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A Study on the Synergistic Development Model of Rural Culture and Universities in Zhejiang Driven by the Cultural Commissioner System: A Case Study of Ninghai

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Abstract: The cultural commissioner system is an institutional innovation through which Zhejiang Province delivers high-quality cultural resources directly to the grassroots, and it has also opened a stable channel for professional forces from universities to take part in rural cultural development. Taking the two-year residency of the first batch of provincial, municipal and county-level cultural commissioners in Ninghai County as a case, and drawing on the author's village surveys, project-tracking records and household visits during his service as head of the Ninghai County cultural commissioner team, this paper examines how the system has changed the conditions under which university-village collaboration is established, and identifies four collaborative paths: spatial symbiosis, talent co-cultivation, industrial co-prosperity and brand co-building. The study finds that the two-year residency cycle, the three-tier coordinating system at provincial, municipal and county levels, and the demand-oriented service loop were each designed to address an old problem in university-village cooperation—project cycles that are too short, resources that are scattered, and mismatches between supply and demand—while the durability of the collaboration depends on whether the individual embedding of a commissioner can be turned into an organizational tie between a school and a village. Three directions for deepening the collaboration are proposed accordingly: long-term twinning between schools and villages, value sharing, and the translation of practice into courses, offering a reference for improving the cultural commissioner system and for building a practice-based education system in universities.

1. Introduction

The No. 1 Central Document of 2025 places the flourishing of rural culture and the protection, inheritance and revitalization of rural cultural heritage on the task list of comprehensive rural revitalization[1]. In recent years, art-based rural construction, design-going-to-the-countryside programmes and university summer social practice have brought professional forces into villages, yet few of them have truly taken root. Rural public cultural services have long faced a structural difficulty: a gap separates the professional resources delivered from outside from the real cultural

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needs of a village, so that the supply side is busy while the demand side stays cold. The cultural commissioner system launched by Zhejiang in 2024 attempts to close that gap by institutional means.

In April 2024 the General Office of the CPC Zhejiang Provincial Committee and the General Office of the Zhejiang Provincial People's Government jointly issued the Implementation Opinions on the Work of Cultural Commissioners, making Zhejiang the earliest province in China to roll out the system across its whole territory[2]. According to the document, a commissioner serves a two-year term, retains his or her personnel relationship with the original institution, spends no fewer than 100 days a year working in a township (or subdistrict) and goes down to the village at least once a month. Assignments follow a "1+1+N" formula: a commissioner is chiefly responsible for liaising with one administrative village, twinning with one New Era Civilization Practice Station or one rural cultural hall, and taking on additional tasks such as theoretical lecturing, service delivery, brand development, resource exploration, site upgrading, industrial assistance and talent training. Each must deliver at least one cultural project, and a tripartite letter of commitment is signed by the dispatching institution, the receiving locality and the commissioner[2]. In May of the same year the first cohort of 100 provincial cultural commissioners assembled in Hangzhou; 44 per cent of them were university teachers and 23 per cent were leading members of performing arts troupes[3].

That university teachers accounted for nearly half of the first cohort deserves attention. It means that the disciplinary resources, teaching staff and student practice system of universities were institutionally connected to rural cultural development; conversely, the countryside offers universities a site for artistic creation, design practice and aesthetic education that cannot be reproduced in a classroom. Following this thread, the paper is concerned not with what individual commissioners have done, but with three questions: what new conditions for collaboration the system has created between universities and villages, into what paths these conditions have been translated in specific villages, and how far those paths can run.

2. 1 Research Case and Analytical Framework

2.1 The Cultural Commissioner System and the Ninghai Sample

A cultural commissioner is a person of comparatively high cultural literacy and professional expertise selected by the publicity department of a Party committee, in coordination with dispatching institutions such as government agencies, institutions of higher learning, cultural enterprises and institutions, and social organizations, to guide a township (or subdistrict) in its publicity, ideological and cultural work. After the system was put into practice, Zhejiang selected more than 1,570 cultural commissioners at the provincial, municipal and county (city, district) levels to work in townships (subdistricts) and twinned villages (communities), achieving full coverage of all townships (subdistricts)[3].

