

Analysis of Ecological Pathways of “Aesthetic Education Empowerment” for Rural Revitalization: A Case Study in Longjie Town, Lianping County

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Abstract Rural aesthetic education plays a prominent role in enhancing villagers’ quality of life, fostering rural ecological development, and advancing rural education. It is crucial for rural cultural inheritance and the harmonization of human-nature coexistence. Using Dongpu Village, Longjie Town, Lianping County, Heyuan City as a case study, this article delves into the practical applications of aesthetic education projects in rural social innovation design and the soft rural ecological environment on three levels—technical, social, and academic. The study explores the pivotal role of design education in rural revitalization. This paper advocates for the integration of digital management and technology-driven optimization of rural environments to forge rural cultural identity, develop intellectual properties for distinctive products, and stimulate growth in rural industries. These efforts ultimately contribute to a practical pathway for rural economic development and rural revitalization empowered by aesthetic education. By facilitating rural cultural and spiritual enrichment, this study promotes construction, agricultural branding, human environment improvement, education, grassroots governance, and spiritual civilization development through collective efforts in rural regions. All these endeavors aim to formulate a sustainable model for developing rural ecology and civilization.

Keywords rural revitalization, aesthetic education, soft ecological environment optimization, design education applications

1 Preface

Since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the Party Central Committee, led by Chinese President XI Jinping, has focused on coordinating and developing urban and rural regions to advance socialist construction. The Committee has formulated significant definitions and strategies to properly address the needs of workers, farmers, cities, and towns.[1]

Within this context, the PCC proposed the nationwide “Rural Revitalization Strategy.” A report from the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party outlined plans to “Coordinate Public Services and Rural Infrastructure to Develop Beautiful and Sound Villages Suitable for Living and Work.” [2] The national “Rural Revitalization Strategy” is a key component of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. It is an important strategy for China to promote coordinated rural and urban development as well as socialist progress in the new era.

At the Central Conference on Rural Work in 2022, XI Jinping emphasized, “Rural modernization is crucial in building an agriculturally strong nation, and developing beautiful and sound villages suitable for both work and living is essential for such a country.” The report from the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party proposed plans to “push for comprehensive rural revitalization” “expedite the development of an agriculturally strong nation” and strengthen rural industries, talent, cultures, and ecology for an organized revitalization.” [2] It also highlighted several objectives for 2050, including “comprehensive rural revitalization, developing strong agriculture, creating beautiful villages, and making farmers wealthy.” The report further mentioned “beautiful and sound villages,” which present “a brand-new stage for higher education institutes in rural revitalization and aesthetic education, offering them key opportunities to fulfill their social missions, expand their classroom teaching frontiers, and nurture university graduates with new-era qualities and abilities.”

In accordance with the unified deployment strategy by the Shenzhen Municipal Party Committee and Municipal Government in 2020, Shenzhen Polytechnic University established a targeted assistance group with selected cadres. With intellectual support from the university and labor support from its students, the group provided targeted assistance to Longjie Town, Lianping County, Heyuan City. Over the span of two years, the group and the university’s School of Art and Design utilized the university’s academic resources to develop an ecological model featuring social innovation design activities. They explored the prominent missions of design education in rural revitalization and leveraged digital technology to devise a rural revitalization model characterized by social innovation design with Shenzhen Polytechnic University’s unique features. This model includes technical, social, and academic aesthetic education and focuses on upgrading agricultural brands, rural environments, villagers’ quality of life, and rural grassroots social governance.

The university’s efforts confirmed the significance of tertiary design education in rural revitalization, explored the connection between poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, built an ecological model of innovative design for rural society, enriched the theoretical framework for how polytechnic universities can implement national strategies, and created several projects demonstrating school–society success.

