

Coordinating Strategy of Preserving the Local Identity during the Rapid Urbanization in China: Case Study of Three Towns in the South of Kunshan

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Accompanied by the rapid urbanization in China, the conflict between development and preservation has been reinforced, especially in the area of land use, environment resource and culture heritage. Recently, the preservation of local identity has been appreciated. This paper is aimed at exploring that how to preserve the local identity as well as achieve the economic development during the rapid urbanization. By the method of comparative analysis based on the data source and valuable resource evaluation, the coordinating strategy in historical conservation redevelopment, integrating space and policymaking has been proved to be effective.

1. Problems of local identity preservation in China

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has made great advancement in urbanization: the urbanization rate has soared from 17.9% in 1978 to 51.3% in 2011. During the development of economy, the townscape and living style has undergone tremendous change. The inheriting of traditional culture heritage is in deep crisis.

On the base of some current research on the problems of local identity preservation, especially about “whether development and preservation are opposites?”, we can find that there are several problems urgently needed to solve in coordinating the development and preservation. Then by referring to the description and analysis of the challenges of local identity preservation in China in “The theory and planning on the preservation of historic city” and “Urbanization and historic city”, we can sort the problems as follow.

1.1 Rapid urbanization brings the unregulated expansion

Facing to the rapid urbanization, many cities still use the traditional expansion model of single center, which excessively accumulates the whole function of living, working and serving. The accumulation of population causes the pressure of infrastructure and the extensive pattern of land use. Many kinds of “city disease” have arisen. Especially, the preservation of culture heritage and environment become more and more serious.

1.2 Motorization brings the destruction of traditional street model

The trend of urban traffic mechanization has a great impact on traditional bicycle traffic and pedestrian. In order to satisfy the need of high speed transportation, many traditional streets have been enlarged. Elevated roads and grade separations change the urban morphology and street texture. Furthermore, vehicles also maintain rapid growth in volume. The excessive motorizing development causes the degrading of the traditional space feature.

1.3 Homogeneity becomes a common phenomenon

“Characteristic crisis”, which was raised by the research of Zhou Ganzhi, Zhu Guanya, etc, proves to be a usual problem. Some cities borrow indiscriminately from other cities’

experience, which aspire to massive constructing. The townscape follows the same pattern. As a result, some characteristic cities and blocks are submerged in the monotonous new-built environment. Local identity has gradually vanished from the historic areas.

2. Valuing what already exists: case study of three towns in the south of kunshan

According to the research of “The Preservation and Protection of Historical and Cultural Cities in the Course of Urbanization”, the valuable resources of local identity include historical buildings, ecological landscape, culture reputation, and so on.

Kunshan, the top level of comprehensive strength among Chinese counties, is undergoing tremendous changes in economic development and urbanization. According to the master planning of Kunshan, it is divided into three parts, central agglomeration for urban development, northern resorts area around Yangcheng Lake, southern tourism area including watery historic towns. In the south of Kunshan, there are three national historic towns (Zhouzhuang, Jinxi and Qiandeng) in the range of less than 300 square kilometers, which is very rarely in China. There are many historic resources accumulating in this area. Meanwhile, this area is the most excellent district in the aspect of ecological environment, with densely lakes and rivers.

