

Research on the Path of Integrating the Spirit of Third-Line Construction into Learning-Oriented City Construction-Taking Chengdu as an Example

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Received: March 11, 2025 Accepted: April 5, 2025 Online Published: April 8, 2025

This article is a phased achievement of the project “A Study on the Impact and Synergistic Mechanism of The Third-line Construction Spirit on Learning City Development — A Case Study of Chengdu” (Project No. SXJS202434), funded by the Sichuan Third Front Construction Research Association.

Abstract

This paper examines the potential of "The Spirit of the Third Line Construction" to contribute to the development of Chengdu as a learning city. The Third-line Construction, a massive industrial relocation effort in the 1960s and 70s, instilled values of self-reliance, innovation, and dedication that continue to resonate in western China. This paper argues that these values can be leveraged to address the challenges facing Chengdu in its quest to become a leading learning city. Through a review of existing literature and analysis of Chengdu's urban development initiatives, this paper identifies specific paths for integrating the the spirit of the third line construction into learning city construction. The findings provide practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders on how to foster innovation, promote lifelong learning, and enhance community engagement in Chengdu.

Keywords: the third-line construction, learning city, urban development, historical legacy, innovation, lifelong learning

1. Introduction

A. Background:

The Third Line Construction was a major national development strategy established by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao in 1964. As a product of its specific historical era, the Third Front Construction not only built national defense and strategic rear bases to ensure China's security at the time but also played a pivotal role in balancing economic and social development between the eastern and western regions. It significantly transformed China's economic layout, effectively promoted productivity growth and social progress in central and western regions, and laid a solid industrial foundation for the later implementation of the Party Central Committee's Western Development Strategy. With the concentrated construction and gradual improvement of infrastructure, coupled with the large-scale relocation of research institutions, universities, and talent to these regions, the once-underdeveloped central and western areas embraced precious development opportunities. New industrial cities, shining like dazzling pearls, emerged one after another.

Confronted with exceptionally challenging economic and natural conditions, the vast contingent of workers, cadres, scientists, engineers, People's Liberation Army personnel, and laborers involved in The Third-line Construction, embodied a revolutionary ethos of "not fearing hardship, nor death itself." Driven by the urgency to gain time and outpace potential imperialist aggressors, they triumphed over seemingly insurmountable obstacles during the politically volatile years of the Cultural Revolution. Their creative endeavors, fueled by immense effort and sacrifice, produced a wealth of inspiring patriotic narratives, ultimately giving rise to the "The Spirit of The Third Line Construction": a testament to "pioneering through hardship, selfless dedication, collaborative unity, and courageous innovation." This spirit, a direct descendant of revolutionary legacies like the Jinggangshan and Yan'an Spirits, represents the profound endurance, resilience, and self-reliance of the Chinese people, and stands as a precious cultural inheritance and an enduring source of national pride (Tang Chengbin, 2020).

This massive relocation effort was driven by geopolitical tensions and the perceived threat of foreign invasion. Beyond its strategic objectives, The Third-line Construction fostered a unique spirit characterized by self-reliance (自力更生), hard work (艰苦奋斗), dedication (无私奉献), and innovation (勇于创新) (LI Deying & ZHU Ling, 2023). These values became deeply ingrained in the culture and identity of the regions that hosted the Third Front industries.

The concept of a “learning city” has gained increasing prominence as a framework for promoting sustainable urban development and improving the quality of life for urban residents. A learning city is defined as a city that effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning, from basic to higher education; revitalizes learning in families and communities; facilitates learning for and in the workplace; extends the use of modern learning technologies; enhances quality and excellence in learning; and fosters a culture of learning throughout life. (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2017b). Learning cities strive to create a culture of lifelong learning, promote social inclusion, foster economic development, and enhance environmental sustainability.

B. Problem Statement:

Despite its rapid economic growth and modernization, Chengdu's progress towards becoming a learning city is hindered by the gap in per-student public funding between urban and rural areas from 2.8 times to 1.5 times (Sichuan Daily, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires innovative solutions and a strong commitment to lifelong learning. This paper argues that the spirit of the third line construction, with its emphasis on self-reliance, innovation, and dedication, can provide valuable guidance and inspiration for overcoming these obstacles. By tapping into the historical legacy of The Third-line Construction, Chengdu can foster a unique identity as a learning city that is both rooted in its past and forward-looking in its vision.