2 Technical Aesthetic Education Facilitates Rural Revitalization

In the context of the Internet of Things, blockchain, and the digital age, promoting aesthetic education through digital technology can open up new possibilities and expand horizons for rural revitalization. Qiu Zhijie, head of the School of Experimental and Sci-Tech Arts at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, stated, “Scientific art can most effectively facilitate rural revitalization.” [3] Inspired by this insight, the research team proposed technical aesthetic education. By deploying modern technical methods, this approach can broaden the scope of aesthetic education and diversify its target demographics in a highly interactive manner. Technical aesthetic education also has the potential to challenge conventional aesthetic education by modernizing its qualities, concepts, and manifestation styles.

2.1 Digital aesthetic education empowers rural construction and perfects grassroots governance

Villages are key places for implementing technical aesthetic education, which integrates aesthetic education into spatial and cultural development using technical methods and artistic designs for extensive regulation and enhanced local aesthetic experiences. As a crucial aspect of grassroots governance, technical aesthetic education begins by upgrading grassroots party organizations’ sense of art and aesthetic experiences through technical means.

In March 2023, Dongpu Village, Longjie Town, Lianping County, Heyuan City, began exploring a rural governance model that combines “party building and point accumulation” to empower rural revitalization with digital aesthetic education. This model encourages full participation by villagers in governing grassroots organizations. Grassroots party organizations invite their members and local talent to participate in the village’s self-governance. To support this effort, Shenzhen Polytechnic University’s targeted assistance group leveraged their school’s resources to promote a program named the “Village-level Affairs Management Platform” and introduced a “point system” considered significant for village governance. This system not only digitally displays village affairs but also standardizes and systematizes villager behaviors.

While designing the program’s interactive components, the research team paid special attention to the villagers’ cultural acceptance levels and information accessibility, ensuring seamless integration into the village culture. The team aimed for deep aesthetic integration within the village, stating, “A comprehensive village governance system needs to not only inherit and develop excellent traditions from the country’s agricultural civilization to forge a civilized culture at the village, family, and individual levels, but it also needs to formulate a modern rural governance system comprehensively led by party committee leaders, operated by the government, coordinated by the community, participated in by the public, and protected by law, to forge a path of socialist rural revitalization with Chinese characteristics.”

The program aimed to present the village’s rules and regulations in clear, engaging, and aesthetically pleasing ways through a new interactive online platform. Additionally, a well-designed reward system, including point redemption, was crucial to maintaining participatory interest

among villagers.

In essence, the Village-level Affairs Management Platform applies China's new-era rural governance theories to village administration using modern technology. Through interactive and immersive aesthetic experiences and a network enhanced with interactive technology, the platform brought villagers closer as digital-era inhabitants, enhancing their aesthetic sense and affective commitment. After a period of implementation, villagers' general attitudes changed notably; they shifted from only caring about their family affairs to regarding "village affairs" as their "family affairs." Consequently, they became more willing, happy, and capable of participating in village governance work.

The research team also deployed technology, such as digital management, to improve neighbor relationships and local spiritual prosperity, thereby uplifting villagers' sense of happiness and cohesion. Currently, an increasing number of villagers are participating in local construction efforts for a "beautiful and sound village," collaboratively creating a new village governance landscape led by the party, supported by networks, and protected by locals, whose participation is incentivized through rewards. The point system encouraged altruistic neighbor relationships and stimulated healthy competition among villagers in point earning and ownership, fostering a new-era culture and atmosphere in the village.

2.2 Sales network expanded with innovative local produce and a digital platform

In recent decades, the transformation of the agricultural economy, the dual layers of social consumption, and new sales channels and styles have necessitated higher requirements and upgrades in modern agricultural brands. However, traditional rural industries lack manpower and brand awareness, leading to relatively low added value in agricultural products and a slow increase in farmer income. This, in turn, has caused deep-rooted problems such as village decline, low-priced agricultural products, and villager migration. Possible solutions include upgrading agricultural value and expanding consumption, especially by increasing sales channels, thereby creating prosperity for both the village and its agricultural sector.