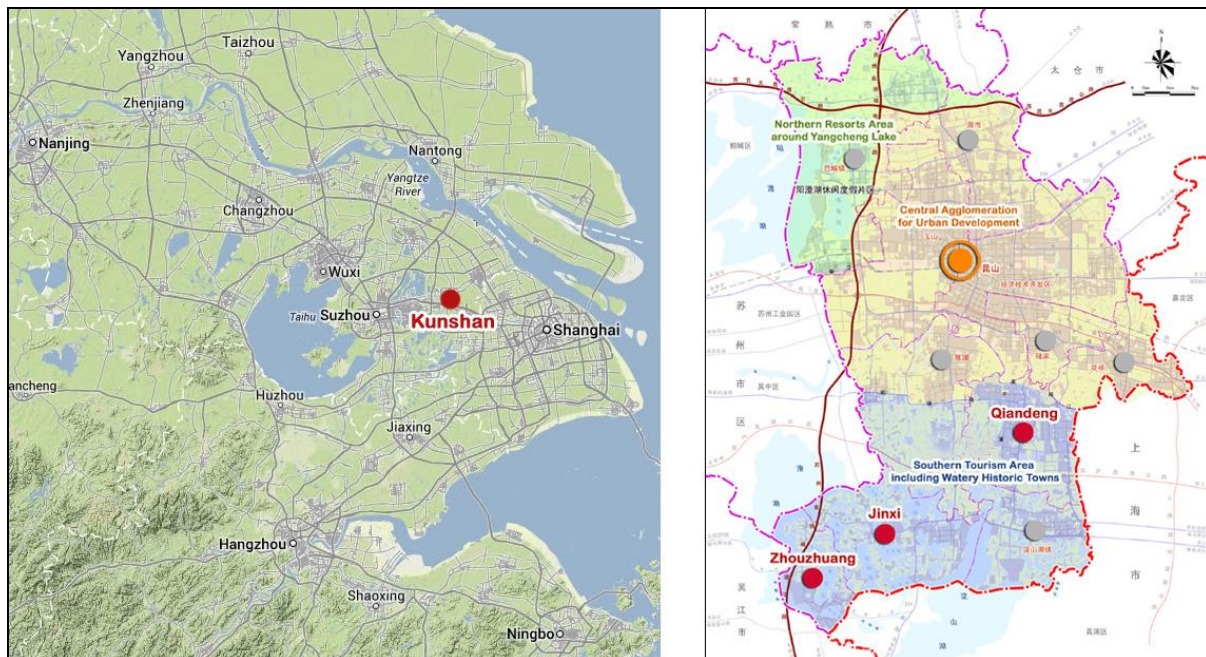


Figure 1: The location of Kunshan and the three towns
Source: The master plan of Kunshan

2.1 The contribution to traditional culture

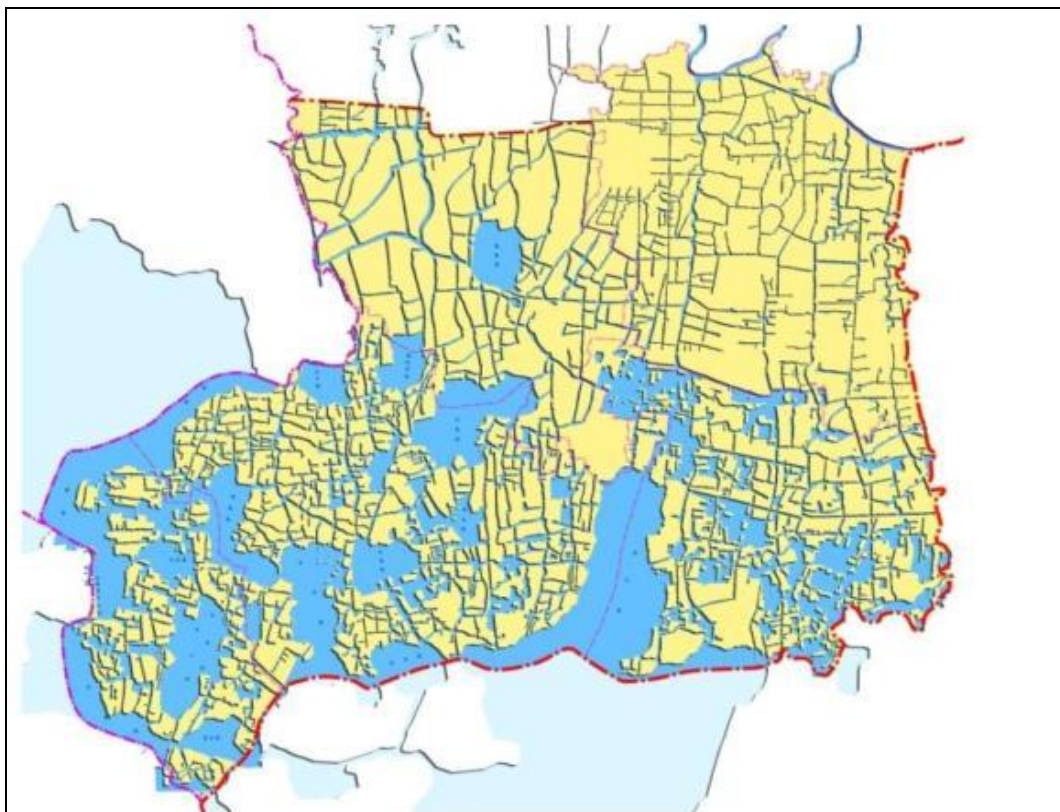
The south area is usually honored by its culture character. The three towns accumulate most of the culture heritage, including 60% of the historical and cultural sites under government protection in Kunshan. In the aspect of nonmaterial I heritage, the three towns occupy 40% of the whole city. Furthermore, Qiandeng is the birthplace of Kunqu opera, which has been listed in the nonmaterial heritage roster by UNESCO. In the aspect of the proportion of culture heritage, three towns account for a large proportion of the whole Kunshan. All in all, the three towns play an important role in the preservation of historic heritage and make a great contribution in the inheriting of culture.

