Design Education for Rural Revitalization

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Design Education for Rural Revitalization

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Abstract: Many countries in the world have experienced the process of rural decline and revival, and China is no exception. School of Design of Hunan University began to pay attention to the rural issues, especially in the remote and impoverished rural areas as early as 2009, and started the New Channel design and social innovation project that aims to find a suitable design education method to participate in the rural revitalization and promote the sustainable development of the rural areas. After ten years of practice and research on design education for rural revitalization, we have accumulated a large number of cases and experiences. We have gradually formed a practical process of design education for rural revitalization, innovated the participatory teaching mode of design education, and constructed the teaching activity framework of design education for rural revitalization that is centred on practice. In addition, we have not only trained a large number of students with social responsibility and passion for the countryside, but also helped the villagers to increase cultural self-confidence and improve living standards in the process of promoting rural revitalization. However, the relevant theoretical research is in its infancy at present, and many problems are still left to be solved. We will continue to explore and research through the practice of design education for rural revitalization.

Keywords: rural revitalization; design education; participatory teaching mode; rural culture

1 Rural Revitalization

With the development of industrialization and urbanization, China has experienced two major rural construction activities in the past 100 years. In the first half of the 20th century, China's political order was turbulent, and the countryside was on the verge of collapse. The rural construction movement during this period was advocated, guided and participated by some academic intellectuals (Hang-sheng & Ying-sheng, 2000). Many of them (represented by Liang Shu-ming and Y.C. James Yan, etc.) hold the view of educational improvement. They advocated that “China's economic construction must start from reviving the countryside” (Shu-ming, 2011). They also tried to achieve national
reforge by promoting rural education. However, because of the inevitable limitation of their political starting point of reformism, the practical results were very limited.

Rural Revitalization in the New Era is a Rural Construction Movement focus on the rejuvenation of Chinese Traditional Culture. Or it can be said that this is a contemporary new rural construction movement marked by the cultural self-awareness and cultural self-confidence of the Chinese nation. In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jin-ping made a clear announcement on the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy for the first time in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Rural revitalization has become a national development strategy. The macro and micro environments of rural development have changed, and the importance and worth of rural development have improved, which has created conditions for rural revitalization (Jun, 2018). The upsurge of building a new socialist countryside has set off across the country.

From a global perspective, many countries have also experienced the process of rural decline and rejuvenation. For example, China’s neighbour Japan began to face the rural crisis in the 1950s, and later took legal measures to ensure that relevant policies were gradually revitalized (Bin, 2018). South Korea also launched the New Village Movement in the 1970s (Yi-qiang, 2017). France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and other countries also have achieved revival in rural areas through effective intervention policies according to their respective situations (Manxiu, Xiang-zhou, Lin-ping & Heng-shan, 2018). Their successful experiences are worth learning from. However, compared with other countries, China’s rural problems have both commonness and individuality. Therefore, it is even more necessary to follow the national conditions and step out of the road of rural revitalization with Chinese characteristics based on learning from the experience of other countries.

2 Practice on the Design Education for Rural Revitalization

With the lead of the government and the support of the policy, all sectors of society have actively participated in the contemporary new rural construction movement. Many colleges and universities in China have also engaged in rural revitalization from different angles.

As early as 2009, School of Design of Hunan University began to pay attention to rural issues, especially in remote and impoverished rural, and started the New Channel design and social innovation project which aim to find a suitable design education method to participate in the rural revitalization and promote the sustainable development of rural culture. In the past ten years, we have consistently adhered to the research and practice on design education for rural revitalization in many poor villages, and gradually formed a practical process of design education, i.e., cultural inspiration, traditional inheritance, transformation and innovation, fusion and generation.