In June 2024, 18 provincial, municipal and county-level cultural commissioners took up posts in the townships (subdistricts) and twinned villages of Ninghai, including one at the provincial level, seven at the municipal level and ten at the county level. Over the two years Ninghai carried out 18 cultural projects at the three levels, coordinated 2.4 million yuan in special funds and mobilised more than 15 million yuan in supporting fiscal funds and social capital, completed over 30 minor artistic renovations, staged more than 2,000 public performances and nearly 300 specialised training sessions, protected and put to use ten intangible cultural heritage items including opera, folk custom and craftsmanship, cultivated more than 20 local cultural teams such as Zoushu storytelling, Sankeng tunes and Daoqing, developed more than 20 kinds of cultural and creative products under the "one village, one product" approach, and helped the host localities increase their income by over 7.6 million yuan[3,4].

Three considerations underlie the choice of Ninghai as the sample. First, its host sites cover villages of quite different types—mountain villages, resettlement villages, market-town villages and suburban villages—with markedly different resource endowments. Second, commissioners at all three levels are stationed in the same county, which makes it convenient to observe collaboration across levels. Third, university teachers have taken charge of several key projects there, so the thread of university-village collaboration is comparatively complete.

2.2 From One-way Delivery to Two-way Empowerment: An Analytical Framework

Scholarship has already said a good deal about art-based rural construction and the entry of external forces into villages. Starting from the notion of "rurality", Xiang Yong argues that art-based rural construction in the new era is essentially a revaluation of rurality, and that its path lies in introducing external mechanisms of creation and creative resources so as to activate a village's own generative drive and creative subjects[5]. An Lizhe divides contemporary art-based rural construction in China into an exploratory, a deepening and a diffusion phase, and notes that scholarly concern has shifted from "what universities can deliver to the countryside" to "how a mechanism can be left behind after delivery"[6]. Song Meng treats art-based rural construction both as a practical form of contemporary art and as artistic creation in its own right, with its point of rest in public art and public cultural services[7]. Wu Xiaolong, studying the long evolution of rural construction in the United Kingdom, summarises it as "symbiotic governance" and holds that later-developing regions have room to move from "partial-benefit symbiosis" toward "integrated symbiosis"[8]. Li Kaozhi and Guo Guanbing, working from intervention paths, stress that renovation should be small in scale and modest in extent, since micro-renewal is more readily accepted by a village than wholesale replacement[9]. Fan Hongfa and He Ying see art-based rural construction as an aesthetic education aimed at villagers, judging its success by whether villagers can grow into aesthetic self-awareness through sustained participation[10].

Research on the cultural commissioner system itself has only just begun. Taking Village S in Zhejiang as a case, Li Tao and Ning Jia propose "dual embeddedness and institutional activation": a commissioner is embedded at the same time in the institutional sequence and in resource networks, thereby securing status and funding, and then integrates internal and external resources through a precise matching of demand so as to awaken villagers' cultural subjectivity[11]. Li Mengqian borrows the concept of "translation" from actor-network theory to describe the commissioner as a core node in a network of multiple actors[12]. These studies provide useful tools for understanding how the system works, yet their unit of analysis largely remains the binary relation between commissioner and village; the university, as an actor, has not yet been given direct treatment.

The paper follows this lead and proposes a framework of two-way empowerment. University-village collaboration is not a one-way transfer of professional capability from a university: what the village gains is endogenous cultural momentum and industrial returns, while what the university gains is a site for practice-based education, genuine problems for disciplinary research and a local network of cooperation. Whether these two gains can be realised at the same time determines whether the collaboration is a temporary project or a stable, long-term relationship. Around this judgement, the paper first analyses the three conditions the system provides, then examines the four collaborative paths, and finally discusses the durability of the results.

2.3 Research Methods and Data Sources

Since June 2024 the author has served as head of the Ninghai County cultural commissioner team, taking part in village surveys, resource reviews and periodic feedback on results at a number of host sites. The paper is based on a review of the literature, while its main body is a case study:

the residency practices of Ninghai's first cohort of commissioners form the overall case, from which representative host sites are selected for in-depth interpretation. The materials used fall into four categories: policy texts of the central government and of Zhejiang Province; published reports and working archives on the operation of the system; village survey records and practice notes covering all 18 host sites; and household visit materials collected around villagers' needs, willingness to participate and satisfaction. Every fact that enters the paper has been checked one by one against a policy text or a published report.