This new era has provided tertiary education institutes with excellent research topics for integration into rural construction. With a subtropical monsoon climate, Longjie Town has abundant land and water resources, which locals have utilized to cultivate produce such as Sanhua plums, citrus, and corn. They have also taken advantage of the local mountainous terrain to extensively plant high-value agricultural products, including bamboo, rice, corn, and peanuts. However, being remote from the market and with relatively inadequate digital promotion, Longjie Town lacked brand awareness for its agricultural products and an effective sales network, leading to low produce value and farmer income, as well as extensive idle land and massive migration of villagers to cities for work. These issues have resulted in problems such as left-behind children, scattered villagers, and an aging population.

As an "economically weak village" selected for focused assistance, Lixin Village in Longjie Town had a collective income of only about 20,000 yuan in 2021. To enhance the village's economy and industries, its top secretary and cadres gathered to discuss possible solutions. Given

that the village was one of the first in Guangdong Province to concentrate on rice cultivation under the “One Village, One Product” scheme, they decided to focus on its rice industry, led by the village’s party branch. With its economic cooperative and premium rice from local and nearby farmers, along with the university’s professional design prowess and a team of marketing experts, the village comprehensively upgraded the branding and commercialization of its rice trade. This facilitated an early transition from casual processing and small-scale cultivation and sales to professional marketing and commercialization.

Currently, rice from the village is available for sale on various online platforms, including Taobao and GDRC, and is showcased at the 8th annual Shenzhen Green Expo. Sales have reached Shenzhen, Huizhou, and Dongguan, totaling approximately 1 million yuan, which has boosted the village’s collective income. Additionally, through the acquisition of rice paddies and labor input, more than 200 village households have seen increased income, and over 50 town households have risen out of poverty.

3 Social Aesthetic Education Motivates Villagers Intrinsically

Xi stressed, “Socialist art and literature, by nature, belong to the people.” [6] He has vividly illustrated multiple times what it means to “build on the people and modern living.” To jointly improve rural living with villagers, artistic workers, such as artists and designers, need to deeply experience the local lifestyle. Rural innovation is not about building a house in the village that is “compatible with modern aesthetics” or replicating the lifestyle of “top-tier cities’ youngsters” in the countryside. Instead, higher education institutes should focus on the important context of villages in their social aesthetic education programs, as villages play a prominent role in artistic education.

Social aesthetic education aims not to develop industrial ruins in the countryside but to use the sensitivity and empathetic power of art and design to discover local highlights, including traditions, customs, literature, and craftsmanship. This approach intrinsically motivates villagers through social aesthetic education, strengthening their cultural identity and aligning with modern governance philosophy and aesthetics. By principle, such education aims to highlight the “locality” and “relevance” in cultural innovation designs.

3.1 “Locality” of innovative design reinforces villagers’ cultural identity

In recent years, villagers’ weak cultural identity and low participation rates in innovative rule design programs have become prevalent issues. A common problem for program designers is their failure to deeply explore villagers’ shared culture or carefully consider ways to ensure widespread participation by villagers in innovative design integration. This often stems from a lack of understanding of rural culture or trust in villagers’ willingness to participate in change, which is a result of the targeted assistance groups’ thinking inertia due to their superior positions. These root causes contribute to issues such as innovative design programs ceasing after the targeted assistance group leaves, being hailed as a success but remaining unpopular, or having conflicted

interests with villagers. Many cultural academics attribute these failures to a lack of prioritization of the overall objective.

Since 2014, the research team has been in close collaboration with inheritors from Gaeml, an ethnic minority in Guizhou City, known for traditional local hand weaving, plant dyeing, and batik. They have also partnered with Tencent's user research and experience design team for research and development. By closely connecting traditional handicrafts with modern living and mass consumption upgrades, the team established a preliminary rural design model to facilitate the sustainable development of rural ecology and culture.

It becomes evident that executing artistic innovations and designs that are "useful" to villagers by considering their actual situations and needs can help increase their approval of their village and its environment, as well as their confidence in their village culture. This effectively encourages their active participation in local revitalization efforts.