2.1 Cultural Inspiration

“Culture still has not been commonly defined in the general language” (Xiao-tong, 1995, p. 57). Throughout the ages, many domestic and foreign scholars have made various definitions of culture. Malinowski (1944), a British social anthropologist, thought of culture as a unity of matter, society and spirit. He advocates going back to real life in order to understand people. Therefore, the practice of design education for rural revitalization in the New Channel projects has always insisted on combining literature research with field surveys and using sociological and anthropological methods to conduct comprehensive assessment and analysis of local cultural resources and poverty.

Taking Tong Dao Autonomous County as an example, it is located in the south-western part of Hunan Province and is a minority area dominated by the Dong ethnic people. Here are the splendid cultural heritage of the Dong people and the quaint and simple customs. However, it is a national-level poverty-stricken county, and the economy is extremely backward.

As shown in Table 1, it is the record of fieldwork conducted in several villages and surrounding cultural areas in the Tong Dao Autonomous County by more than 40 teachers and students from the School of Design of Hunan University. They divided into six teams to investigate rural culture according to different directions. During more than 20 days, the teachers led students to conduct door-to-door surveys in the area, eating and working with the villagers to experience the real rural life, understanding local culture and acquiring local knowledge in the local context. At the same time, the young generation of students also felt the poverty of the countryside and the hardships of their life. Only personal experience can shock the soul. The resulting sense of social responsibility will make them more eager to help poor rural people to lead a better life through design and to think about their future designer identity and career choices. We believe this is also very important in terms of design education for rural revitalization.
Table 1. Fieldwork record in Tong Dao Autonomous County from July 16 to August 6, 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Investigation and Division of Labour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociological research team</td>
<td>Population structure, mode of production, consumption patterns and social organizations, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie design team</td>
<td>Digital records and protection of local intangible cultural heritage, original ecological music sampling, record new channel project, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental landscape home design team</td>
<td>Village landscape design, residential design, traditional folk house design, river clearing, children’s game platform, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial design team</td>
<td>Creative products based on regional culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual design team</td>
<td>Collect, organize and reproduce traditional folk art and crafts (digital protection), children’s art class, local brand logo, and packaging, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information design team</td>
<td>Investigate migrant workers, left-behind families, local communities, and social entertainment, establishing connections between local and external worlds in a variety of ways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Traditional Inheritance

“Culture is a tightly-organized system. At the same time, it can be divided into two essential aspects: implements and customs. They can then further sub-divided into smaller parts or units” (Malinowski, 1987, p. 11). That is, culture has both material and spiritual aspects. For example, the brocade, national traditional characteristic architecture, etc., of the Dong ethnic minority in Tong Dao autonomous county, these are the material form of Dong people’s traditional culture. But the handicraft technology, pattern composition, legends and stories, etc., are the spiritual form of their traditional culture. These are the crystallization of the knowledge, wisdom, and emotions of the Dong people. For the inheritance of traditional culture, we should pay attention to not only the tangible cultural but also the intangible cultural. These ethnologic wisdom and emotions are what we need to inherit in particular.

Therefore, it is especially important to lead students to learn and study traditional craftsmanship, techniques, and processes with local people who have traditional skills (especially the inheritors of intangible cultural heritage) in the practice of design education for social innovation. The local people are the holders and expressions of the traditional culture of their regional characteristics. They express what they see, think and wish for life through their unique cultural expression and material carrier. The inheritance of traditional culture must return to the tradition at first. Do we need to understand how the traditional culture we are going to inherit is formed? How did people treat and utilize local resources in the past? What are the wisdom and emotions of traditional crafts, methods, skills, patterns and colours, etc.? We need to analyse and judge which ones can be utilized and improved under today’s technological conditions, and which ones are restricted. We should guide students to explore these issues in the process of collaborative innovation design with local cultural holders, instead of staying on the surface of problems. Only by having a comprehensive understanding of the rural culture and internalizing it into our own knowledge system can we see the traditional culture with empathy. The photos in Figure 1 were taken in 2009 when we took students to the Tongdao Autonomous County for field research. Students learned brocade weaving from Tian-mei Su, the inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage.
2.3 Transformation and Innovation

In the 21st century, the value of local culture is no longer preservation, but the positive significance of constructing modern thoughts and spiritual levels, so that the fermentation of individual and regional culture can produce, and then achieve new development and application. The needs of people are changing, people’s ability is improving, science and technology are advancing rapidly, and culture is also developing dynamically.