3. Institutional Provision: Three Conditions for University-Village Collaboration

Cooperation between a university school and a village has in the past been blocked in three places: project cycles were too short for plans to land on the ground; resources were scattered, so supply and demand failed to match; and returns were vague, so momentum could not be sustained. The design of the cultural commissioner system addresses precisely these three points.

3.1 Residency Cycle and the Temporal Condition of "Slow Cultivation"

When university teachers and students formerly went to the countryside for cultural projects, the forms were limited to summer social practice, short design workshops or graduation projects, with stays of a few weeks or even a few days. Without enough time, the historical texture of a village and the real needs of its residents cannot be grasped, and the plans handed in often remain on paper as idealised drawings. The rules that a term lasts two years, that at least 100 days a year are spent on site and that a visit is made at least once a month[2] have broken that "fire one shot and move on" rhythm.

Several host sites in Ninghai show what time is good for. The municipal commissioner Duan Hongjiao arrived in Shenzhen Township in July 2024 and spent the first few months getting a thorough grasp of the hot-spring resources of Nanxi Village before starting work on turning an idle patch of wasteland at the village entrance into a hot-spring cultural courtyard. The provincial commissioner Ren Tian, stationed in Ruo'ao Village, drew on its cluster of Ming and Qing buildings to create artistic pieces such as a bamboo-woven installation called "Rocking Canopy"[4]. Plans of this kind, which require repeated site surveys and repeated negotiation with carpenters and bamboo craftsmen, are hard to bring off without ample time on the ground.

Time is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. It settles whether a commissioner can stay; whether the work can actually be done depends on whether the village has a smooth organizational interface.

3.2 Three-tier Coordination and the Organizational Condition

Formerly, for a school to cooperate with a village it had to approach different local government departments level by level, which meant high coordination costs and considerable loss in the intermediate stages. The cultural commissioner system has built an organizational structure of tiered management that runs from top to bottom: the provincial level is responsible for policy-making and overall coordination, the municipal level for coordination within the municipality, and the county and township levels for responsibilities within their jurisdiction; regular meetings promote resource sharing and project cooperation, and project funds for provincial, municipal and county-level commissioners are earmarked for dedicated use[3]. A matching mechanism led by the publicity department with the cooperation of relevant departments has taken shape almost everywhere, so that commissioners need not waste energy on securing policy support and venues.

On top of this structure, Ninghai guides commissioners to combine art and design with village

renovation by drawing on the natural grain and cultural endowments of their host villages[4]. For an outside force entering a village, whether the supporting conditions needed for implementation can be obtained quickly often decides whether a project stays on paper or grows in the ground. What three-tier coordination settles is whether an outside force can get in and settle down; whether what settles down is what villagers actually want is a further gateway the system has yet to pass.

3.3 The Demand Loop and the Motivational Condition

In some university rural cultural projects the ideas come from the artistic imagination of teachers and students rather than from the real needs of villagers' daily life, and once a project is finished participation remains limited. The cultural commissioner system places people's needs at the front end, and in practice Ninghai has worked out a service chain in which "villagers place orders, the government dispatches them, and commissioners take them up"[4].

The first link is demand identification. In Wangfu Village the commissioner learned that villagers were quite keen on singing Yue opera and dancing in the square, and that what they lacked was professional guidance[13]; in Hehong Village the commissioner found retired music teachers, local singers and a group of music lovers hidden away, and took these "musical talents" as the opening for activating local resources[14]. The second link is resource matching, in which the county publicity department, together with the dispatching institutions, makes a two-way match between village endowments and commissioners' expertise, and then uses project letters of commitment to clarify the boundaries of responsibility among the three parties[2]. The third link is implementation: when the county commissioner Tong Feixia led the "cultural mutual visit" gala in Hehong Village, she and her team adopted an order-based service, visiting villagers in advance to collect programme requests, and the programmes finally presented carried a strong flavour of everyday life[14]. Villager satisfaction became the practical yardstick of effectiveness, which in turn obliges commissioners to put villagers' feelings first.

