

ARTICLE

Research on the mutual contribution of higher arts education to rural cultural revitalization

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 23 December 2025

Accepted: 24 December 2025

Published Online: 30 December 2025

Keywords:

Rural cultural revitalization

Higher education in the arts

Popular culture

Ethno-socio-aesthetics

Foreigner effect

Field research

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of national strategies for smart village development and rural cultural revitalization, this study focuses on the fundamental role of higher arts education. Rural literacy, as an indicator of improved cultural literacy, has expanded its scope to encompass a multidimensional cultural perception that embraces audiovisual and experiential dimensions. Drawing on the artistic practices of popular culture, this article explores how higher education in the arts can transcend the traditional transmission of knowledge and economic empowerment. It examines how such education can respond profoundly to the spiritual nourishment needs of rural residents on their path to material prosperity, particularly through the transmission and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) skills. The central research question is: in the context of smart villages and expanded rural reading initiatives, how can higher education in the arts achieve aesthetic healing and functional social reconstruction of rural communities through popular artistic practices, thereby realizing a dual revitalization of material and spiritual dimensions?

The research methodology employs field surveys in the ancient town of Yongning and case studies of participatory practice course activities. Drawing on ethnosociology, the theory of strangeness, and the theory of aesthetic healing, the study examines three dimensions: the social field, innovative methodology, and fundamental objectives. Using the practice of the ancient city of Yongning as a case study, it addresses how higher education in the arts can achieve deep reciprocity in rural cultural revitalization through aesthetic healing pathways. This research aims to reveal the unique value of higher education in the arts in promoting mental well-being within rural communities, repairing social relationships, and rebuilding cultural identity. It also provides theoretical foundations and practical guidance for creating sustainable models of rural cultural revitalization.

Introduction

The integration of rural reading with the arts is not only a fundamental means of raising the cultural literacy of villagers, but also the cornerstone for building a spiritual

homeland parallel to the material world^[1]. This process places unprecedented demands on the functions of art and art education, transforming it from a mere embellishment of life to a central force that reshapes the social fabric of rural communities, unites hearts and minds, and stimu-

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lates endogenous development. At the intersection of the aesthetics of ICH and the contemporary logic of knowledge production, understanding how higher education in the arts can support rural revitalization has become a topic of profound contemporary relevance. However, a review of current research reveals that, although the field of “art theory education promoting rural revitalization” has produced substantial results, its research dimensions remain relatively concentrated, leaving room for further expansion.

This study focuses primarily on the subjectivity of rural “people,” addressing in particular deficiencies in mental well-being, social relationships, and community identity. It innovatively proposes “aesthetic healing” as a new dimension of research. Three sub-questions are explored: 1) How can the resources of higher arts education, applicable to rural cultural revitalization, be reexamined and integrated from a “healing” perspective? 2) How can specific methods of higher arts education to give back to rural areas embody healing functions at the psychological, social, and ecological levels? 3) How can a long-term “localized” feedback mechanism focused on “aesthetic healing” be built, integrating curricula, platforms, talent, and dissemination?

1. Theoretical foundations and conceptual definitions for higher arts education in rural cultural revitalization

This study will draw on three theoretical frameworks—ethno-socio-aesthetics, the theory of strangeness, and the theory of aesthetic healing—to clearly define the fundamental concepts (rural cultural revitalization, higher arts education).

1.1. Rural cultural revitalization and higher education in arts studies

Rural cultural revitalization is a multidimensional concept. It encompasses not only the preservation and transmission of traditional culture, such as the excavation of ICH such as the “bamboo horse game” in the ancient city of Yongning^[2], but also means an endogenous capacity for cultural regeneration.

Higher education in arts studies is considered a key external variable and an enabling agent for achieving rural cultural revitalization. It serves not only as a cradle for the training of professional artistic talents, but also as a comprehensive platform that integrates knowledge production, social service, and cultural leadership. Its role in rural revitalization has evolved from the traditional one-way model of “bringing culture to the countryside” to a mod-

el of deep interaction characterized by “residency-based creation,” “participatory design,” and “collaborative co-construction.” As a result, its paths of reciprocity have become more complex and profound.

1.2. Ethnic-social art studies and popular cultural fields

Professor Liang Jiu, founder of “Aesthetic Criticism Studies,” offers a fundamental theoretical perspective through his framework of ethnic-social art studies to understand artistic activities within the specific social field of the countryside (Liang Jiu, 2020). This theory emphasizes that all artistic phenomena are deeply rooted in the social structures and cultural contexts of their respective communities. Art is not just an individualized aesthetic expression, but rather a vehicle for social relations, group identity, and cultural memory.