Items		Kunshan	The three towns	Proportion
Historical and cultural sites under government protection	National	1	0	0%
	Provincial	9	7	78%
	Municipal	67	36	54%
Historical buildings		14	9	64%
Cultural relics buried underground region		28	5	18%

*Table1: Three towns' proportion of Kunshan in culture heritage
Source: The author's own study*

2.2 The contribution to ecological townscape environment

The natural landscape resources include many kinds of lakes, rivers and ecological green belt. The three towns belong to the alluvial plain of Taihu lake, where the component of water has accounted to more than 30%. The rivers in this area shape a geographical layout in a crisscross pattern. Along the river layout, the rural land use is arranged. These resources form the townscape feature of “bridge, stream and house”.



*Figure 2: Watery layout pattern
Source: The author's own study*

2.3 The contribution to reputation and tourism

Because of the cultural fascination of the historic heritage, such as Zhouzhuang and Kunqu opera, the three towns prove to be the worldwide brand of Kunshan. In the recent years, the amount of tourists in three towns has occupied more than 50% of the whole city. As the continual increase of the amount of tourists and the rapid expansion of the influence of tourism brand, the three towns play a significant role in the overall development of the service industries of Kunshan.

	The amount of tourists	Proportion to the whole city
The whole of Kunshan	17,100,000	100%
Zhouzhuang	5,340,000	31.2%
Jinxi	1,730,000	10.1%
Qiandeng	1,520,000	8.9%

Table2: Three towns' proportion of Kunshan in the amount of tourists, 2011
Source: Kunshan Statistical Yearbook