At the early stages of the project, the team immersed themselves in the villagers' daily production and living activities. They studied the Dongpu Village and County Chronicles, Township Chronicles, Village Chronicles, and other historical texts. Through this research, they discovered that the village had a longstanding and rich rural culture. The accompanying group of students sensitively noticed that while ancestral halls were less common in Dongpu Village than in southern Fujian Province or Chaoshan City in Guangdong Province, the village's largest families placed great importance on preserving cross-generational literature in their ancestral halls. This literature included children's family and given names, as well as literary records related to couplets.

More importantly, ancestral halls in Dongpu Village of Longjie Town were closed to tourism and deeply entrenched in villagers' cultural lives, especially during important festivals. The lack of "special features" in these halls became the focus of innovative social design for the village. The research team inspired villagers to share stories about their family and given names and integrated the village's literary treasures into its logo design, so that villagers would "see" the spirit of their village. Given that local Hakka families valued concepts such as family and ancestral halls, the village logo generally focused on the architecture of local ancestral halls.

In the logo, the Chinese character "东" (Dong, meaning east) was rendered in seal script, with its symmetrical shape resembling the gate of an ancestral hall. The character could be interpreted as a group of intersecting roads leading to the same destination, symbolizing an ancestral hall. The logo represented that family members will always find their way home or come together regardless of their physical location. With field green and peanut yellow colors, the logo clearly displayed agriculture as the village's main industry and highlighted Hakka virtues such as patience, reliability, simplicity, and hard work.

Unlike its surrounding counterparts, the village's logo design helped locals relate to their self-identity and personally feel the connection among art, beauty, and themselves. Inspired by villagers' stories and Dongpu Village's ancestral hall culture, the research team created a logo that interestingly responded to the villagers' simple lifestyle. Moreover, the prevalent use of the village logo in governance and during prominent events, such as weddings, funerals, Spring Festival, and

Chung Yeung Festival, continuously popularized the logo and further related it to ancestral halls. The modern design gave old ancestral halls a new lease on life and encouraged more young people to visit and understand them, which led to better utilization of them in designing common rural spaces—an important step towards forming a public network and shared culture in the village.

3.2 “Relevance” of innovative design gathers rural cultural resources

In innovative design, “relevance” refers to how the artistic and innovative aspects of rural design relate to villagers, including their daily lives, income generation, and cultural identity. This means that the project should feature local inspirations, participation, targets, and implementation. During the process of innovative design for Longjie Town, the research team discovered that Dongpu Village was blessed with abundant grain production, which, along with materials relevant to villagers’ daily lives, became a key source of inspiration for the project’s innovative designs.

By organizing classes on aesthetic education grounded in Hakka culture, the project team widely implemented artistic innovation and connected it with villagers’ daily lives to maximize their involvement. The team thoughtfully encouraged the village’s children to bring dustpans, grains, and legumes, which were common in every household. The children first learned Hakka’s intangible weaving handicraft to craft bamboo-woven products. Based on their individual preferences, teachers from the team organized activities on bamboo weaving, bean paste painting, and more.

By fully extending local cultural symbols and using modern design, the research team combined traditional hand-weaving crafts with local cultural prosperity to re-create local resources. The development of aesthetic education and cultural tourism led to healthy development for rural aesthetic education, where deliberate integration with natural resources created a shared village environment. This new-era aesthetic education was effectively implemented, fostering a deeper connection between the villagers and their cultural heritage.

In Shazhen Village of Longjie Town, the people were known for their simplicity and honesty, with Hakka culture being widespread. Many ancient buildings from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, such as Hakka walled houses, had been preserved, providing valuable resources for developing rural tourism. Through the local economic cooperative, the university’s locally stationed target assistance group partnered with the village’s party branch to trial a project featuring “party leadership and farmland sharing.” The project was built on the idea that urbanites should have access to rural farmland. By bolstering the local economy through party education and stimulating consumption in local farmland, accommodation, catering, and agricultural by-products, the joint team aimed to create a sustainable and reproducible targeted assistance model for local industries, with the goal of developing a rural revitalization brand under party leadership.

