages, capital accumulation is an important condition for small cities seeking to realize economic growth in the preparation or take-off stages. However, capital outflows from small cities in China are a serious issue, with most capital flowing to large and medium-sized cities and economically developed regions. There are many channels through which capital can flow out from small cities, including financial institutions and non-financial institutions, such as commercial banks' small city branches' capital deposits, commercial banks' small deposits and large loans, postal savings banks' deposits, branch insurance companies' premium payments, and local residents' purchases of houses in large cities. Year-end differences between deposit and loan balances at financial institutions reflect the outflow of savings that should have been converted into investment capital for small cities. In 2019, most districts and counties in Sichuan Province experienced capital outflows. The higher the deposit-loan differences in the year-end deposit balance, the greater the capital loss. Capital outflows seriously affect capital formation, which is needed for economic growth in small cities. At the same time, it is impossible to form a virtuous financial ecosystem in which deposits generate loans and loan-derived deposits that cannot meet the capital investment needs of economic development. In 2019, Liangshan Prefecture had a positive deposit-loan balance, which accounted for 17% of the deposit balance, indicating a small capital utilization rate.

Table-2: Savings and loan differences of cities and states in Sichuan Province in 2019

region	Deposit-loan balance (RMB 10,000)	The balance of deposits and loans accounted for the proportion of the balance of deposits
Chengdu	744757	17%
Zigong	10286	7.9%
Panzhihua	-11347	-15%
Luzhou	-16804	-9%
Deyang	25387	13%
Mianyang	4785	1%
Guangyuan	19608	17%
Suining	7257	5%
Neijiang	39069	38%
Leshan	-6332	-3%
Nanchong	39987	17%
Meishan	-39419	-2%
Yibin	-37456	-18%
Guang' an	42452	27%
Dazhou	65606	28%
Ya'an city	-12	-0.01
Bazhong	21206	20%
Ziyang	25219	23%
A'ba	-5960	-21%
Ganzi	-15259	-57%
liangshan	22211	17%

Source: Sichuan Statistical Yearbook-2020

4 Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture "small city disease" - governance path

"Small city disease" governance should follow the general principles of synchronous evolution over time, regional integration in space, and systematic reform and innovation, in order to develop endogenous superior industries, strengthen regional cooperation, promote system and mechanism reform, bring innovation to the urban development concept, and form a three-part small city development pattern with cities as the carrier, industries as the support, and the population as the main body.

4.1 Develop endogenous superior industries

The regional economy is the characteristic economy. Moreover, the characteristic industry must be embodied as the superior industry if it is to be meaningful. Therefore, focusing primarily on developing endogenous superior industries is not only beneficial to strengthening the industry's labor absorbing capacity, but also avoiding interregional homogeneous competition. For small cities, industrial competitiveness comes from locally rooted and advantageous firms. Small cities must first of all focus on introducing and developing firms that successfully leverage local resources. The government should shift from its existing, blind approach to attracting investment to paying greater attention to attracting and selecting investment, and introducing investment along the support chain, including ecologically sounds investments for key industries, firms, and projects. At the same time, the government should pay attention to the coupling of investment attraction areas and urban functions, developing a differentiated strategy to attracting investment aimed at the functional and development orientation of different industrial functional areas in the city, so as to ultimately promote the integration of production and cities. Moreover, small cities should acknowledge the threat posed by input scarcity, reserve development space for superior firms, focus financial resources on developing industries with endogenous advantages, and attract talented professionals. Finally, it is necessary to clarify various industrial support policies; effectively integrate relevant industrial functions, such as development and reform, economy and credit, finance, science and technology and other departments; formulate and implement industrial support policies in a unified manner; and use industrial subsidy policies in a cautious manner.