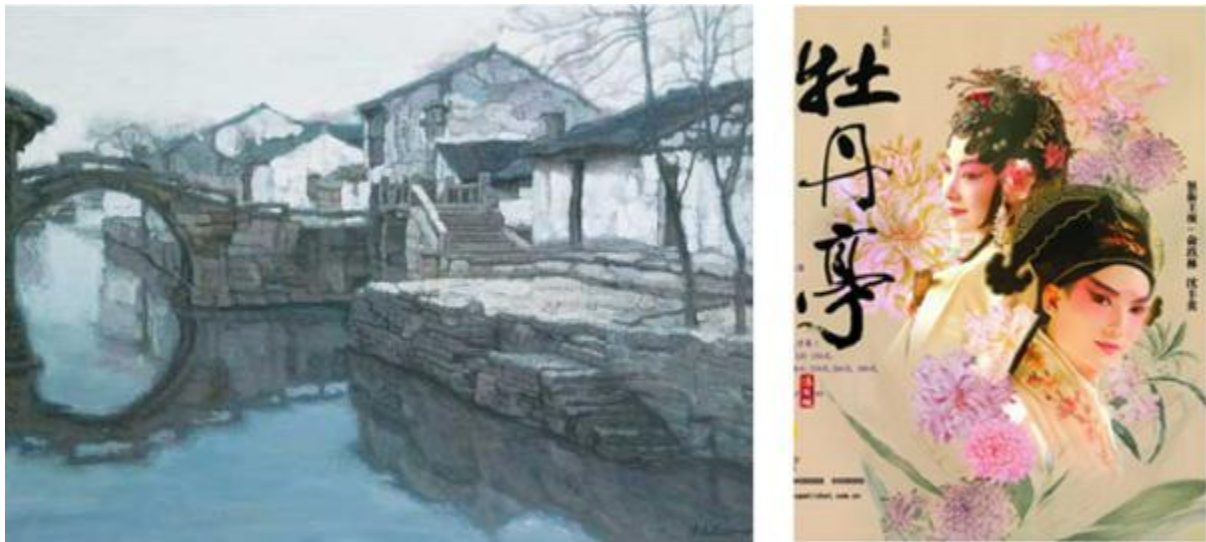


Figure 3: The paint of “Double Bridges in Zhouzhuang” by Yifei Chen (left), Kunqu Opera (right)
Source: The art collection of Kunshan

2.4 Dilemmas between preservation and development

According to the statistics of 2011, the GDP per person of the three towns covered the range from 8,200 to 15,500 US Dollars. In the aspect of GDP per person, none of the three towns can achieve the average level of Kunshan, let alone the highest level of Kunshan Economic & Technological Development Zone which is mainly responsible for the traditional manufacturing industry.

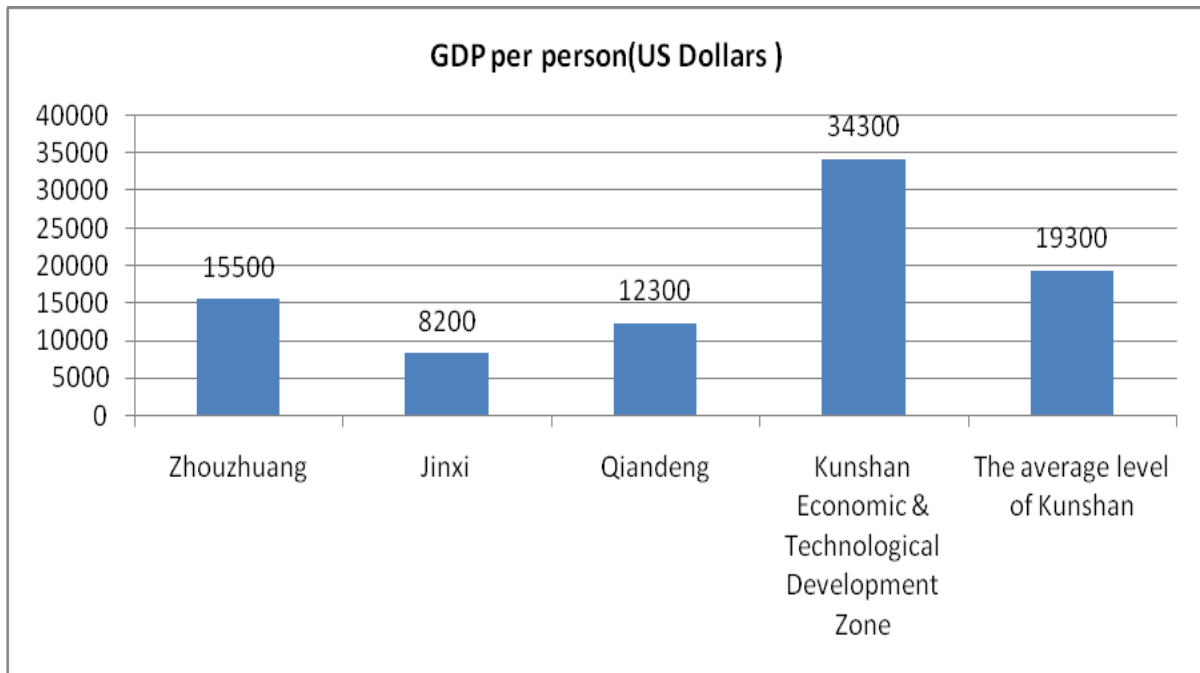


Figure 4: GDP per person of the three towns, 2011
 Source: Kunshan Statistical Yearbook

Although Kunshan is noted for its rapid economic growth, the three towns develop slower than the others because of more strict environmental constraints and historic preservation. The three towns can't follow the development model of Kunshan Economic & Technological Development Zone. The existing development model of the three towns should be restructured. Local identity preservation and economical development should be balanced.

