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Teaching Research on Public Art Design Courses in Colleges and Universities under the Cultural Commissioner System: A Case Study of Field Investigation and Scheme Implementation in Rural Ninghai

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Abstract: Public art design courses have long followed a teaching chain of "classroom lecturing—hypothetical brief—drawing-based assessment", in which schemes have little substantive connection with real sites and real users, so that design training easily remains at the level of form. The introduction of the cultural commissioner system in Zhejiang has created conditions for overcoming this difficulty: it dispatches design teachers from universities to the front line of villages, turning the village from a "site visit" made occasionally by students into a real field on which they can rely over the long term. Taking Ninghai as a case, this paper discusses the changes that occur in teaching objectives, teaching process and explanation paths once a rural field enters a course, and proposes a teaching scheme at three levels: functional positioning, implementation framework and breakthrough paths. The study argues that the significance of field investigation and scheme implementation lies not in adding a field session to the course, but in shifting the way design knowledge is generated from "formal deduction" to "on-site construction".

1. Introduction

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China calls for "accelerating the construction of the disciplinary, academic and discourse systems of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics"[1]. Design combines artistic and applied attributes, and one question cannot be avoided: where does the originality of the discipline come from? For a long time, public art design courses in Chinese universities have followed a chain of "classroom lecturing—hypothetical brief—drawing-based assessment". Students complete a set of schemes that looks complete, yet cannot explain clearly for whom the space is built.

The change has come from two directions. In 2022 the Ministry of Education issued the Guidelines for Public Art Courses in Higher Education Institutions, which list "art experience and

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practice" alongside courses on aesthetics and art history and on art appreciation and criticism as the three types of courses, require that courses include practical sessions in real situations, and stress that public art courses "have irreplaceable value and function in guiding students to establish a correct view of history, nation, state and culture"[2]. Subsequently, the Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era and the Notice on Fully Implementing the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative further called for "strengthening practical experience"[3] and for taking "immersion as the goal and path of aesthetic education work"[4].

The other direction comes from local practice. Since 2024 Zhejiang has been the first in the country to implement the cultural commissioner system, dispatching university teachers and professionals from performing arts troupes to villages on two-year terms, with no fewer than 100 days of on-site time each year. A considerable proportion of the first batch of commissioners came from design faculties in universities, and what they did during their village residency was precisely the renovation of public spaces and the shaping of cultural brands. For design teaching this means that the village is no longer merely a "site visit" for students on a weekend, but a real field where someone is stationed over the long term.

The question this paper seeks to answer follows from this: when a rural field enters a public art design course, what changes in the teaching of that course, and can such change be stably organized and repeatedly implemented? Drawing on the author's own residency experience and course practice in Liyang Village, Liyang Town, Ninghai County, the paper gives an answer at three levels: functional positioning, implementation framework and breakthrough paths. It should be noted in advance that "rural practice teaching" as used here refers to a form of teaching organization that takes field investigation and scheme implementation as its main thread and runs through the whole course.

2. From Drawings to the Field: The Progressive Implications of Introducing the Rural Field into Public Art Design Courses

2.1 The Historical Lineage of Design Education's Involvement in Rural Areas

The involvement of design education in rural areas is not a new proposition, yet design education in China long depended on fine arts education, emphasizing expression and form. In recent years this situation has begun to loosen: public art courses are no longer merely about letting students know a little more art history, but about establishing a link between aesthetics, emotion and values[5]; aesthetic education is also required to return to concrete cultural sites[6], and some design faculties have already brought the countryside into course and graduation project topics. These practices point to one judgement: the countryside is not a backdrop for the course; it is itself part of the teaching content.

2.2 Three Differences between Classroom Design and Field Design

Bringing a rural field into the course does not expand the range of topics; it adjusts the logic of teaching design—if the past hypothetical brief is merely replaced by a real brief while all the other links remain unchanged, the countryside is still only a slightly more specific topic. The difference is concentrated at three levels.

First, there is a hierarchical difference in goal setting. The goal of a conventional course design is to complete a work that conforms to professional norms, with the emphasis on the completeness of the drawings and the expressive force of form; the goal of field design is to respond to a genuinely existing problem, with the criteria constituted jointly by the actual conditions of the site

and the needs of users. The former trains skill, the latter trains judgement—students must learn to distinguish which needs must be responded to and which conditions may be conceded.