The inheritance of traditional culture is quite similar to the growth and development of natural organisms. Natural organisms absorb external nutrients to maintain and develop life organisms and functions, but their genes have long-term stability, and are not easy to change. If we regard culture as a natural creature, then for the cultural, the recessive genes that control the cultural forms also should have stability. Therefore, we need to find its elementary cultural genes in the process of traditional inheritance at first. Then according to the current level of productivity and technology, we can appropriately improve, transform and innovate it to meet the production and living needs of modern people. In other words, we should treat traditional culture with the vision and thinking of development, add appropriate nutrients to the cultural, transform and create new cultural vitality.

As shown in Figure 2, these are the traditional brocade patterns of the Dong ethnic minority in Tong Dao autonomous county. And shown in Figures 3 and 4, these are the collaborative innovation design based on traditional brocade patterns of the Dong ethnic minority and weaving skills. They are joint works of the villagers who have traditional skills and our students. These students have gone to the Tong Dao autonomous county several times to follow the local brocade experts to learn and research the brocade weaving technology, and then combine the modern design concepts and production techniques to complete the innovative design works based on the traditional brocade weaving techniques. They recorded the process of Dong ethnic minority traditional brocade weaving, from cotton selection, spinning to row yarn, weaving brocade and so on. Then they studied the weaving skills of the traditional brocade carefully under the guidance of Tian-mei Su (inheritor of intangible cultural heritage). At the same time, they also tried to compare traditional manual weaving skills with modern machine weaving technology, hoping to find a balance between handicrafts and machine.

Figure 2. Traditional brocade patterns of the Dong ethnic minority in Tong Dao autonomous county.
2.4 Fusion and Generation

Fusion and generation are the corresponding viewpoints in the simple dialectics of ancient China. It means that the combination of different elements can generate and develop all things in the world. Different things can fuse to generate more things. If everything is the same, the world will not develop anymore.

Fusion, it means that different and even opposite things fuse to interact and relate to each other, thus generate valuable new things. Therefore, in addition to the inheritance and development of the traditional cultural, we can also generate a new cultural form that is richer and more vibrant than the original cultural form through the fusion of new materials, new technologies and new methods. But at the same time, it is necessary to use the mechanism of generation - the cultural gene as the criterion of fusion. Once this criterion lost, it may deviate from the track of the original traditional culture and thus lose the meaning of cultural inheritance.
As shown in Figure 5, it is an attempt to explore the innovative design expression of the traditional patterns of the brocade in different materials, such as silica gel, ceramics, PVC, and silk. Figure 6 is a bold attempt to combine the traditional pattern and structures of the brocade with modern 3D printing technology. Taking the dragon pattern, phoenix pattern, bird pattern and octagonal pattern in the brocade as the prototype, the students have designed three-dimensional models based on the traditional brocade though combining modern 3D printing with traditional culture. The whole design is full of innovative spirit. Through extraction, reconstruction, overlapping and other design methods, according to a certain proportion, structural rationality, and optimal allocation principle, the brocade pattern of the Dong ethnic minority is decomposed into multiple horizontal and vertical small cubes. And then, through the flexible application of material properties, techniques, structural principles and understanding of the spatial structure, they are integrated into a poetic and rhythmic polyhedron. On these polyhedrons, each structure has a formal logic, meaning, and symbolic value, and each different polyhedron represents the different benedictions of the Dong ethnic minority.