3. Coordinating strategy of preserving the local identity

Despite of the background that many regions have lost the identity during the rapid urbanization in China, the three towns should take the road of characteristic development which depends on the basis of exclusive local culture and ecological resource instead of massive manufacturing industry.

During the current research on the strategy of preserving the local identity, preservation is put more attention than development. Furthermore, local governments' economic and social policies are usually neglected. In response to the problems of local identity preservation during the rapid urbanization, this paper tries to propose coordinating strategy for characteristic areas so as to achieve synchronized planning of development and preservation.

Coordinating strategy is aimed at finding out that how to preserve the local identity as well as achieve the economic development during the rapid urbanization. Moreover, coordinating strategy is involved in the integrated cooperation of different departments instead of disorderly competition. The details are as follows:

3.1 Coordinating strategy in character inheriting

By the method of comparative analysis and evaluation above, what is worthy of preservation has been valued. Culture and watery townscape can be embodied in the local identity of the three towns. The tourism activities should be enriched in order to improve the brand of "watery historic towns". By the integration of resources, the competition and cooperation

among the three towns can be coordinated. The three towns can achieve the developing alliance instead of individual development. Cultural features are protected by the collaboration of three towns. At the same time, every town is encouraged to shape its own identity, not only in the aspect of physical space but also in the aspect of nonmaterial heritage. In the aspect of townscape feature, Zhouzhuang highlights the pattern of “house-street-water-street-house” with significant bridge, Jinxi gives prominence to the model of “house-street-water” with famous porch, Qiandeng emphasizes the texture of “house-water-house-street-house” with the ancient tower.



*Figure 5: Texture and Street pattern of Zhouzhuang (left), Jinxi (middle), Qiandeng (right)
Source: The author's own study*



*Figure 6: The significant bridge of Zhouzhuang, famous porch of Jinxi, ancient tower of Qiandeng
Source: Photo by the author*

In the aspect of nonmaterial heritage, Zhouzhuang highlights the culture of Shen Wansan, a famous merchant in Ming dynasty. Jinxi highlights the culture of Chen Fei, the imperial concubine in Yuan dynasty. Qiandeng highlights the culture of Gu Yanwu, a patriot in Qing dynasty.



*Figure 7: The famous merchant (left), the imperial concubine (middle), the patriot (right)
Source: Photo by the author*

By the integration of townscape and the cooperation of the three towns, coordinating development of the cultural tourism can be achieved. In addition, by the union with Shanghai and Zhejiang, world-famous agglomeration of historic towns will be gradually cultivated in the future.

3.2 Coordinating strategy in the economical development

On the basis of the local identity, service sector development should be prior to the manufacturing industry and so on. By positive preservation and reasonable use of the resources of historic towns, watery plain and ecological agriculture, the skeleton of service sector development can be constructed. As a catalyst for agriculture and service sector development, tourism also plays an important role in the aspects of culture redevelopment and increasing people's income. By the landscape and activities of agriculture, the relation between the agriculture and tourism can be enhanced. The integration of farmland and tourism route also can advance the added value of agricultural products, as well as improve the income of peasants. The traditional manufacturing industry should be transformed into characteristic and effective development, especially the production of Tourist commodities, art works and cultural handicraft. Synthesizing agriculture, handicraft and tourism, economical development and feature preservation can be coordinated.



*Figure 8: Tourism (left), Handicraft (middle), Agriculture (right)
Source: Photo by the author*

3.3 Coordinating strategy in the space integration

Coordinating the old towns and new towns on the basis of watery fundament formulates the local morphology in order to balance the ecology, development and society. The new towns have been constructed to satisfy the expansion of urbanization in order to alleviate the pressure of old towns and preserve the texture of historic towns. By reasonable control of the building height and development density, watery townscape can be inherited. In the aspect of

riverside, public character should be a prime concern. The development should give priority to the protection of watery environment.

