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New quality productivity: an empirical study of service design as a new driving force for rural revitalization

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Abstract
Globalization and technological advancements have increasingly become key drivers of economic and social progress. Service design, emphasizing user experience and interdisciplinary collaboration, significantly enhances service quality and user satisfaction. Recently, the comprehensive implementation of the rural revitalization strategy has made the effective application of service design in rural development a noteworthy research topic. This study uses Huangjinjing Village, Hunan Province as a case study to examine the sustainable impact of service design on rural revitalization, beginning with the inherent values and backgrounds of traditional villages. The objective is to devise innovative mechanisms for rural development, leveraging design to create sustainable and livable villages, thus advancing rural revitalization towards a new phase of scientific progress.

Keywords: Labour education; rural revitalization; college and university talents; practice

1. Introduction
On the afternoon of March 5, 2024, during the review of the Jiangsu delegation at the second session of the 14th National People’s Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of prioritizing high-quality development and developing new productive forces suitable for local conditions. “The development of new productive forces is an intrinsic requirement and a crucial focus for promoting high-quality development. We must continue to excel in innovation to accelerate the development of new productive forces.”

On January 31, 2024, during the 11th collective study session of the Politburo, General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered an important speech that systematically explained the scientific connotation of new productive forces from both theoretical and practical perspectives. He
profoundly highlighted the significance of developing new productive forces and set forth clear requirements for their development. The 2024 Central Document No. 1 emphasized “promoting the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas as the overarching task for the ‘three rural’ work in the new era and new journey” and stressed the need to “enhance the level of rural industrial development.” Productivity is the fundamental driving force for the development of enterprises and industries. New productive forces provide scientific guidance for accelerating technological innovation, promoting rural revitalization, and driving high-quality development in the new era and new journey.

The rural revitalization strategy is a national strategy to address the shortcomings in the modernization of agriculture and rural areas. This strategy aims to achieve coordinated and comprehensive development of rural society, economy, and the natural environment through systematic engineering. It has significant historical importance for consolidating and expanding the achievements of poverty alleviation, fully building a moderately prosperous society, and constructing a modern socialist country. Design, as a form of social productivity, is crucial for promoting rural revitalization. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, “Scientific planning yields the greatest benefits”, and emphasized that the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy should adhere to planning first, proceed in an orderly manner, focus on quality, and build steadily. Through original design, the integration of the primary, secondary, and tertiary industries can be accelerated, and the resources of rural history, culture, agricultural products, and traditional architecture can be integrated to achieve the goals of ecological livability, industrial prosperity, and increased income for farmers, thereby comprehensively promoting rural revitalization. However, how to effectively integrate design into the rural revitalization strategy is an issue that designers need to deeply contemplate.

2. Rural Revitalization and Service Design

2.1 Rural Revitalization

Rural revitalization is a major strategy of the Party and the state, requiring unwavering implementation across the nation. As contemporary young scholars and participants in the construction of beautiful rural areas, it is essential to understand the background, purpose, methods, measures, and significance of rural revitalization. The most important aspect of rural revitalization is to boost confidence and morale. It should be approached from the perspective of national strategy and grounded in the needs of the people, as the broad masses are the main participants and builders of rural revitalization. Most issues of rural revitalization should be viewed from the standpoint of serving and being rooted in the people. In “From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society”, Fei Xiaotong mentioned, “At the grassroots level, Chinese society has a strong rural nature”. For a society to develop well, it requires a suitable relationship between the distribution of production factors, including individual harmony, stable interpersonal relationships, and the symbiosis between humans and nature. Land, as one of the key production factors, is the source of wealth, the foundation of agriculture, and the reliance of farmers. In the process of rural development, land issues have become prominent, with frequent land disputes hindering rural development and social stability. Since 2005, the state has implemented a village consolidation policy aimed at
adjusting township structures, rationally planning, and governing the rural environment. With the advancement of national policies, rural revitalization has become a new wave. Local governments and various industries are exploring new paths for rural revitalization. However, many problems have been encountered in this process: often imitating the practices of other regions, building a batch of identical small Western-style houses, neglecting the core of rural revitalization—villagers’ lifestyles; blindly pursuing short-term economic benefits by planning tourism commercial projects that destroy the uniqueness of the countryside, leading to a homogeneous appearance of villages; and overemphasizing material aspects while ignoring the spiritual needs of the remaining population when implementing the beautiful rural revitalization plan. Pan Lusheng, Vice Chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, proposed the concept of “designing for people’s livelihood” and the proposition of “designing for the service of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers.” He believes that by participating in rural revitalization through service design, livelihoods can be improved, livelihood channels can be broadened, and residents’ quality of life can be enhanced, thereby contributing greater strength to the revitalization of beautiful rural areas. Therefore, in the current wave of rural revitalization, formulating scientific service design strategies is particularly important.