In the case of the ancient town of Yongning, this implies that we cannot consider the “bamboo horse game” solely as an art form. Instead, it must be understood as a vital practice that sustains the historical memory and social interactions of the Yongning community. Through rehearsals and performances, villagers not only perpetuate an art form, but also revisit shared histories and reaffirm neighborhood ties. This creates an intriguing dialogue with Fei Xiaotong’s theory of the “differential social model.” Traditional rural societies formed interpersonal networks according to this model, linked by kinship and locality. However, under the impact of modernization, this structure has gradually loosened. Studies on the arts of ethnic communities prompt us to reflect: can public artistic practices rooted in popular culture, such as the collective staging of Bamboo Horse, Green Plum, organized with university teachers and students, create new “community bonds”? Can they establish a “community of shared aesthetic experience” or a “community of artistic connection” beyond traditional hierarchical structures? This provides a theoretical basis for understanding how art can repair and rebuild rural social relations.

1.3. The “Verfremdungseffekt” and innovative approaches to revitalizing ICH

The theory of the “alienation effect” (Verfremdungseffekt), originally proposed by German playwright Bertolt Brecht to break theatrical illusion and stimulate critical engagement by the audience, produces unexpected value when creatively applied to the revitalization of rural ICH. For the villagers of Yongning, the “bamboo horse game” is such a common and taken-for-granted cultural tradition that its very familiarity may have diminished its vitality

for analysis and appreciation.

Higher education intervention in artistic studies aims precisely to cultivate a “defamiliarized” perspective. For example, when theater arts students adapted this folk custom in the light comedy Bamboo Horse, Green Plum [3], they used modern dramatic narrative structures, character development, and theatrical techniques. By placing familiar elements in a new context, they rediscovered the aesthetic value, cultural significance, and relevance of bamboo horse theater. Similarly, digital media students who document bamboo horse activities through the lens “defamiliarize” an everyday productive activity, giving it ritual significance and aesthetic value. This “defamiliarization” in artistic practice is a fundamental methodological approach to stimulating endogenous innovative vitality within rural culture. It avoids the simple replication of tradition, instead activating the capacity for reflection and recreation of villagers as cultural agents through creative “alienation”.

1.4. Aesthetic healing and reconstruction of spiritual homelands

This study aims to construct and apply a basic theoretical framework. As mentioned above, drawing inspiration from Guo Xiao’s interview with Cao Xiaoqiao (Guo Xiao, 2024), this research introduces the concept of “art therapy.” It comprises three levels. First, individual psychological healing. Artistic creation activities target specific groups within rural communities (such as the elderly and children left behind). For example, participation in theatrical performances provides an emotional outlet, helping them to build self-confidence, combat loneliness, and discover a sense of self-worth. This directly responds to the spiritual “nurturing” needs of rural society. Secondly, healing community relationships. Participatory and collaborative artistic practices are organized to address issues such as the erosion of neighborhood ties and the decline of community life within rural societies, resulting from population migration and changing lifestyles. For example, the Mid-Autumn Lantern Festival “Dushān Night Moon” sees villagers collectively crafting lanterns and participating in garden performances—a process that itself serves as a “bonding agent” for community relations. Third, cultural identity healing. Addressing the potential cultural inferiority and identity crises rural residents may face amid globalization and urbanization, Through artistic education, local cultural resources—such as Yongning’s bamboo horses, tofu, and Great Wall heritage—undergo aesthetic refinement and value reassessment. Presenting these through high-quality artistic works—like stage plays, design products, and documentary films—signifi-

cantly boosts villagers’ cultural pride and identity. When residents witness their culture being respected, appreciated, and creatively revitalized, a profound healing of cultural identity unfolds.

2. Resources and pathways for higher arts education in the service of rural cultural revitalization

Higher arts education and rural cultural revitalization, though seemingly distinct, are inextricably linked in contemporary development. Higher education institutions have specialized faculty and academic resources that enable systematic field investigations, historical verification, and theoretical interpretations of rural cultural heritage. In the case of the ancient town of Yongning, faculty and students from the art academy first immersed themselves in the field. Through interviews, archival research, and visual documentation, they comprehensively traced the historical origins, performance rituals, and current state of transmission of the “bamboo horse game.” This academic examination not only provided solid material for subsequent artistic creation, but more significantly, it conferred academic legitimacy and elevated the cultural value of this folk tradition. It transformed what was once considered a simple “country pastime” into a cultural treasure worthy of academic study and preservation.