Second, there is a generative difference in the teaching process. Conventional design teaching advances along the linear sequence of "brief—research—sketch—final drawing"; field design follows a cyclical path of "entry—understanding—co-creation—revision": the first step on entering the village is not data collection but building relationships with villagers, and the scheme is adjusted through discussion with village officials, villagers and craftsmen. What is obtained in the field is not merely data but meaning[7].

Third, there is a difference in the depth of the explanation path. The explanatory basis of conventional design teaching is formal principles and comparable cases, while field design shifts to the site's social relations, the village's historical lineage and villagers' everyday practices. The same patch of open ground in front of an old house is, within a framework of formal analysis, "a negative space in need of renewal", yet within a framework of village life history it may be a place of shared memory across generations[8].

Synthesizing these three differences, this paper defines public art design teaching in a rural field as: teaching that takes the village as the teaching site, in which students obtain first-hand materials through field investigation, establish design briefs and promote the implementation of schemes. Its core does not lie in "having gone to the countryside", but in the fact that the source of design problems, the way design grounds are obtained and the criteria by which design outcomes are tested have all changed.

3. The Functional Positioning of Integrating the Cultural Commissioner System into Public Art Design Courses

The significance of the cultural commissioner system for design teaching is often understood as "one more cooperating institution" or "one more channel for contacting village officials", which underestimates its value. A commissioner resides in a village for two years; when students enter the village, what they take on is not a site arranged on the spur of the moment, but a working field where someone has long been rooted, where basic reconnaissance has been completed and where projects are already being advanced[9].

3.1 Restoring the Local Context of Design Briefs and Activating Knowledge Production in Design Teaching

There has long been a rupture in design teaching: what is taught in class is abstract principles, while what students practise are schemes deduced under assumed conditions, and there is a lack of a mediator of real problems between the two. What the cultural commissioner system provides is precisely such a mediator. During their residency, commissioners must complete the sorting of cultural resources and a survey of needs; the author organizes the accumulated village materials and the list of public cultural facilities into a "brief pool" for the course, and the briefs students receive carry their own context.

From the perspective of teaching, what happens here is a cycle of "practice—concept—practice": the first "practice" is the concrete experience students gather on site; the "concept" distilled from it is the judgement of the problem and the design direction; the second "practice" is the application of that judgement to drawings, models and even construction. In the traditional classroom the first link is often compressed into background explained orally by the teacher, so that the design statements students write can only be paraphrases of generic discourse.

3.2 Unblocking Local Obstacles in Design Problems and Promoting Problem Decoding in Design Teaching

Design problems are distinctly socially embedded: why a village cannot keep its young people—the answers mostly lie beyond the space itself. The reason the cultural commissioner system helps decode problems is that, through long-term residency, it restores design problems to concrete social situations, and this restoration has a threefold solidity.

The first is depth in time: a commissioner stationed in the same village for two years can trace the village's historical lineage, family structure and the rise and fall of its industries. The second is immersion in space: students live and eat in the village and can observe details that are easily overlooked—where the elderly sit in the sun and at what hour, and which open ground gathers the most people at festivals. The third is the cross-verification of details: on the same matter the accounts of village officials, elderly residents and outside business operators often differ, and placing them side by side brings one closer to the truth.

The value of artistic intervention in the local ultimately depends on whether it enables villagers to re-understand their own life-world[10].

3.3 Taking Root in Rural Chinese Design Scenarios and Building an Autonomous Knowledge System for Design Teaching

The knowledge system of the design discipline has long taken the theoretical framework and formal language of Western modern design as its reference. This framework is effective in dealing with urban space, yet it often fails when transplanted to the countryside: the organizational logic, spatial order and even aesthetic judgement of the local environment are embedded in the history and life of village society itself, and are hard to encompass by universalized formal principles. Research has pointed out that commissioners play the role of connecting the institutional sequence with the resource network in rural cultural construction, and that their role is one of two-way embedding and activation[11].