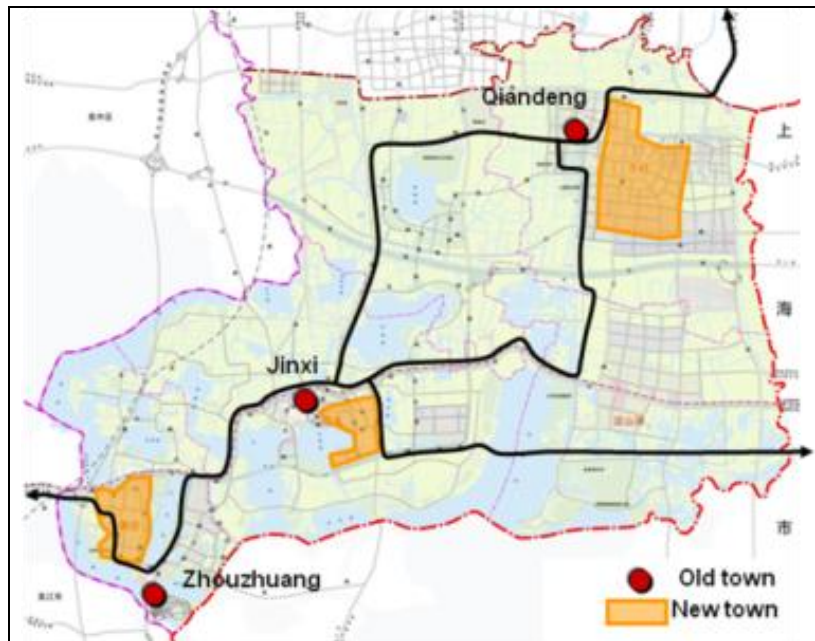


Figure 9: The model of integration with old towns and new towns
Source: The author's own study

There are plenty of characteristic villages around the edge of the three towns. The relation between the residential space and farmland should be balanced in order to help the farming and developing the tourism of villages. Conservation of the integrity of natural landscape inherits the traditional watery layout. According to the advantages of resources, the villages are divided into three groups, cultural, riverside and rustic type. Different types of villages should be adopted different strategy in order to achieve characteristic development.

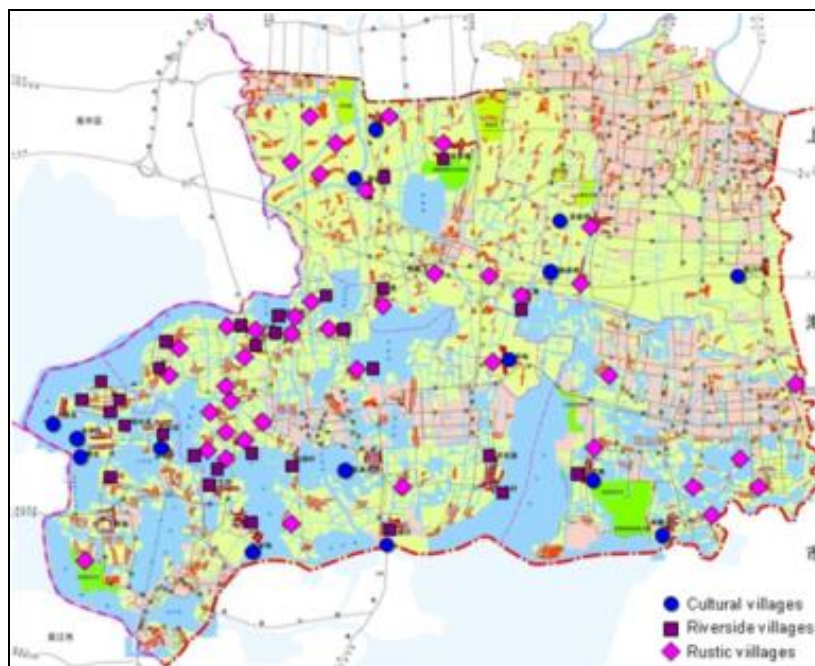


Figure 10: The layout of different types of villages
Source: The author's own study

Tourism system is shaped by the means of integrating many kinds of traditional watery villages with characteristic transport, which not only connect the three towns but also join into the regional tourism routes. Blue corridors along the riverside and green corridors along the road compose the tourism routes. Furthermore, the arrangement of service along the routes is helpful to the development of tourism.