2.2 Service Design

The deepening social division of labor has given rise to a comprehensive service design industry. As an interdisciplinary field, service design solves complex problems through cross-disciplinary collaborative innovation, aiming to improve products, systems, services, and experiences. Exploring how to use creative design to empower rural areas, clarify their development ideas, optimize their production and living ecological spaces, and enhance the environmental awareness and living environment of rural residents is key to realizing the rural revitalization strategy. Design views problems as opportunities and proposes new solutions for the future. By integrating creativity, technology, service, market, and users, design creates new competitive advantages and value in economic and social fields. Service design is no longer just about providing services and products; it also deeply addresses social and livelihood issues. Rural revitalization involves multiple factors and various interests, making it a complex social issue. Facing such issues, service design, with its interdisciplinary collaborative nature, connects different fields, investigates social needs, and coordinates resources, becoming an important driving force in the formation of solutions for rural revitalization and providing innovative momentum for the revitalization of beautiful rural areas.

3. Design Issues Urgently Needing Resolution in Rural Development

Rural areas are continuously evolving entities. In ancient times, rural landscapes were stable and uniform, remaining relatively backward for long periods. Since the founding of New China, the rapid development of the social economy has thoroughly disrupted the millennia-old stable state of rural areas. Today’s rural areas, having undergone thousands of years of evolution, reflect the ongoing changes in natural processes and social demands and their interactions. Since 2005, the state has implemented a village consolidation policy aimed
at adjusting township structures, rational planning, and managing the rural environment. In the same year, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee proposed the task of building a new socialist countryside, specifying requirements such as “developed production, ample living standards, civilized rural customs, clean and tidy villages, and effective management”, with “beautiful countryside” established as a key construction goal. In 2017, the state proposed the “rural revitalization” strategy, and in February 2018, a series of implementation opinions and policies were announced. During the implementation of these policies and plans, the disconnect between planning and execution and the contradictions in rural cultural development gradually became apparent.

Currently, the decline of rural culture and arts has become a reality. The survival space for historical and widely participated intangible cultural heritage activities is shrinking, and the spread of urban culture is accelerating rural hollowing out. Changes in the spatial and organizational structure of traditional villages, villager relationships, labor patterns, and lifestyles have led to a state of “cultural adaptation” and “cultural stress” in modern rural cultural systems. The lack of mature structural connections between rural and urban cultures during the transition period threatens the continuity of rural culture. In the process of “new rural construction”, some grand planning concepts pose threats to the structure, spatial layout, traditional appearance, and local arts of rural areas. However, new rural construction also provides opportunities for protecting and inheriting rural cultural arts. The social responsibility and awareness of giving back to society through rural construction arts, along with collaborative efforts from various forces, are crucial for restoring rural social order and cultural ecological balance, addressing the urgent need for reconstructing rural cultural ecology in the new era.

In the process of rural revitalization, shaping the living environment requires the participation of multiple design service fields, including environmental art, planning design, landscape design, architectural design, and visual communication design. This involves comprehensive design from residential spaces, rural landscapes, and public entertainment spaces to the spatial planning of entire villages, road network organization, land use and business distribution, and environmental guidance systems. Through the communication of art design, the new era’s rural cultural ecology can be improved and restored, rural cultural vitality can be reignited, and the multidimensional and systematic construction of cultural and artistic empowerment can be promoted.

4. Practical Paths for Service Design in Rural Revitalization
4.1 Forming Service Teams

Huangjinjing Village is located in the south-central part of Jinshiqiao Town, Longhui County, Hunan Province. It was formed by the merger of two natural villages, Luogongwan Village and Juhe Village, in 2016. It is now recognized as a provincial-level rural revitalization demonstration village, a municipal-level civilized village, and a county-level beautiful home demonstration village. However, issues of unclear land boundaries left over from the early stages of the merger still affect the relationships among villagers.

The project team, with a background in service design from universities, is a design institution that extends services beyond the campus. Building on years of public welfare and
educational assistance, the team introduced a new model of international cooperation and formed an interdisciplinary service design volunteer team to carry out a series of service design attempts. The goal is to address common rural development issues such as lack of scientific planning, executable plans, and specific problems like the loss of belonging after the merger, bottlenecks in cultural and tourism development, and limitations in the inheritance and innovation of intangible cultural heritage. Activities include in-depth research, holding seminars with the village committee and management committee, providing design support for village environment beautification, and participating in folk activities. Through nearly a year of immersive experience and construction participation, the project team explored a systematic model utilizing the integration of human resources in village mergers to resolve material resource disputes, focusing on the practice model of “co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits” to bridge community divides and achieve harmonious governance. The model was validated through a series of activities over the next six months.

After understanding the environmental improvement needs of Huangjinjing Village, the project team designed a series of environmental improvement schemes for the village, such as “Happy Courtyard” and “Beautiful Water Village”. During the design research, it was found that although the villages had merged into a new administrative village, conflicts over land boundaries from the original natural villages caused disputes and low recognition of the new Huangjinjing Village. The project team’s design aimed to improve the living environment of Huangjinjing Village, enhance the identity of the original natural villages with the new Huangjinjing Village, and guide villagers to realize the importance of unity and cooperation in village mergers for development.