Liyang Village is a case in point. The village has a history of more than 1,200 years, and there remain seventeen courtyards from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the Republic of China period, along with a long-standing tradition of children's poetry and a craft of wine-making. Such general design terms as "node", "corridor" and "interface" are insufficient to explain the matter; one must switch to a set of expressions grown from the village itself: the threshing ground in front of the ancestral hall, the stone steps at the stream landing, the steam in the wine workshop and the children's poems copied on the walls—these are the materials students really need to work with. Once refined in the classroom, such experience may settle into transmissible design knowledge[12].

4. The Implementation Framework of Rural Practice Teaching in Public Art Design Courses

How to make the rural field truly enter the course rather than become a collective spring outing is the core concern of teaching organization. Since July 2024 the author has been dispatched as a municipal-level cultural commissioner of Ningbo to Liyang Village, Liyang Town, Ninghai County, and the "Dreams Painted in the Countryside, Youth Building the Realm" graduation design exhibition placed students' schemes directly before villagers[13]. The following explains four links: preparation, collection, analysis and implementation.

4.1 The Preparatory Link: Localized Structuring of the Field Investigation Plan

The first step of rural practice teaching is not lecturing but letting students know what to look at

and what to ask in the village. Before the course begins the author builds a “three-dimensional interactive” research framework: the theoretical dimension guides students to become familiar with such concepts as public space, genius loci and participatory design; the practical dimension determines the use of space, the operation of projects and the gap in needs; the cultural dimension sorts out the village’s memory, its crafts and the cultural activities currently taking place.

After the framework comes the preparation of resources and the arrangement of personnel. Taking Liyang Village as an example, the pre-departure materials include the morphological layout and building distribution of the ancient village, the origin of the children’s poetry culture and the history and production techniques of the Liyang wine industry, some coming from archives accumulated by the commissioner during residency and some from local gazetteers and public reports[14]. Students are divided into groups of four to five, with four roles within the group—recording, interviewing, surveying and photography—rotated each round; a briefing explains how to obtain consent before entering courtyards and what to note when photographing villagers.

4.2 The Core Support Link: Grounded Collection of Multi-source Information

Material collection is the most substantive link in rural practice teaching, and also the one most liable to become a formality—if students are merely taken around the village and asked to take a few photographs, the design scheme can still only proceed by imagination. To avoid this, the course fixes a “three-line parallel” mode of collection: field observation, in-depth interviews and material records are carried out at the same time, and the three kinds of material corroborate one another.

Field observation requires students to enter the same site at different times and record differences in how it is used. Observation combines fixed-point and walking methods: the fixed point records the state of use, while walking records the connections between spaces. Surveying requires students to complete basic drawings by hand and with simple instruments; the scale need not be precise, but the spatial relations must have been measured and drawn by hand.

In-depth interviewing is the link that most needs design. The course draws on interviewing methods from qualitative research, emphasizes open-ended questioning and on-the-spot follow-up questions, and treats the interview as a process of meaning construction rather than the item-by-item gathering of evidence[15]. The interview outline proceeds in three stages: for village officials and elderly residents, the questions begin with the village’s memory and then move to change and expectation; for ordinary villagers, especially the elderly and women, “top-down” questioning is abandoned in favour of life-history recall and scenario reproduction. Each interview is kept to about forty minutes, and a period of small talk is left before the end, for much useful information emerges precisely in this “off-topic” conversation.

The course requires talking less and listening more, and recording tone and scene rather than merely conclusions; old objects, old photographs, receipts and family genealogies are often more reliable than oral accounts and easier to turn into design material.

4.3 The Essential Analysis Link: Symbolic Modelling of Design Problems

The collected materials are scattered: dozens of pages of notes, hundreds of photographs and a number of hand-drawn sheets, and they require a process of distillation before they can become design judgements. The method the author adopts is to guide students to look for “symbols” and classify the materials into three types: linguistic symbols, that is, expressions repeatedly used by villagers, for example “this used to be the place for drying grain”; behavioural symbols, that is, everyday actions repeatedly practised; and spatial symbols, that is, places and objects bearing collective memory, for example the ancestral hall, the old well, the stage and the old wine

workshop.

Once the three types of symbols are identified, the correspondence of “symbol—meaning—function” is established. Take the threshing ground in front of the ancestral hall in Liyang Village as an example: linguistically it is a “drying yard”, behaviourally it carries festival gatherings and everyday sitting, and spatially it is the most public place in the whole village; the design direction derived from this is not to make a pretty landscaped plaza, but to let this ground accommodate both gatherings and sitting at the same time.