4. Collaborative Pathways: Four Models of University-Village Cultural Collaboration in Ninghai

Over two years Ninghai has grown four comparatively clear collaborative paths, falling respectively on space, talent, industry and brand. They are not four parallel tracks so much as four knots in one net: spatial renovation provides a venue for talent cultivation, cultural teams provide hands for industrial operation, and industrial returns in turn support the maintenance of brands and spaces. They are discussed separately below for ease of observation; in practice they are often entwined within a single village.

4.1 Spatial Symbiosis: Professional Forces in the Renewal of Rural Public Space

Rural public space is at once the physical carrier of local cultural inheritance and the main field of villagers' everyday cultural activities. In many villages such space has long stood idle and lost its cultural character; at the same time, programmes in art and design and in architecture have strong renovation capabilities, and the many dormant, idle spaces in the countryside offer teachers and students a real site of practice. Linked by the commissioner, the two sides form a collaborative chain of spatial diagnosis, minor renovation and operational empowerment[9].

The approach taken in Nanxi Village, Shenzhen Township, is representative. Drawing on hot-spring resources, Duan Hongjiao turned a long-idle patch of wasteland at the village entrance into a base integrating culture and tourism. She did not pursue expensive materials or extravagant forms: gravel was laid for paths, and stone, bamboo and wood were used as found. Today the place

has become a well-known new rural landmark[4]. Ren Tian in Ruo'ao Village, Yishi Town, took another route: without damaging the cluster of Ming and Qing buildings, he inserted a mainly bamboo-based minor renovation, so that the bamboo-woven installation "Rocking Canopy" at the village entrance became a place for children to play, and the creative installation inside the Zhigui Study House drew many visitors[4].

Further still is the linking of one node to another. After completing the work in Nanxi Village, Duan Hongjiao joined with neighbouring villages to create eight themed cultural courtyards—hot-spring culture, imperial-examination culture and others—stringing previously isolated village spaces into a chain of public cultural space; over two years Ninghai carried out more than 30 minor artistic renovation projects in all[4]. What is commendable about these spaces lies in their order of priority: they open first to the villagers themselves and only then to visitors, rather than being made into internet-famous attractions cut off from villagers' lives. Space is a carrier, not an end, and whether it will be used and maintained over the long term depends on whether the village has a cultural team that can stay.

4.2 Talent Co-cultivation: Two-way Cultivation of Local Arts Teams and Professional Forces

What rural cultural revitalization lacks most is people. Unless a village can cultivate an arts team that cannot be taken away, projects brought in from outside are hard to sustain over time. The commissioner acts here as a hub: at one end, professional resources are brought down and local arts backbones are trained hands-on; at the other end, the village's cultural practice in turn nourishes the local experience and practical ability of professionals.

The most visible result is the teams themselves. In Wangfu Village, Yuelong Subdistrict, the municipal commissioner Miao Jing built a "villagers' open mic" around "opera contests and song competitions", making villagers the protagonists on stage[13]; villager Sun Li thus moved from the audience to the stage and won applause in a county-level performance with a song entitled "The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau"[4]. The continuity of opera teams is especially clear: Hu Qiongqiong, stationed in Zhehuyang Village, Qiantong Town, brought out three village-level opera teams within two months, and in September 2026 three stages lit up at the same time as villagers turned from onlookers into performers[15]. Earlier, in Xujia Village, which had been relocated as a whole, Hu Qiongqiong rebuilt the Xu Family Luantan troupe that had been disbanded for more than 40 years, and in June 2026 launched Ninghai's first original "village tribute", Wind Rises over Xixi, in which 120 villagers performed their village's past on stage[16].

Across the county as a whole, commissioners at all levels ran nearly 300 specialised training sessions and brought out more than 20 local cultural teams such as Zoushu storytelling, Sankeng tunes and Daoqing[4]. Cultivation is not one-way: professional forces pass on skills and also draw living local experience from villagers, and for art programmes in universities these village needs are themselves real problems for practice-based teaching and graduation projects. Building a team is only the first step; training subsidies and local sentiment can support it for a while but not for long, and culture only truly takes root when it begins to generate returns of its own.