However, there is a lack of systematic research on how to effectively integrate the spirit of the third line construction into the specific context of Chengdu's learning city construction. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring the key values and principles of the spirit of the third line construction, identifying specific mechanisms for their integration into Chengdu's learning city initiatives, and providing practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders.

C. Research Questions:

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the key values and principles of the spirit of the third line construction that are relevant to the construction of a learning city in the 21st century?
- 2) How can the spirit of the third line construction be leveraged to promote innovation and entrepreneurship in Chengdu, particularly in emerging industries?
- 3) How can the spirit of the third line construction be used to foster a culture of lifelong learning and community engagement in Chengdu's diverse neighborhoods?
- 4) What are the specific paths and strategies for integrating the spirit of the third line construction into Chengdu's learning city initiatives, taking into account the city's unique historical and cultural context?

D. Significance of the Study:

This research is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it contributes to the understanding of the complex relationship between historical legacies and contemporary urban development. It explores how historical events and values can shape the identity and trajectory of a city. Practically, this research provides valuable insights for Chengdu's policymakers and stakeholders on how to leverage the spirit of the third line construction to accelerate the construction of a learning city. The recommendations offered in this paper can inform the development of new policies, programs, and initiatives that promote innovation, lifelong learning, and community engagement in Chengdu.

2. Literature Review

A. The Third-line Construction:

The Third-line Construction (三线建设) was a monumental undertaking initiated by the Chinese government in the mid-1960s, aimed at relocating industries and strategic resources from the vulnerable coastal regions to the more secure inland areas of western and southwestern China (Barry Naughton, 1988; Qin Ying & Liu Hebo, 2020).

Driven by fears of external aggression, the government sought to create a more resilient and self-sufficient industrial base. This endeavor resulted in the establishment of numerous factories, research institutes, and

infrastructure projects in remote areas, transforming the economic and social landscape of western China. The Third-line Construction was not only an industrial project but also a social and cultural movement, fostering a spirit of self-reliance (自力更生), hard work (艰苦奋斗), dedication (无私奉献), and innovation (勇于创新) among the workers and communities involved (Zhuyunsheng & Heyue, 2020; Zhengyougui, 2013).

While The Third-line Construction has been the subject of scholarly research, much of the existing literature focuses on its historical context, economic impact, and strategic significance. The Third-line Construction positively influenced regional economic performance by enhancing industrialization and attracting population inflows. Meanwhile, this development strategy also improved regional human capital accumulation, thus contributing to long-term economic growth (Wangxin etc, 2022). The other scholars further contend that The Third-line Construction represented not only a strategic reconfiguration of China's defense industry during a critical period but also a holistic structural transformation intended to address the substantial economic disparities between the eastern and western regions of the country (Fansong, 2015). However, less attention has been paid to the enduring legacy of the The spirit of the third line construction and its potential relevance to contemporary urban development.

B. Learning Cities:

The concept of a learning city has gained increasing attention as a framework for promoting sustainable urban development and improving the quality of life for urban residents. UNESCO defines a learning city as a city that uses its resources to promote inclusive learning, revitalize learning in families and communities, facilitate learning in the workplace, extend the use of modern learning technologies, enhance quality and excellence in learning, and foster a culture of learning throughout life (UNESCO guidelines on learning city development 2015).

Several cities around the world have successfully implemented learning city initiatives, demonstrating the potential of this approach to address urban challenges and promote sustainable development. For example, In Melton, Australia, due to economic stagnation caused by high unemployment rates, the city's Community Learning Board (CLB) has long maintained that access to high-quality lifelong learning opportunities can improve individuals' lives as well as the social and economic well-being of the community (UNESCO & NILE, 2015). It has implemented innovative programs to promote lifelong learning and social inclusion. However, the specific strategies and approaches used by these cities may not be directly applicable to the context of Chengdu, given its unique historical and cultural background.