4.2 Service Design Methods
During the period of the original natural villages, the two villages had conflicts over land boundaries, leading to a lack of interaction between the villages. Leveraging the transportation and locational advantages of Huangjinjing Village, the project team designed a new project at the village entrance (the original Luogongwan Village stele). This project involved the participation of villagers from the original Luogongwan Village, Juhe Village, and public welfare designers. Through extensive research and visits, the project team gained a comprehensive understanding of the development status of Huangjinjing Village and clarified the functional positioning of public spaces. The volunteer team organized multiple design schemes based on villagers’ intentions, adjusted according to feedback, and obtained the support of village cadres and villagers. During construction, the project team encouraged students to communicate and learn with local craftsmen to improve the plan, ensuring the project’s smooth progress. This plan demonstrated how to create an environment recognized by villagers through low-cost strategies in economically underdeveloped rural areas while preserving rural characteristics.

Through environmental beautification schemes such as “Happy Courtyard” and “Beautiful Water Village”, the team improved and managed village settlements and rivers. The aim was to enhance the sense of belonging of villagers from the original natural villages to Huangjinjing Village and their hope for the new development of their hometown through environmental improvement and management. Over the course of a year, the team visited
Huangjinjing Village three times. The places were well-maintained and highly utilized, indicating that villagers could manage and cherish their locations properly. More importantly, village cadres stated that the co-construction activities promoted relationships and cooperation among villagers and between villagers and village cadres.

The team proposed regular village gala events and successfully held the first event on August 30, 2022, led by public welfare designers. The project team hoped to enhance interpersonal communication and alleviate grievances in the new home through ways that villagers loved. Multiple observations and return visits showed that this project addressed fundamental issues, eliminated boundary feelings, alleviated resource scarcity, expanded the sharing of economic and social benefits, and achieved a win-win situation by evoking the common desire of original residents to improve their homes, recognize traditional culture, and live harmoniously.

Through a series of measures under the theme “co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits”, the happiness of villagers in the new Huangjinjing Village improved, promoting unity among people and constructing a positive rural development environment.

4.3 Ensuring Service Design
The Xiangyang Zhudream Public Welfare Service Design Team is dedicated to solving rural issues by forming a professional team of public welfare service designers. They provide services including rural service design, construction, and promotion. Team members come from fields such as architecture, landscape architecture, environmental art, public art, and water supply and drainage, mainly responsible for scheme design, rendering production, text writing, construction drawing, and post-construction. The core scientific research team is responsible for applying for funds, enhancing concepts, and building systems to ensure the practical implementation and research depth of service design.

5. Case Study of Xiangyang Zhudream Service Design
Attached are images of the co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits pilot program in Longhui County, Hunan Province.

6. Conclusion
Art has always faithfully recorded the evolution of human consciousness, reflecting the relationship between humans and daily life at various historical moments. The development of things follows the law of “progressing in waves and rising in spirals”. The project team should acknowledge the roots of rural art (i.e., production landscapes and living landscapes), confront the deficiencies present in the early stages of transformation, and continuously promote the innovation and restoration of rural culture. Guided by the principle of “teaching a man to fish rather than giving him a fish”, the project team must also enhance and affirm the villagers’ initiative. This approach can promote the integration of aesthetics and functionality, tradition and modernity, and urban and rural areas, striving to awaken the hidden yet vibrant aesthetic genes within the village and involve them in the generation and reconstruction of contemporary aesthetic experiences.
Only by deeply integrating service design into the entire process of rural revitalization can the project team achieve the goal of promoting high-quality rural development. The purpose of serving rural revitalization is not merely to protect cultural heritage, nor is it solely for the sake of service design itself, and it is certainly not just for urban tourists. It is genuinely for the benefit of the rural areas and the villagers. Under the guidance of service design strategies, designers should improve the environment based on the true characteristics of the rural areas, enhance their environmental appeal and cultural quality, re-establish the connection between the rural areas and people, and achieve harmonious development of the living environment, natural ecology, and commercial environment, thereby invigorating the rural areas.

Rural revitalization is a complex and extensive systemic project that concerns the material
and spiritual, production and living aspects of the broad masses of people and involves many aspects of economic and social development. The author summarizes it into four categories: skin, fur, root, and essence, which can also be understood as external and internal categories for simplicity. Everything attached to the surface of rural society can be classified as superficial appearances. The good ones are integrated, and vice versa. Roots and essence are also present in the rural society, embodied by the villagers and their hearts. Admittedly, these appearances can be natural or man-made. It is not difficult to see that all things constructed and transformed by humans have human attributes and a certain universality and significance of existence. Therefore, the quality of superficial appearances has a direct and inevitable relationship with their roots and essence, forming a complementary structure once again.

In summary, to address the urgent issues existing in the current rural society, relevant personnel need to diagnose and prescribe remedies through observation, inquiry, and analysis. Contemporary young scholars have the obligation and responsibility to start from their hearts, within their capabilities, and through their professional knowledge, to contribute their love, ignite fervent hope, and warm endless aspirations.

Note
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