Since the project’s implementation in 2023, more than 1,000 people from the Greater Bay Area, including the cities of Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Dongguan, have participated in local experience activities, resulting in the signing of 120 farmland sharing agreements. This project effectively addressed issues such as idle farmland, empty residences, and surplus rural labor by

increasing sales channels for local agricultural by-products and boosting spending on local accommodation and catering. These efforts have considerably raised income for both the villagers and the village as a whole.

Currently, a cluster of residences with distinctive styles and more than 100 rooms has been established in Shazhen Village. Additionally, auxiliary projects are in the pipeline, including outdoor ecological walking trails, campsites, and off-road vehicle bases, all aimed at effectively revitalizing local resources.

4 Academic Aesthetic Education Increases Village Resources

Academic aesthetic education refers to the concept that, in the context of rural revitalization, higher education institutes should fully utilize their intellectual powers. Through effective academic research, knowledge creation, and active participation by villagers in cultural activities and projects, these institutes continuously explore the intrinsic values of rural resources to expand the frontiers of aesthetic education at economic, social, and cultural levels. Additionally, they achieve balanced joint development of rural public resources and aesthetic education by developing aesthetic education courses and increasing resources for their implementation.

Aesthetic education is an important method to enhance capabilities for rural innovation and development. Academic aesthetic education strengthens the transfer and innovation of knowledge, achieving rural revitalization in various aspects, including cultural and economic development. These aspects include enriching rural cultural life, increasing investment in public cultural services, supporting the construction of public spaces such as cultural malls, increasing the availability of cultural products and services that showcase rural beauty, and protecting and inheriting excellent rural traditions and cultures.

4.1 Create, transfer, and achieve innovative development of rural culture

XI pointed out, “The Chinese aesthetic spirit should be guided as an overall concept for developing contemporary Chinese aesthetic thinking since it largely reflects unique, rational, and academic achievements of Chinese aesthetic and artistic traditions.” During the practice stage of the project in Longjie Town, the research team chose to design a wedding ceremony souvenir for Dongpu Village. An investigation by the student researchers found that some Hakka customs were still practiced at young people’s weddings. Among the items prepared to welcome a new marriage was an auspicious and interesting cloth bag containing two to five smaller cloth bags, with the smallest one holding peanuts, lily bulbs, and melon seeds. These items symbolized wishes for having a son soon, a cheerful lifelong marriage, and the cross-generational inheritance of family prosperity, represented by the multiple layers of cloth bags.

The research team drew inspiration from this tradition, which signifies familial prosperity as a cross-generational mission, with each generation hopefully bettering their predecessors. The initial idea represented by this accessory was transformed into a souvenir-cum-accessory. They created a gift bag made of a silky scarf, whose opening was adorned with accessories designed

to resemble protection bags. The gift bag's exterior was made of metal, inside which were protection bags representing multiple blessings. Inside the silky gift bag was a metal protection bag containing one smaller counterpart after another. The different layers of bags returned to the initial idea—a wish for the cross-generational inheritance of familial prosperity.

The cultural product design for Dongpu Village, symbolizing cross-generational inheritance of family prosperity, was a result of the creative conversion of intangible village culture. Beautiful concepts from traditional cultural living were converted into customized cultural products that meet modern aesthetic standards.

In another academic activity, the team received widespread approval from villagers by focusing on the local folk culture and fully considering modern design functionality. During their field investigation, the team found that Dongpu villagers attached great importance to flower decorations at celebrations for prominent festivals, wedding ceremonies, and large-scale events. Such flower decorations were made of ordinary flowers, non-commemorative, and disposed of after the occasion. If the village adopted a city-like practice of using flowers for every large event, it would result in significant expenditure.