C. Chengdu's Urban Development:

Chengdu has experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization in recent decades, transforming itself into a major economic, cultural, and transportation hub in western China. In the past year, Chengdu witnessed steady growth in residents' income and spending, expanded social security coverage, substantial investments in education and scientific innovation, enriched cultural resources, and improved healthcare infrastructure, contributing to an enhanced quality of life for its citizens (Statistical Communiqué on Chengdu's National Economic and Social Development in 2024). The city has also set ambitious goals to become a leading learning city, recognizing the importance of lifelong learning for its future development. Chengdu has implemented various initiatives to promote education, innovation, and community engagement. Over the past five years, certain community education colleges have offered an average of 72 offline class sessions weekly, totaling 1,048 sessions per week, along with an average of 7 online class sessions weekly, amounting to 149 sessions per week. The total funding for these classes has reached 5.66 million yuan, benefiting 980,000 community participants, with a citizen learner satisfaction rate of 99.8% regarding both the courses and the community colleges (The data presented were collected from Wuhou Community Education College).

However, Chengdu faces several challenges in its journey to becoming a learning city. Scholars, drawing upon the established positioning of learning cities and focusing on the evaluation of their activities and substance, recognize that assessment within learning city development is a vital mechanism. However, as learning city development progresses into more advanced stages, the sustainability of these evaluation processes becomes a concern (Xieli & Chenhao, 2013). Other scholars point to the 48 recipients of the UNESCO Learning City Award as examples. The "UNESCO Learning City Award" embodies a clustering concept, embracing cities at various stages of development within its framework. Using learning city development as both a means and an end, it deeply explores the cultural and educational traditions of each region, employing a point-to-area approach to strengthen collaboration between cities, promote the flow and exchange of resources, and ultimately achieve holistic regional social developmen (Guo Huinan & Qin Yiming, 2022). Learning city development faces major difficulties such as the inequitable distribution of resources, disparities in educational opportunities between urban and rural communities, a shortage of qualified educators, and the absence of efficient and effective operational structures

(Guo Huinan & Qin Yiming, 2024). These challenges require innovative solutions and a renewed commitment to the values of self-reliance, innovation, and dedication that characterized The Third-line Construction

E. Gaps in the Literature:

While there is a growing body of literature on learning cities and urban development, there is a lack of specific research on how historical legacies can be actively integrated into learning city development. Furthermore, there is limited research on the the spirit of the third line construction and its potential relevance to contemporary urban challenges. This paper aims to fill these gaps by providing a systematic analysis of the paths for integrating the the spirit of the third line construction into the construction of a learning city in Chengdu.

3. Methodology

A. Research Approach:

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the integration of the the spirit of the third line construction into Chengdu's learning city construction. A case study approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a complex phenomenon within its real-world context. Chengdu is selected as the case study due to its historical significance as a major center of The Third-line Construction and its ambition to become a leading learning city.

B. Data Collection Methods:

Data will be collected using a variety of methods, including:

Document Analysis: Relevant policy documents, urban planning reports, and historical archives related to The Third-line Construction and Chengdu's learning city initiatives will be analyzed to identify key themes and patterns.

Site Visits: Site visits will be conducted to relevant locations in Chengdu, such as industrial heritage sites and community learning centers, to observe firsthand the impact of the the spirit of the third line construction and the implementation of learning city initiatives.

C. Data Analysis Methods:

The collected data will be analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis will be used to identify key themes and patterns in the data related to the the spirit of the third line construction and its relevance to learning city construction. Comparative analysis will be used to compare and contrast different perspectives and experiences to identify commonalities and differences. The analysis will be guided by the research questions and the theoretical framework outlined in Section II.

4. Findings and Analysis

A. Key Values and Principles of the the spirit of the third line construction Relevant to Learning City Construction:

Self-Reliance: The Third-line Construction emphasized the importance of self-reliance and independence in the face of external challenges. This value can inspire Chengdu to develop its own unique solutions to its urban challenges, rather than relying solely on external models or expertise. The specific practices and related data of Chengdu integrating the “Third Front Construction Spirit” (emphasizing self-reliance) with learning city development are organized into the following table 1:

Table 1. Chengdu integrating the “Third Front Construction Spirit” with learning city development

Area	Specific Challenges	Self-Reliance Measures	Achievements and Data	Reference source
Industrial Transformation	Excessive reliance on external technologies and capital in high-tech industry	Promoting local incubation of high-tech enterprises	By 2023, Chengdu High-tech Zone had attracted over 750,000 talents, housed 436 innovation platforms (61 national-level), established 18 national incubators with 17,000 incubated enterprises, and held 12,972 high-value invention patents.	CNR NEWS