4.2 Strengthen regional cooperation

Strengthening industrial cooperation is the foundation of mutually-beneficial interactions between small and big cities. On the one hand, thanks to globalization, big cities actively participate in the international industrial division of labor. Strategic industries in big cities that face global competition are developing rapidly, with an objective demand for industrial transfer, such as general manufacturing and labor-intensive industries. Small cities should take the initiative to engage in industrial transfer with big cities, so as to enhance their industrial undertaking and supporting capabilities, while at the same time actively integrating themselves into the industrial division system in urban agglomerations. On the other hand,

small cities should speed up the development of complementary industries, nurture upstream-downstream relationships within industries, and enhance partnerships with industrial supply chains in big cities, thereby creating both competition and cooperation, with staggered development. Industrial urban development has changed from regional competition to both the vertical and horizontal division of labor, and from complementary production factors to a co-developed industrial structure and industrial business model. Furthermore, due to the economies of scale of public service resources, it is very difficult for small cities to achieve Pareto efficiency in their supply of high-quality public service resources. Small cities should better leverage regional cooperation within the urban agglomeration caused by industrial cooperation, enhancing urban attraction through mutual assistance agreements or entrustment relationships with big cities, such as Chengdu, in public service resources provision, such as fire protection, public health, sewage treatment, water supply, heat supply, libraries, transportation, and public construction projects. As a result, small cities can establish a regional sharing mechanism of public service resources with big cities, improving their service functions and providing local residents with the same public services as those of big cities.

4.3 Promote system and mechanism reform

In addition to reforming the household registration system, social security system and rural land system, small cities should also pay more attention to breaking the capital bottleneck facing small city development in terms of the system and mechanism. First of all, general transfer payments, which are designed to achieve equity in basic public services, are too small and have limited financial compensation capacity for small cities with financial difficulties. Therefore, government operating at larger scales within China can appropriately increase the expenditure proportion of general transfer payments in the general financial transfer payment. Second, the central government should establish a fiscal policy that is compatible with the main functional areas as soon as possible; increase the fiscal transfer payment for small cities that are classified as restricted or forbidden development zones; and give small cities that are currently optimizing their development zones and key development zones additional space so that they can successfully explore and experiment with their tax policies. Third, the governments of small cities should explore establishing cost-sharing mechanisms between the agricultural transfer population and the government, so as to share the cost of public services. Thus, the individual agricultural transfer population will bear the cost of "club-style public goods" and firms will bear the cost of labor security. However, in practice, it is necessary to further define the scope of these three costs, clarify the recipients and purpose, and solve any practical problems that may be encountered in the process of establishing the cost-sharing mechanism.

4.4. Innovation in the urban development concept

Governments in small cities should change the traditional development concept, whereby urban development refers to urban construction, be innovative in their approach to urban development, shift the orientation of urban development from scale to function, transition from a focus on industry to ecological civilization, strengthen the management of urban space growth, and avoid the blind construction of high-level industrial parks in small cities. In transforming the urban development concept, urban management should also focus on the coordinated development of the economy, population and environment, by being innovative in their development of population management policies. Local governments should focus on the "social person" management concept and determine the appropriate population mobility policies based on the size of the local population, gender structure, age structure, employment structure and urban-rural structure, so as to build a population ecology that is compatible with the industrial ecology. Many small cities tend to unilaterally try to attract high-end professionals, such as college students and doctoral students. However, industries in small cities have a greater demand for skilled labor and senior technicians. Therefore, policies should be introduced that can attract this particular demographic.

5. CONCLUSION

Given the intensifying downward pressure on the economy and accelerating urbanization, this paper takes small cities as the research object; systematically examining the symptoms of "small city disease", including labor force losses, insufficient public service resources, fewer employment opportunities, and insufficient capital utilization. Furthermore, this paper puts forward a set of governance measures designed to combat "small city disease" from the perspective of the city government, including developing endogenous superior industries, strengthening regional cooperation, promoting system and mechanism reform, and being innovative in its approach to urban development.

Nevertheless, this paper contains a number of limitations that are worth identifying and discussing. First, this paper only describes "small city disease" symptoms from a qualitative perspective and does not establish an appropriate set of quantitative indicators. Second, the governance of "small city disease" is a systematic project, an important link in which is system and mechanism reform. Third, the financial policies proposed in this paper with regard to breaking capital bottleneck lack sufficiently detailed research and thus are not enough to build a complete innovation system.

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