From their in-depth investigations into Dongpu villagers' lifestyles and by considering design sustainability for village events, the research team successfully designed a cultural product named “Dong Charm.” The team included the Chinese character “东” (“Dong” meaning east) from Dongpu Village in the accessory design and created a reusable brooch appropriate for prominent occasions such as wedding ceremonies and events. The brooch had an overall upward spiral design in the main body. Besides being visually appealing, this reusable design allowed the placement of flowers in the brooch's small central space, which could hold different floral decorations for different occasions.

Furthermore, the product featured the Chinese character “东,” whose font boldness ratio had been adjusted for a transparent gem setting. This cultural product design transformed the Chinese character from a “readable symbol” into “a visual object.” By displaying the character's semantics, the design extended cultural innovation frontiers through a product—a key value-adding element. Showing both the culture and character semantics in its design, this rural cultural product design stemmed from a semantic transfer of the Chinese character, reinforcing villagers' approval of cultural products from their village and extending their imagination.

The design of “Dong Charm” not only highlighted the unique cultural identity of Dongpu Village but also provided a sustainable and functional solution for decorative needs during important events. This innovative approach allowed the villagers to celebrate their traditions while minimizing costs and environmental impact, thus fostering a stronger connection to their cultural heritage.

4.2 Design education expands rural living aesthetics

Rural design education requires local participation and prioritizes the creation of cultural spaces that pertain to villagers' interests to intrinsically motivate them to improve their living conditions and environment. Additionally, the smooth creation of public cultural spaces is significant in

achieving better rural target assistance results and in the effective implementation of rural aesthetic education courses. Rural aesthetic education needs to consider local characteristics, including local ecological development patterns and aesthetics, to ensure that rural living aesthetics will penetrate local production and daily life.

In July 2023, the research team entered Dongpu Village, where they created artistic and creative wall paintings on enclosing walls covering an area of 100 square meters and painted a cultural plaza measuring 1,530 square meters. Their environmental decoration efforts aimed to promote rural revitalization in Longjie Town and add a unique cultural touch to the area. The thoughtful designs and paintings by the team transformed old, unregulated, and “useless” spaces into participatory, beautiful, and convenient artistic installations. These areas have recently become popular local leisure venues.

The plaza design drew inspiration from walled houses and included the village logo, demonstrating a relatively high aesthetic and practical value. The design concept was based on the idea that people always seek perfection and gathering, represented by layers of enclosing circles. The simple geometric color blocks complemented each other, creating a space that was both beautiful and practical. In the end, a participatory and convenient artistic installation was created, significantly enhancing the community’s aesthetic and cultural landscape.

Aside from artistic innovations and designs, the research team also organized various fun activities to promote rural living aesthetics. These included summer activities and practical courses targeting tertiary students, encouraging them to participate in building a beautiful and sound village. Additionally, they aimed to influence left-behind local children with innovative design courses on aesthetics, literature, and music.

Moreover, the team promoted these activities through traditional and social media platforms, such as WeChat groups, rapidly popularizing rural aesthetic education in the village. This multifaceted approach not only engaged the community but also fostered a broader appreciation for aesthetics and culture among both students and local children.

5 Conclusion

Innovative social design expresses and embodies China’s rich culture and cultural aesthetics through modern design methods and products. This requires in-depth exploration and high-quality manifestation of village culture, as well as coordinating different parties’ interests for effective integration. In their artistic design programs, vocational design schools should leverage their expertise and thoroughly understand various rural revitalization policies. This approach enables them to formulate program frameworks that are aligned with their market positions and focused on the specific needs of rural communities.

During the three years of practice in Longjie Town of Lianping County, Shenzhen Polytechnic University’s research team fully explored local Hakka culture, engaged with the village center and local ancestral halls, and attended local weddings and funerals. Led by the village’s assistance group and supported by design professionals from the university, the research team

achieved breakthroughs in recreating the village's culture, reshaping villagers' spirit, designing public spaces, and promoting economic development.

This collaborative effort proved effective, expanding higher education institutes' social service frontiers and enhancing their social reputation. Ultimately, it forged a win-win situation for tertiary education providers, governments, and society.

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