Environmental Governance	Ecological problems such as water and air pollution	Innovative ecological governance practices and local environmental protection technologies	In 2023, Chengdu achieved 285days with good air quality, setting a historical record.	Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Ecological Environment
Transportation Management	Traffic congestion and dependency on external technology for key urban rail technologies	Promoting independent R&D and localization of rail transit systems	By 2024, the total passenger volume of Chengdu Urban Rail Transit had exceeded 13.5 billion trips. Its average daily ridership surpassed 6.04 million, with a record single-day high of 8.3218 million trips.	SC NEWS
Community Governance and Public Services	Over-reliance on external models and technologies for public services	Promoting smart city construction and developing the “City Opportunity List” to foster local innovation in public services	By December 2021, Chengdu's “City Opportunity List” published over 2, 280 items, achieving financing of RMB 14 billion.	CNR NEWS ¹

Innovation: The Third-line Construction fostered a culture of innovation and experimentation, as workers and engineers were forced to develop new technologies and adapt existing ones to the challenging conditions of the interior regions. This value can encourage Chengdu to promote innovation and entrepreneurship, particularly in emerging industries such as Integrated Circuits、Advanced Display、Network Security etc. Table 2 summarizing the emerging industries in Chengdu, driven by the spirit of self-reliance and innovation inherited from The Third-line Construction period:

Table 2. Summarizing the emerging industries in Chengdu

NO	Emerging Industry Clusters	Specific Areas and Applications	Source of Information
1	Integrated Circuits	IC design, manufacturing, packaging, testing, and related industries	Sichuan Provincial Government
2	Advanced Display	R&D and application of LCD, OLED, flexible displays	Sichuan Provincial Government
3	Network Security	Cybersecurity product development, security services and solutions	Sichuan Provincial Government
4	Artificial Intelligence	Smart manufacturing, smart cities, intelligent healthcare	Sichuan Provincial Government
5	Aviation	Aircraft manufacturing, aero-engines, avionics	Sichuan Provincial Department of Economy

¹ https://sc.cnr.cn/gstjsc/20211021/t20211021_525638705.shtml

			and Information Technology
6	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV)	UAV R&D, manufacturing, agricultural, logistics, security applications	Sichuan Provincial Department of Economy and Information Technology

In addition to demonstrating innovation in emerging industries, Chengdu has also made substantial efforts in enhancing citizen competencies, converting learning outcomes, and stimulating motivation for continuous learning. In 2018, Chengdu established the Lifelong Education Credit Bank at Chengdu Open University to document lifelong learning outcomes and promote connectivity among academic education, non-academic education, senior universities, and community education. Figure 1 further illustrates the concept of the Credit Bank.