3 Research on the Design Education for Rural Revitalization

“Design is a new knowledge structure system evolved by human beings for active adaptation to external causes such as the environment. It is the wisdom creation of human reorganization survival structure” (Klaus, 2016, p. 015-017). The formation and transmission of this new knowledge structure system need to be realized through design education, and it is continuously updated and iterated with the development of society and the advancement of technology.

3.1 The Shift in the Focus of Design Education

“The design has encountered unprecedented challenges in the past ten years. The focus of design has shifted from the design of tangible cultural to the intangible cultural level such as service design, information design, business model design, and lifestyle design, etc.” (Tie, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, the focus of design education has also changed with the shift of design focus.

Traditional design education mostly tends to use basic training and professional design training to enable students to learn how to build a multi-party communication bridge in commercial design activities to achieve design goals. In the teaching process, more focus is on the teaching of design skills, and the ecological, social, economic and political environments closely related to the design is less involved. Design education for rural revitalization is more socially responsible and pays more attention to the memory of the rural culture. It tries to link design with traditional culture, social responsibility, professional ethics, ecological environment, intellectual property awareness and so on, in a more meaningful way. It applies tradition to modernity and connects the past with the future.

“We have a moral obligation and responsibility for human companions and other lives. This obligation calls us to be a prudent manager of the natural environment that sustains and supports our existence” (Heller & Vienne, 2017, p. 33). Design is closely related to people’s needs and social needs. Therefore, designers have more social responsibilities than ordinary people. As a design educator, while teaching students professional design knowledge and skills, it is more necessary to guide students to understand design as a social force that cannot be ignored, and help them to establish a positive and active design concept, aware of their responsibilities, and also know how to carry it out.

3.2 Expansion of the Field of Design Education

From a historical perspective, design does have the power to change the world. In modern society, the talent of the designers has maximized. However, when we look at design from the perspective of social vision, its power is often overestimated in fact. We cannot expect a person’s design practice to realize all his social, political, spiritual, cultural and other ideas. Only an interdisciplinary team can achieve the real design needs of the world. Professionals from
different disciplines study, discuss and experiment with each other, through multi-disciplinary cross-complementation and planning adjustments.

Of course, the significance of interdisciplinary and cross-collaborative innovation lies not only in teamwork between different disciplines. It also puts higher demands on the designers themselves. Therefore, design education has higher requirements for a teacher. First of all, to cultivate students in becoming generalists, teachers should also be generalists to adapt to the multi-faceted needs of design education. Complete design education should extend to other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, ecology, economics, and management.

3.3 The Innovation of Participatory Teaching Method

The so-called participatory teaching, that is, cooperative teaching or collaborative teaching, is opposite to preaching teaching (Jin-qi, Shui-ying & Chang-chun, 2000). Participatory teaching methods usually focus on the active participation of students throughout the teaching process, aiming to expand students’ autonomy in learning, mobilize the initiative and enthusiasm of students’ learning, and promote the development of students’ personality and creativity. As shown in Figure 7, it is a general participatory teaching method model. This teaching method supports the formation of a teaching field that is conducive to knowledge generation between teachers and students. Teachers and students work together in forms of independence, equality, interaction and inquiry to break the traditional one-way process of transferring knowledge to students.

Different from general teaching, design education for rural revitalization has a more practice feeling. It is more focused on guiding students to use innovative design thinking to solve or help solve some rural problems, as well as collaborative innovation design with the participation of villagers. The villagers are the real holders of rural culture. Each participant has his unique understanding of things because of the different environments and cultural backgrounds. They build a collaborative innovation design community based on mutual understanding and respect and thus get the chance to collision spark ideas.

As shown in Figure 8, it is a participatory teaching innovation model that is consistent with the characteristics of design education for rural revitalization. Teachers, students and villagers have formed a meaningful relationship in the process of participating in innovative design. Design knowledge, design methods, design thinking, and rural culture fuse together and internalization becomes the creative energy of each participant which should finally generate the design synergy.

![Figure 7. General participatory teaching method model.](image-url)
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Figure 8. Participatory teaching method model of design education for rural revitalization.