4.3 Industrial Co-prosperity: Cultural and Creative Transformation Turning Cultural Resources into Value

If cultural revitalization stops at the spiritual level it is hard to sustain; only when it lands in returns that villagers can feel does cultural work gain lasting endogenous momentum. In Nanzhuang Village, Yuexi Township, the county commissioner Hu Xiaojie drew on mudflat resources and the local fishing-and-farming heritage to help launch two experience projects—Nanzhuang printmaking and the mudflat hobby-horse ride—which brought more than 2,000 visitors in the first year and

pushed village collective income past 100,000 yuan[4]. Ye Hanxiu in Xiweng Village, Huchen Township, focused on study tourism, stringing together nodes such as the potato workshop and the potato park into an immersive village[4]. Tong Feixia in Hehong Village, Meilin Subdistrict, "used music as a thread to link up longevity culture"; over two years she staged more than 40 public performances including village galas and culture-and-tourism carnivals, online readership passed five million, the number of businesses in the village rose from nine to eighteen, more than 400,000 visitors came in 2025, and village collective income grew by 600,000 yuan[14].

The significance of these figures goes beyond the increase in income itself. They have done something to alter the entrenched assumption that "culture is a business that only spends money": high-quality local cultural resources, transformed through professional creativity, can become a real competitive strength that raises villagers' incomes and enriches the village collective. What industrial co-prosperity settles is the monetisation of cultural resources, yet the scale of that monetisation is limited by the reach of a single village; whether rural culture can achieve stable market bargaining power depends on the degree of integration of regional public brands.

4.4 Brand Co-building: Cross-regional Integration of a Local Public Cultural Brand

The reach of a cultural project in a single village is limited after all. Only by integrating the distinctive resources scattered across villages into a unified regional public cultural brand can overall communicative power be raised. In September 2026 a mutual-visit exchange performance by cultural commissioners from four places—Ninghai, Zhenhai, Cixi and Yuyao—was staged in Zhehuyang Village, Qiantong Town, Ninghai County; thirteen selected programmes appeared in turn, including the local operas of eastern Zhejiang such as Ninghai Pingdiao, Yao opera, Shao opera, Yue opera, Hu opera and Yong opera, and the regional opera brand "Stars Shine over Siming: Ninghai Has Opera" was thereby launched[17]. The brand was initiated by the Publicity Department of the Ninghai County Party Committee, building on the public-benefit performance brand of Ningbo's cultural commissioners also named "Stars Shine over Siming". With the cultural commissioner system as its driver, it brings into play the county cultural centre, the county Pingdiao Art Heritage Centre and the county Dramatists Association, invites folk artists to teach on site and organises village-level opera teams, and plans to build more than 18 distinctive stages—"under the tree", "by the stream", "at the wharf" and others—across the county within two years[15].

A branded distinctive scene is another form, whose mark is that space itself is shaped into a cultural marker. At the old wharf of Xue'ao in Qiangjiao Town, the provincial commissioner Xu Jing'er, a national first-class performer with the Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe, turned an idle wharf into an "opera wharf", opened opera classes and polished local performers; within three months the long-silent wharf had gathered popular attention again, and the people of this fishing village changed from spectators watching from below the stage into protagonists singing on it[18]. Stages are thus set up under old trees, beside streams and on village squares, and the scattered cultural highlights of individual villages are aggregated into an overall brand advantage; with short videos and live streaming added, the reach goes far beyond the scene itself.