This link also requires students to deal with a common misconception, namely understanding symbols as patterns and motifs. Carving children’s poems on the wall or arranging wine jars in a row is visually acceptable but often ineffective in design, because such practices extract only the outer form of the symbol without dealing with the behaviour and meaning behind it. The truly effective transformation is to set the place where children’s poems are copied at the intersection that children must pass on their way from school, and to embed the display of wine-making techniques into the existing production line.

4.4 The Value Realization Link: Paradigmatic Distillation of Scheme Implementation

The gap most likely to appear in rural practice teaching is that a scheme is beautifully made yet cannot be implemented—half of the reason lying in the fact that the design itself is detached from the site, and half in the fact that the teaching links do not incorporate implementation into the process. The author sets three gates in the course: the feasibility gate, which requires the scheme to answer at the mid-term review who will carry out the construction, where the materials come from, how much the funding is and who will maintain it afterwards; the villagers’ review gate, which makes the mid-term schemes into presentation boards and simple models and places them in the village for comments; and the local exhibition gate, which exhibits the final outcomes in the village.

The “Dreams Painted in the Countryside, Youth Building the Realm” graduation design exhibition held at the paper-cutting hall of Liyang Village in June 2026 was a concentrated presentation of these three gates. The works of twelve students addressed such topics as the renovation of nodes along the old street, the rebranding of the wine factory and the spatial planning of homestays in Kong Village. Among them was “Reconstruction of a Wine-tourism Cultural Space Based on the Concept of Five Senses” by Shi Yi, which organizes the visiting route around the brewing process. Her reflection is fairly representative: the first draft pursued formal beauty at the expense of everyday use, and it was only after repeated visits to the site and repeated communication with the factory that the problems of implementation were thought through. After the exhibition the School and Liyang Village granted each other the title of practice teaching base; schemes that could be directly implemented entered the procedure for advancement, while those not yet mature returned to the course for further refinement[16].

Three transferable practices can be distilled from this round of teaching. First, extend the time scale of the course, linking the course with the graduation project to form a continuous chain. Second, diversify the subjects of assessment—whether a scheme is good is no longer decided by the teacher alone, and villagers’ opinions, township officials’ opinions and the effects of use must all enter the assessment. Third, leave the outcomes on site—after students leave the village, the schemes, drawings and models remain there, which facilitates subsequent implementation and lets villagers continue to feel that they are participants.

It should also be noted that implementation does not equal completion. Constrained by funding, approval and construction conditions, some of the students’ schemes can only exist as staged outcomes, such as complete construction drawings, physical models or a single curatorial exercise. In teaching this need not be evaded; rather, the question of “how far advanced counts as complete”

should be handed back to students for discussion—setting the teaching goal as “an implementable scheme plus a sustainable mechanism” is closer to the reality of rural work than setting it as “must be built”.

5. Constraints on Rural Practice Teaching in Public Art Design Courses and Paths of Breakthrough

Rural practice teaching encounters a number of constraints, coming mainly from students’ cognitive habits, the way teaching is organized and the course system; if these are not solved, the field will degenerate once again into a site visit.

5.1 The Limits of Fixed Thinking Patterns and Their Breakthrough

When students enter the countryside they carry the aesthetic formulae formed by years of classroom training, which take two forms: handling rural sites with a parametric formal language, so that schemes look fashionable yet clash with the surrounding courtyards and trees; and trimming on-site materials with a preset theoretical framework, simplifying complex rural life into a few concepts.

Breaking through fixed thinking patterns requires three things at the methodological level. First, suspend preconceptions, treating “unfinished”, “irregular” and “old” as neutral states to be observed, without rushing to make value judgements. Second, value the texture of experience: the author often gives students an exercise—without a camera and without a sketchbook, walk in the village for two hours, and on returning speak only of three things: which place is the liveliest, which place smells best and which place most makes one want to sit down. Third, go beyond binary thinking, choosing neither “keep it as it is” nor “thoroughly transform it”, but instead examining which elements must be preserved and which can be adjusted.