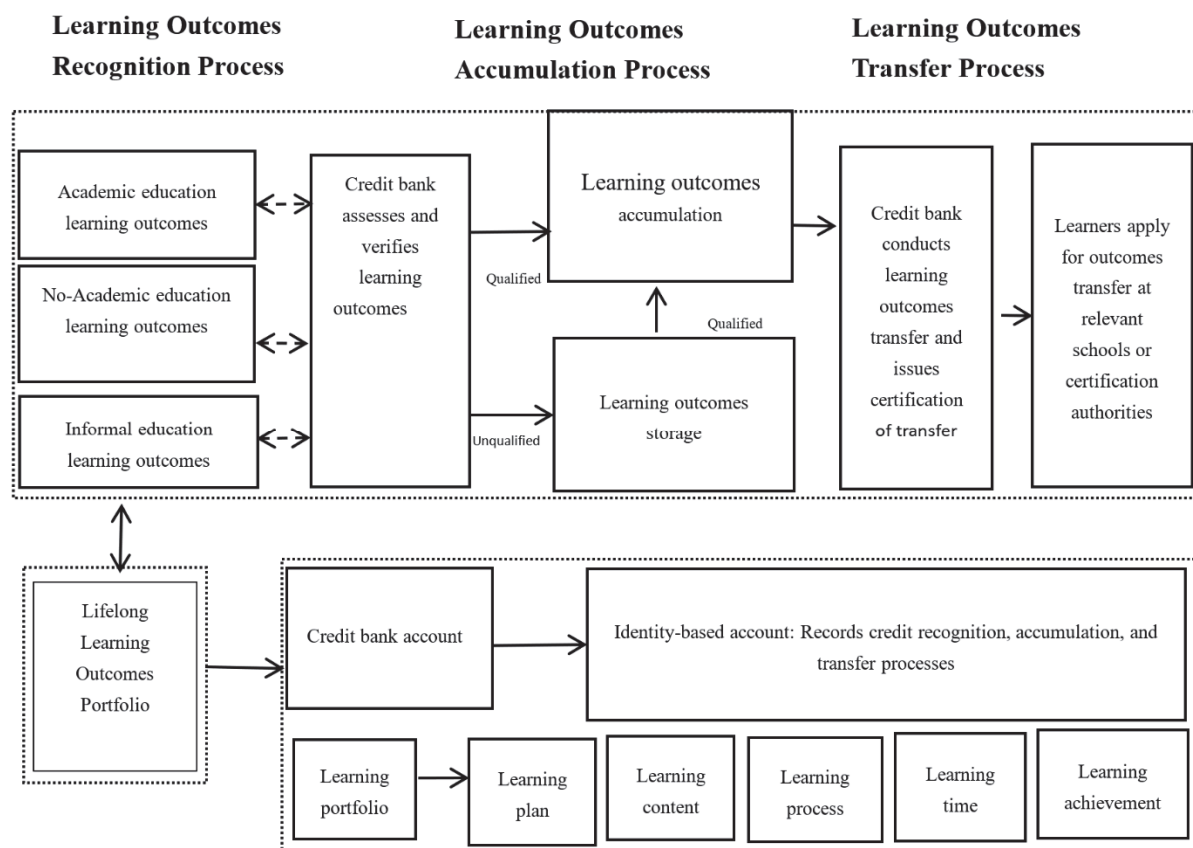


Figure 1. Definition of Credit Bank (The figure is sourced from the Chengdu Credit Bank website.)

Dedication: The Third-line workers were characterized by their dedication to the national cause and their willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good. This value can inspire Chengdu's residents to engage in community service and contribute to the development of the city as a whole. Since launching the “Most Chengdu·Citizen Class” initiative in the spring of 2011, Chengdu began its first lecture at the Citizen Learning Center of Chengdu Community University, aiming to enrich citizens' cultural lives and promote community education. Over the following decade, the initiative aimed to transform the “Citizen Class” into a regular program, with both course offerings and research activities relying on Chengdu Community University and community education colleges in the five urban districts.

Hard Work: The Third-line Construction demanded tremendous effort and perseverance from the workers involved. This value can encourage Chengdu to promote a culture of lifelong learning and continuous

improvement, as residents strive to acquire new skills and knowledge throughout their lives. The annual “Skilled Masters as Teachers” and “Craftsmen Cultivation” programs reflect Chengdu citizens' pursuit of skill inheritance and excellence, as well as their strong recognition of lifelong learning and continuous self-improvement.

B: Case Studies of Successful Integration. Table 3 presents relevant information on the incubation of citizen-led autonomous learning teams in Xindu and Wuhou community education systems.

Table 3. Citizen-led autonomous learning teams

Background	Describe the project	Organization	initiative	goals and activities
Addressing the dilemma of scarce degree opportunities.	In cultivating resident-led learning teams, it is key to define responsibilities, promote self-management, develop core members, enhance cohesion, expand content and methods, foster community awareness, and offer platforms for exchange and development.	Wuhou Community Education College	Lifelong Learning for All	Cultivating 20,000 resident-led autonomous learning groups across urban and rural areas.
Increased the number of citizen-led learning teams, promoted social governance, and enhanced the cultural quality of the city.	First, it promoted team development and explored new models of community education. Second, it enhanced residents' competencies and expanded innovative approaches to community governance. Third, it created distinctive brands, highlighting new features of community education.	Xindu Community Education College	Lifelong Learning for All	In their development, citizen-led autonomous learning teams actively participate in various community education activities such as the “Lifelong Learning Week,” “Most Chengdu Citizen Class,” and “Community Young Eagles.” They continuously explore new directions and approaches for advancing community education, making team building a true catalyst and driving force for its deeper development.

Taking the Spring 2025 “Most Chengdu · Citizen Class” as an example, Table 4 lists the data from six districts as follows.