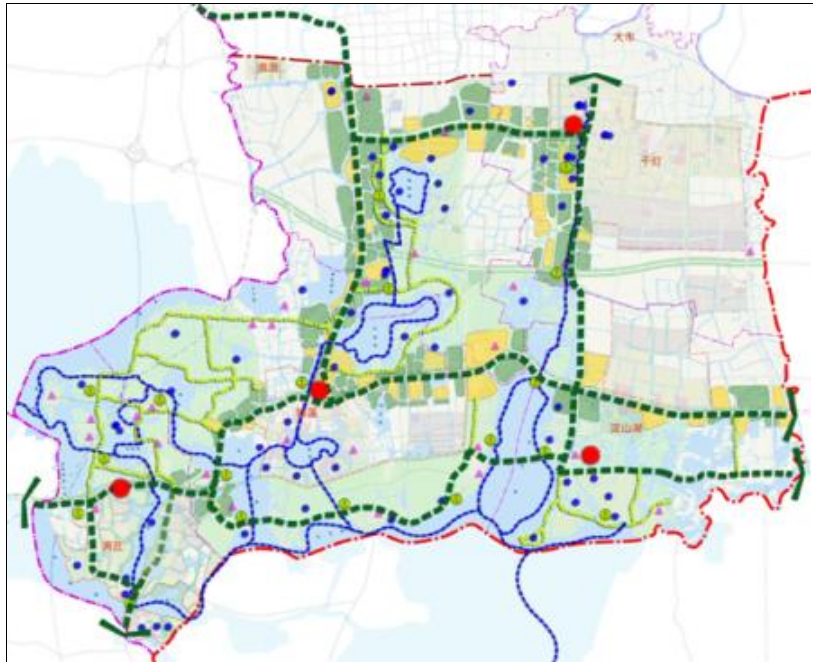


Figure 11: The tourism routes of blue and green corridors
Source: The author's own study

3.4 Coordinating policy

Policymaking in the range of whole city helps to bridge the gap of economic development between the three towns and the others.

Firstly, by increasing transfer payments, the three towns can give priority to the preservation of local identity, both culture and ecology, instead of the manufacturing industry and economical development. Ecological and cultural subsidies help the three towns to preserve the local identity. The improvement of the income helps the peoples' initiative of preserving the culture heritage and ecological environment. Furthermore, the special funds for the three towns have already established to promote the development power.

Secondly, training policy is helpful to the farmers and foreign workers, especially to the development of tourism. For the management leaders, the study of advanced operating model and management should be provided in order to exploit the tourism market. For the service staffs, the knowledge of local culture should be trained in order to spread local culture. In addition, the foreign language training should be provided in order to enhance the ability of tourism service.

Moreover, a coordinating agency is put on the agenda. On the one hand, the agency is responsible for integrating the relationship among the three towns. On the other hand, the agency should cooperate with Shanghai and Zhejiang inter-regionally. By the establishment of regular conferences and communication procedure, the cooperation of local identity preservation and tourism development can be achieved.

4. Conclusion

All in all, the coordinating strategy in the aspects of historical conservation, industrial development, integrating space and policymaking is very useful to the three towns which aim at characteristic development. The coordinating strategy not only helps to preserve the local identity but also achieves the economic development, which can be an excellent balance. Especially, it points out the real possibility that local governments have to implement the coordinating strategy within the current political, economic and social context. Furthermore, the coordinating strategy has a great deal of significance on the future development of the similar regions which are full of cultural and ecological resources in order to preserve the local identity during the rapid urbanization.

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