5.2 The Distortion of Information Details and Its Breakthrough

The distortion of research materials is a hidden concern in rural practice teaching, and there are three common situations: students treat research as a formality that must be completed for submitting coursework, go only once, listen to introductions and take materials at the village committee, and then design on the basis of second-hand information; villagers, out of politeness or caution, give decent answers rather than genuine thoughts; and students selectively retain what fits their presuppositions when organizing materials, ignoring contrary evidence. When the three kinds of distortion are compounded, the grounds for the scheme are no longer reliable.

Responses can be made in three respects. First, insist on repeated presence: visit the same site in at least three different periods, and contact the same respondent at least twice. Second, build a mechanism of empathy: after the interview submit the transcript to the other party for confirmation; once villagers feel respected, defensive expressions naturally diminish. Third, strengthen the close reading of text and image—when organizing interview transcripts, students should not merely summarize the main points but retain tone, pauses and context, because villagers’ attitudes toward space are often hidden in adversative clauses.

5.3 The Fragmentation of Teaching Domains and Its Breakthrough

Rural practice teaching is inherently interdisciplinary, yet the curriculum of higher education institutions is divided by discipline, so that students can often see a problem in the village yet cannot explain why it arises. Another fragmentation occurs within the course itself: research, design

and presentation are cut into three segments, each the responsibility of a different teacher, so that the materials collected at the research stage are often already distorted by the design stage.

Breaking through these two kinds of fragmentation requires effort in three directions. First, connect the internal links of the course, with one teacher or a team coordinating research, design and implementation. Second, introduce interdisciplinary collaborators, inviting teachers of sociology, anthropology and agronomy into the course to take students down to the village alongside the design teachers. Third, open the boundary of the course outward, letting village officials, returning young people and craft inheritors enter teaching as “local mentors”—workshop teaching based on school-enterprise and school-local collaboration has attracted attention in recent years precisely because it can bring such real roles into teaching[17].

5.4 The Constraints of Time and Space and Their Breakthrough

Two hard conditions constrain rural practice teaching: time and space. As for time, design courses often last only a dozen weeks, and the time students can spend in the village is concentrated in weekends and short holidays; as for space, there is usually a distance of tens to hundreds of kilometres between an urban university and a village, so that the cost of travelling back and forth is high.

Breaking through these two constraints can draw on three methods. First, reconstruct the time scale of the course, extending a single course into a course cluster, with the graduation project carrying the task of implementation. Second, establish a stable local fulcrum—the two-year residency of a cultural commissioner happens to provide such a fulcrum: while at university students do desk work under a teacher’s guidance, on entering the village they are received by the commissioner, and in winter and summer holidays they take turns in batches, forming a “relay-style investigation”. Third, use digital means to extend effective presence, so that students can keep in touch with the field after leaving the village. Technology can alleviate the distance, but it cannot replace personal presence.

There is also the matter of maintaining the relationship after the course ends. Students graduate and commissioners rotate, either of which may break the teaching chain. A feasible approach is to institutionalize the local relationship, for example by having the School and the village sign an agreement on a practice teaching base that specifies the use of the site, the ownership of outcomes and the mechanism for subsequent communication; at the same time, the village materials, interview records and design outcomes accumulated over the years are compiled into volumes to form a teaching archive that can be handed over.

6. Conclusion

Bringing a rural field into a public art design course changes more than the way one course is taught: the source of knowledge shifts from textbooks and cases to the real social field, the criteria for assessing design ability shift from graphic presentation to problem solving, and students’ learning goal shifts from completing an assignment to taking part in a real construction. The cultural commissioner system happens to provide institutional conditions on which this shift can rely: resident commissioners bring the results of needs surveys, resource sorting and project advancement into the classroom, and students’ schemes in turn settle back into the village, forming a two-way cycle between teaching and practice[18].

Such teaching, however, remains at an exploratory stage. The time lag between the course cycle and the implementation cycle, the organizational cost of interdisciplinary collaboration and the backwardness of the assessment system are all problems not yet well solved. All these difficulties point to the same conclusion: the maturity of rural practice teaching does not depend on a single

teacher making a few more trips to the village, but on adjusting the course system, the teaching staff structure and the school-local relationship together[19]. This is both a pressure and an opportunity to let the discipline take root again—the design experience grown in rural China follows a path of its own, and only when such experience accumulates will the construction of an autonomous knowledge system for the design discipline cease to be an empty slogan[20].

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