2.1. Pathways for excavating and revitalizing cultural heritage: transforming “resources” into “capital”

In the case of the ancient city of Yongning, students and teachers from the performing arts program adapted the static, ritualized bamboo horse game into the light comedy Bamboo Horse · Green Plum. This adaptation not only aligns with the aesthetics of contemporary audiences, but also breathes new life into ancient ICH. After conducting research, digital media students transformed Yongning’s tofu production techniques and elements of the Great Wall cultural belt into visual symbols such as brand logos and cultural and creative products. Others digitally disseminated ICH narratives through documentary filmmaking, animation production, and game development. This not only expanded cultural dissemination channels but also attracted greater youth engagement, creating conditions for intergenerational transmission.

The essence of this approach lies in the use of artistic skills to transcend the “original” form of ICH. Through design, storytelling, and media recoding, it gives these traditions contemporary meaning, form, and value, thus achieving the transformative leap from “cultural resource”

to “cultural capital.”

2.2. The path to empowerment and added value of industrial integration: from “works of art” to “products”

Rural cultural revitalization provides practical foundations for higher arts education, enriches teaching resources, and stimulates creative inspiration. For cultural revitalization to be sustainable, it must find points of convergence with economic development. In this process, higher arts education plays the role of “designer” and “connector,” driving deep integration between culture and industry to achieve value multiplication.

Rural tourism is one of the most direct ways to monetize cultural assets. However, low-level rural tourism often remains confined to the “farm stay” stage. Artistic intervention can significantly elevate the quality and experiential value of rural tourism.

In Yongning, the 2024 Mid-Autumn Lantern Festival “Dushān Yèyuè” is a prime example. It was not simply a lantern exhibition, but an immersive cultural event that organically blended historical legends (such as the figure of Consort Wan) with lantern art, folk performances, and various other elements. Effective design not only enhances the visual appeal of a product, but also tells its underlying cultural narrative, thereby improving its added value and competitiveness in the market. This represents a fundamental step in extending arts education from “creating works” to “making products.” Technological advances have catalyzed new synergies between art and rural communities. Some examples:

- “Virtual city tours” developed using digital media technology
- Virtual cultural spaces built on game engines (e.g., the cultural impact of “Black Myth: Wukong” on Shanxi’s heritage)
- Sale of ICH handicrafts integrated with e-commerce livestreaming

2.3. Pathways for integration and educational collaboration: from “ivory towers” to “rural fields”

The countryside offers the broadest and most vivid practical basis and creative source for arts education. The summer practice program at the ancient city of Yongning is an exemplary initiative. This “localized” teaching not only provides students with knowledge and skills that go beyond textbooks, but, crucially, cultivates their deep understanding and sincere affection for rural China. This reciprocity should not be one-sided. While universities export talent and intellectual resources to rural areas, they

should also actively “import” wisdom from the countryside. For example, appointing inheritors of rural ICH and folk artists as guest lecturers or practical mentors allows their “mastery” and “orally transmitted” wisdom to enrich academic knowledge systems. At the same time, the creation of start-up support funds encourages and helps graduates to engage in rural cultural revitalization.

3. Examination of the current state of higher arts education contributing to rural cultural revitalization

In addition to the three traditional paths of cultural heritage revitalization, industrial integration, and education system alignment, this study proposes a new dimension of “aesthetic healing.” The aim is to focus attention on deeper and more fundamental aspects of rural revitalization: the health of people’s spiritual world and social relationships. Fieldwork in the ancient town of Yongning revealed numerous “symptoms” beneath the surface prosperity, where artistic practice inadvertently takes on the role of “healer.”

3.1 Practical challenges identified in the survey

Through in-depth interviews and participatory observations with villagers, we identified the following symptoms that require urgent “healing”: First, spiritual “emptiness.” A student from the Yongning area candidly observed: “Many elderly people remain in the ancient town of Yongning,” as young people predominantly seek work elsewhere, resulting in a loss of vitality in the village. These elderly people left behind face prolonged loneliness, a sense of diminished self-worth, and alienation from modern society. Their spiritual world, much like the emptied village, shows signs of “emptiness.” Material improvements cannot fully compensate for this spiritual emptiness. The second is relational fragmentation. Another local student observed, “Some villagers harbor conflicts they don’t know how to resolve.” This reflects how the strong kinship ties and geographic networks of traditional rural society have weakened or fragmented under the pressure of modern individualization and atomization. The estrangement between neighbors and the decline of public spirit have diminished community cohesion, making it increasingly difficult to resolve traditional conflicts. A third issue is cultural “loss of voice.” Despite possessing ICH such as the “Bamboo Horse Play,” many villagers, especially the younger generations, show little awareness of or identification with these traditions. Traditional culture has been gradually marginalized in daily life, existing in an awkward state where it “has stories to tell but cannot tell