When the four paths reach a particular village they often occur in overlapping fashion. Liyang Village in Liyang Town, eastern Ninghai, is one example: the two-year residency of a university teacher as cultural commissioner touched on all four levels at once. Liyang Village was first established in the Tang dynasty, and 17 Ming and Qing buildings survive there; the "Five-Gate Mansion" covers about 2,500 square metres. In 2014 the village was listed as a Chinese traditional village; in 2018 the children's writer Xue Ye returned to his ancestral home and founded in an old house the country's first children's poetry research centre, after which markers such as the China Children's Poetry Annual Meeting and the "Gaicang Mountain Cup" national children's poetry

competition successively settled there[19]. In June 2024 Huang Xiaohua, associate professor at the School of Design, NingboTech University, took up residence in Liyang Village as one of Ningbo's first cultural commissioners. Once there he first mapped the distribution of old houses, the distillery and paper-cutting skills, then opened a "travelling artists' classroom" that brought aesthetic education to children, and guided graduates to treat the lanes and courtyards as material for their graduation designs[20]. The synergy reached industry as well: the team helped the Liyang Distillery, a Chinese time-honoured brand, to sort out the cultural idea of its "Six Essentials of Winemaking" and brought in e-commerce resources to advance digital marketing. In June 2026 the graduation exhibition "Painting Dreams in the Fields, Building Realms with Youth" was held in the village, where a student project entitled "Reconstructing a Wine-Tourism Cultural Space Based on the Five Senses" wove sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch into a touring narrative, and the School at the same time conferred on the village a plaque designating it a practice-based teaching base[20]. After his term ended, Huang Xiaohua returned to Liyang Village as a "cultural volunteer"[21]. The thread suggests that once stable trust and shared goals are established between professional forces from a university and a village, collaboration may reach beyond the temporal boundary of the residency system.

5. Conclusion: From Phased Residency to Long-term Symbiosis

Two years of practice in Ninghai show that institutionally driven university-village collaboration has already displayed vitality. As the two-year residency of the first cohort draws to a close, how to sustain the results and how to keep projects already on the ground from stalling once the people leave have become unavoidable questions.

In terms of results, the collaboration has by and large completed a leap from "external input" to "endogenous cultivation". In the density of resources delivered, three-level projects and special funds have extended from the county centre to mountain villages and resettlement villages; in the depth of participation, villagers have turned from recipients of culture into its creators, with more than 20 local arts teams cultivated county-wide and ten intangible cultural heritage items placed under list-based protection[4]; in the breadth of influence, the music-based cultural tourism of Hehong Village and "Stars Shine over Siming: Ninghai Has Opera" have pushed village highlights to a cross-municipal reach. Comparatively weak is the length of durability: the sediment deposited so far relies largely on the emotional commitment and sense of responsibility of individual commissioners, and a stable organizational twining mechanism between university schools and administrative villages has not yet been fully established.

Three paths can therefore be taken up. The first is to upgrade individual residency into organizational twinning, encouraging the schools concerned to sign long-term co-building agreements with administrative villages, so that after one commissioner's term ends subsequent commissioners, young teachers and student practice teams can carry on with the same village. Ninghai already has some initial experience: Hehong Village has brought in a market-based operating team to take part in whole-village operation, Nanzhuang Village keeps its culture-and-tourism returns within the village collective, and the commissioner serves in the role of interpreter and facilitator[4].

The second is to translate practical experience into courses and outputs. A great deal of vivid rural practice should not remain at the project level alone; it should be systematically translated into distinctive courses, teaching cases and academic outputs, with the countryside treated as an important classroom for national-condition education, artistic practice and the popularisation of aesthetic education[10]. By moving graduation design into the old village for "real problems, real solutions" and having the School designate a practice-based teaching base there, Liyang Village has

already found the way to such curricular translation[20]. For design disciplines, a site of this kind provides both genuine problems and a measure for assessing the social value of students' work.

The third is to rebuild a relatively equal cultural relationship between city and countryside. Previously cultural resources mostly flowed one way, from village to city; now professional forces go down with creativity and skills, and the new value created flows back to the city through cultural-tourism integration and digital communication. Whether this loop can be closed determines whether the collaboration is an expedient or a lasting arrangement. As for what kind of village each of the four paths suits, more cases will be needed to put the question to the test.

This paper has drawn on the author's practical experience to conduct village surveys and project tracking, yet the collaborative process is still under way; long-term quantitative measurement and multi-case comparison are both lacking, and judgements about the conditions in which the four models apply inevitably carry an inferential element. If subsequent research can introduce a control group, or track the same group of villages over three to five years, it will be of greater value to the improvement of the cultural commissioner system.

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