Table 4. 2025 “Most Chengdu · Citizen Class” Statistical Table (Partial Statistics)

Department	Number of Courses Offered	Number of Learners	Enrolled	Estimated Number of People Reached
Qingyang Community Education College	About 102	About 2000		About 20,000
Xindu Community Education College	About 104	About 2200		About 23,000

Wuhou Community Education College	About 61	About 1500	About 15,000
Jinjiang Community Education College	About 132	About 3709	About 50,000
Chenghua Community Education College	About 36(Partial Statistics)	About 902(Partial Statistics)	About 5000
Pixian Community Education College	About 152	About 4139	About 49,000

From the above data, it is evident that the “Most Chengdu · Citizen Class” has been implemented for 14 years, evolving from nothing to something, and now showing a gradual decline. This trend calls for stronger promotion efforts and more effective implementation of relevant policies by the concerned authorities. In the autumn and winter of 2019, the “Most Chengdu · Citizen Classroom” initiative, coordinated by Chengdu Community University, integrated educational resources across districts (cities) and counties. The initiative encompassed community education workstations throughout all 22 districts (cities) and counties of Chengdu, delivering over 2,700 public-interest courses.

5. Discussion

A. Interpretation of Findings:

The findings of this study suggest that the spirit of the third line construction holds significant potential to contribute to the construction of a learning city in Chengdu. The values of self-reliance, innovation, dedication, and hard work, which were central to The Third-line Construction, remain relevant in the 21st century and can provide valuable guidance and inspiration for addressing the challenges facing Chengdu.

B. Limitations of the Study:

1. This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case study, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data collection methods relied primarily on document analysis and interviews, which may be subject to bias. Third, the interpretation of the spirit of the third line construction is based on the author's perspective and may not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of those who were involved in the construction.

2. From the perspective of building a learning city, the Citizens' Classroom serves as an essential vehicle for the lifelong learning system, with the breadth and depth of its course offerings directly reflecting the level of public educational services in the city. A comparison of data between 2019 and 2025 shows a significant reduction in the coverage of districts (cities) and counties by the Citizens' Classroom, accompanied by a decline in both the quantity and quality of courses available. Consequently, it cannot adequately meet citizens' increasingly diverse learning needs. This situation highlights problems such as weakening motivation and insufficient resource integration in promoting curriculum development.

Therefore, advancing the development of the Citizens' Classroom requires, on the one hand, increased policy-level promotion efforts to strengthen recognition and support from governmental departments at all levels and social organizations regarding the value of community education. On the other hand, practical efforts should be intensified to enhance resource integration and allocation, broaden course coverage, and improve course quality and diversity, thereby better addressing citizens' lifelong learning needs. This is not only an objective requirement for building a learning city but also an essential measure for improving citizens' overall quality and enhancing the city's soft power.

C. Policy Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are offered for Chengdu's policymakers and stakeholders:

- 1) Develop educational programs that teach the history and values of The Third-line Construction: This can help to raise awareness of the spirit of the third line construction and its relevance to contemporary urban challenges.
- 2) Provide funding and support for projects that preserve and promote the industrial heritage of the Third Front era: This can help to create a sense of place and identity and attract tourists to Chengdu.

- 3) Encourage local businesses to adopt the principles of self-reliance and innovation: This can help to foster economic growth and create new job opportunities.
4. Promote community engagement and participation in learning activities: This can help to build social cohesion and empower residents to take ownership of their city's development.

6. Conclusion

A. Summary of Key Findings:

This paper has explored the potential of the spirit of the third line construction to contribute to the construction of a learning city in Chengdu. The findings suggest that the values of self-reliance, innovation, dedication, and hard work, which were central to The Third-line Construction, remain relevant in the 21st century and can provide valuable guidance and inspiration for addressing the challenges facing Chengdu.

B. Reiterate Significance:

This research is significant because it contributes to the understanding of the relationship between historical legacies and contemporary urban development. It demonstrates how historical events and values can shape the identity and trajectory of a city.

C. Future Research Directions:

Future research should explore the integration of other historical legacies into urban development initiatives. It should also examine the long-term impact of learning city initiatives on economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

D. Concluding Thought:

By embracing the values of the the spirit of the third line construction, Chengdu can create a unique identity as a learning city that is both rooted in its past and forward-looking in its vision. This will not only help to address the challenges facing Chengdu but also inspire other cities to leverage their historical legacies to promote sustainable and inclusive development.

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