them.” This cultural “loss of voice” directly manifests a decline in cultural confidence and is the main cause of the generational crisis in cultural transmission.

3.2 Artistic practice as a means of psychological healing: nourishing the spirit

In Yongning’s initiatives, this healing manifests itself through empowerment and the restoration of values, emotional expression and catharsis, experiences of flow, and the cultivation of positive psychology.

When older adults are invited to rehearse bamboo horse performances or serve as “cultural mentors” for student research, recounting the history of the ancient city, they cease to be passive recipients of care and instead become “experts” possessing unique knowledge and experience. This reversal of roles significantly elevates their sense of self-worth and dignity. Artistic practice provides them with a stage to showcase themselves and earn the respect of society. Artistic creation serves as a safe emotional “container.” For older adults who struggle to articulate their inner feelings or children oppressed by school pressures, role-playing in theatrical performances or focused engagement in crafts allows them to express and release emotions such as loneliness, anxiety, or joy in a constructive way, thus achieving psychological catharsis and balance. Whether learning a traditional craft or participating in group dances, people immersed in creative activities easily experience a state of “flow.” This increased concentration and enjoyment effectively counteract negative emotions, cultivate positive psychological qualities, and nourish the spirit with invaluable sustenance.

3.3 Participatory arts as catalysts for community healing: mending social networks

If individual healing represents a timely restoration, community healing constitutes a reconstruction at the surface level. Participatory arts create public spaces for interaction, generate collective memories and shared experiences, and foster dialogue and understanding between groups. They have powerful functions in repairing social relationships and building community identity. For example, public art projects such as rehearsals for theatrical performances with bamboo horses or preparations for mid-autumn lantern festivals provide villagers, who would otherwise lead separate lives, with a “pretext” and a “place” to come together and interact. These shared experiences of collective creation become valuable collective memories. University staff and students, local villagers, young people returning home, and visiting tourists: these diverse groups meeting and collaborating within an

artistic space inherently constitute a form of intercultural dialogue.

3.4. Local aesthetics as a path to healing cultural identity: reawakening “dormant” cultural confidence

The healing of cultural identity represents the highest level of aesthetic therapy. It concerns the way a community perceives itself and narrates its own history. The intervention of higher education in artistic studies can, through a perspective of “alienation,” help villagers rediscover and appreciate the value of their indigenous culture. Teachers and students specializing in art and design can distill the natural landscapes, architectural features, and folk customs of the ancient city of Yongning, elements of local aesthetics, into visual symbols and artistic works imbued with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities. Whether it is set designs for theatrical productions or models for cultural and creative products, this represents a “trendy” reinterpretation of local aesthetics. This allows villagers to recognize that their culture is not only “traditional”, but can also be “modern” and “beautiful.” Through theatrical productions, documentaries, and branded storytelling, artistic intervention has equipped the ancient city of Yongning with a contemporary “grammar” to articulate its cultural identity. This renewed narrative not only allows the local population to reconnect with their history, but also enables outsiders to understand and appreciate the area’s heritage. When a community is able to articulate its history to the world with clarity, confidence, and elegance, the healing of its cultural identity is largely accomplished.

4. Rebuilding the path: establishing a long-term mechanism for mutual enrichment based on aesthetic healing.

University programs serve as models for talent development and as a starting point for mutual enrichment initiatives. It is essential to promote the transformation of the curriculum system from “classroom-centered” to “field-centered” and from “knowledge-based” to “problem-based” and “healing-based.”

4.1. Localized integration and healing orientation

An interdisciplinary course cluster entitled “Research and Practice of Cultural Ecology in Ancient Cities” could be developed, integrating modules from design studies, theater and film studies, fine arts, and art theory. The design courses would undertake branding projects in Yongning; the theater courses would stage community theater productions; the theory courses would conduct oral histo-

ry research within the locality. Teaching, practical work, and assessment would all take place within this locality, achieving a deep integration between education and local development.