3.4 Construction of Self-Circulating Teaching Activity Framework

More than 2,000 years ago, Confucius, the great educator of ancient China, put forward the teaching framework of listening, seeing, thinking, learning and practicing. He believes that learning is a kind of cognitive activity. It requires more listening and seeing, combining learning with thinking, practicing and action. Nowadays, design education for rural revitalization puts forward higher requirements for teaching and learning. It pays more attention to students’ ability to participate in social innovation practice, cultivates talents with independent cognition, to enable them to think independently and make their judgments and choices through investigation and research. For the need of design education for rural revitalization, we summarized the design education practice of the decade and built a teaching activity framework based on the wisdom of the predecessors.

As shown in Figure 9 (left), teaching, learning, practicing, thinking and researching is the five elements of the teaching framework. Putting practicing at the centre is because it is the fundamental way in which design education is involved in rural revitalization. In practice, the teacher passes on design knowledge, design thinking, and design methods for students. Students spontaneously learn and research rural culture and traditional handicraft (including intangible cultural heritage). And they will think deeply about how to use rural resources (culture, nature, society, etc.). They will naturally work in design innovation with the villagers, forming a collaborative innovation design community of equality and mutual assistance. Teaching, learning, practicing, thinking and researching is just like a self-circulating system. Each participant in the system is innovating. They work together to design products that not only inherit rural culture but also fit market needs. And they work together to build a sustainable rural society vision that meets both the needs of rural economic development and maintains rural ecological balance.

Figure 9. Left: Teaching activity framework centred on practice. Right: Sustainable development of rural culture.

As shown in Figure 9 (right), rural culture is also the core of design education for rural revitalization. Design education for rural revitalization is to start with the understanding, recognition, respect, and love of rural culture. Rural culture generates by the rural natural environment, human environment, and social environment. It is the most important
resource available for rural revitalization. By participating in design innovation with the villagers, not only can cultural resources be developed and utilized to the maximum extent, but also the villagers’ cultural self-conscious can be inspired, the villagers’ cultural self-confidence can be enhanced. It is also conducive to promoting the overall revitalization of the countryside.

4 Conclusion

After ten years of practice and research on design education for rural revitalization, we have accumulated a large number of cases and experiences. We have gradually formed a practical process of design education for rural revitalization and innovated the participatory teaching mode of design education (See Figure 7 and Figure 8 for details). Compared with general education, design education for rural revitalization pays more attention to the participation of villagers, and the relationship between the participants is closer than the former. The educational process is open to all. The teaching space extends from the classroom to a broader field. Anyone who is willing to participate can join. Except for classroom study, teaching content also includes social learning and emotional learning. And we have constructed a teaching activity framework of design education for rural revitalization that is centred on practice. All participants form a collaborative innovation design community based on mutual understanding and respect. Each participant (teacher, student and villager) has multiple identities, different knowledge structures and cultural backgrounds. They teach and learn from each other, think and research on how to make use of rural resources to solve rural social problems and promote rural revitalization.

In addition, design education for rural revitalization has more practical significance. We have not only trained a large number of students with social responsibility and the passion for the countryside, but also helped the villagers to increase cultural self-confidence and improve living standards in the process of promoting rural revitalization. Taking Tong Dao Autonomous County as an example, by the end of 2018, we have helped the villagers to create a local brand Suo Shuo, based on the inheritance and innovation of the Dong brocade culture, provided training to more than 300 traditional Dong brocade craftsmen, and sold more than 3,000 handmade scarves in total as well. The per capita net income has increased from more than 500 RMB in 2011 to 2,000 RMB in 2017.

In the future, as the driving force at the national level continues to increase, we believe that more and more people will devote themselves to design education for rural revitalization. However, the relevant theoretical research is in its infancy at present, and many problems are still left to be solved. We will continue to explore and research through the practice of design education for rural revitalization.

References


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