Course design could consciously incorporate “aesthetic healing” objectives. For example, in a “Community Arts” module, assessment criteria would go beyond the artistic merit of the final works to include social indicators such as the improvement of community relations during the project, the breadth and depth of villager participation, and positive impacts on specific groups (e.g., neglected elderly people). In the “Design Ethics” module, students could be guided to consider how their designs can avoid the pitfalls of consumerism, genuinely respect local cultural contexts, and meet community needs to achieve “therapeutic design.”

4.2. Creation of practical “integrated” and “symbiotic” platforms

Short-term summer internships or field trips struggle to generate a lasting impact. Existing designated institutions, such as “bases for party-building activities” or “bases for study tours,” could undergo structural improvements. By renting or renovating an unused courtyard within the village, a “university-community art workstation” or “rural aesthetic education workshop” could be created that integrates teaching, creation, exhibition, and exchange. This space could be managed on a rotating basis by graduate students or young teachers, regularly hosting art workshops, film screenings, and reading groups for villagers, thus becoming the village’s ever-active cultural center. In addition, the workstation could collaborate with village committees and local cultural tourism companies to undertake the design and planning of cultural projects, using the proceeds from the projects to support the platform’s daily operations and public utility activities. At the same time, the station could serve as an incubator and point of sale for students’ cultural and creative products, with a portion of the proceeds returned to participating villagers, fostering a virtuous circle of “cultural economy.”

4.3. Talent development: focusing on “two-way empowerment” and “value recognition”

People are at the heart of the feedback mechanism. We must dismantle the one-way mindset that “universities give and villages receive” and establish a talent development and interaction mechanism based on mutual empowerment and shared growth. For example, students could be tasked with producing an in-depth interview with an inheritor of ICH or independently organizing a community

event involving villagers. Witnessing firsthand how their efforts bring positive change to the village or community and seeing the smiles on the faces of the villagers gives a sense of accomplishment and purpose that cannot be achieved through classroom teaching alone. Higher education institutions should strongly emphasize the value and honor of dedicating oneself to rural revitalization through award ceremonies, publicity campaigns, and career guidance. This will guide students to align their personal development with national needs and social progress, considering service to rural communities as a meaningful and valuable life choice.

4.4. Balancing “empowerment” and “reflection” in digital communication

When spreading Yongning culture through new media platforms such as Douyin and Video Accounts, the emphasis should not be placed on students producing high-quality videos. Rather, the focus should be on teaching villagers how to use these tools, enabling them to become storytellers and ambassadors for the culture of their hometown. This empowerment through digital literacy has greater vitality than any promotional effort undertaken on their behalf. Digital dissemination risks making cultural symbols superficial and homogeneous. For example, the presentation of ancient towns in various regions on short video platforms is becoming increasingly similar. Higher education institutions need to integrate critical media theory into teaching, guiding students and villagers to reflect collectively: does our communication authentically reflect the cultural essence of Yongning? Is there an overly spectacular or entertainment-oriented approach to attract traffic? How can digital tools be leveraged for deeper and more distinctive cultural expression? This capacity for reflection serves as a counterweight that prevents rural culture from losing its identity in the digital tide.

5. Conclusion

Building on existing research on “art theory education promoting rural revitalization,” this study systematically reviews the underlying literature to identify four main research dimensions: cultural heritage revitalization, integrated industrial development, reflection on the education system, and macro-strategic implementation. Based on this, the study keenly identifies the insufficient attention of existing research to the actions of individuals, particularly the health of their spiritual world and social relationships, in rural revitalization. It creatively proposes “aesthetic healing and social construction” as a new dimension for examining the issue.

The findings reveal that higher education in arts studies can contribute far beyond the revitalization of ICH and the development of cultural tourism industries. Ultimately, to ensure that the concept of “aesthetic healing” takes root, this study proposes fundamental pathways for establishing a long-term reciprocal mechanism.

In summary, this research not only provides theoretical support and practical guidance on how higher education in the arts can serve the national rural revitalization strategy in a more profound and effective way, but also offers a solution centered on “beauty” as a path and “healing” as a goal to safeguard and rebuild our nation’s spiritual homeland during modernization. Future research could build on this foundation by developing an evaluation system that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the effectiveness of “aesthetic healing,” along with comparative studies of artistic intervention models in different types of rural communities.

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This research result is one of the interim results of the research project “Study on the Development Relationship of New Media Artistic Creation” (Contract No. JingLianYi (2024) 147).

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