

The Active Practice of Rural Creativity: Exploration of Multi-dimensional Paths of Art Intervention in Rural Revitalization

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Abstract

In the context of rural revitalization, localized artistic practices have emerged as pivotal vehicles for activating rural resources and reshaping cultural identity. In this study, the “Bao Xiaoguang’s Earthy Three Kingdoms” video series and the Tiananmen-themed mural installation in Henan village are used as case studies, and how local communities transform cultural symbols into endogenous drivers for rural revitalization through artistic design initiatives is explored. The research demonstrates that such practices not only redefine rural visual landscapes but also establish multidimensional pathways for cultural reproduction, economic empowerment, and social cohesion through media dissemination, emotional engagement, and community participation. Moving beyond the conventional “art in rural areas” narrative, this study emphasizes the creative agency of local stakeholders, providing academic insights with both theoretical depth and practical implications for rural revitalization efforts.

Keywords

rural revitalization, local art, cultural symbols, community participation, rural creativity

1. Introduction

The implementation of rural revitalization strategies relies not only on tangible investments in industry and infrastructure but also on the activation and reconstruction of cultural soft power. In recent years, a series of art practices led by local communities have quietly emerged in rural areas. These initiatives, deeply rooted in regional cultural contexts, have garnered widespread attention through creative forms imbued with rustic charm. For instance, Bao Xiaoguang, a young artist from Hebei Province, reimagined classical literary figures in rural daily life through his “Rural Three Kingdoms” short video series, reconstructing historical memory with humorous storytelling [1]. Moreover, villagers in Henan village spontaneously painted Tiananmen-themed murals on their walls, integrating national symbols into local landscapes to create distinctive visual expressions [2]. While diverse in form, these cases collectively demonstrate the profound connection between artistic design and rural revitalization. This paper aims to analyse specific case studies to illustrate how localized art practices—through symbolic translation, emotional mobilization, and resource reorganization—open multiple pathways for rural development while further reflecting on their sustainability and potential challenges.

2. Theoretical Framework: Locality, Symbolic Reproduction and Rural Agency

Artistic interventions in rural revitalization are often discussed within the theoretical framework of “cultural empowerment”. However, traditional research predominantly focuses on externally driven “implanted” artistic creations led by external artists, neglecting the agency of local communities [3]. This study introduces the dual perspectives of “locality” and “symbolic reproduction,” emphasizing the proactive role of rural communities in cultural practices. Locality encompasses not only geographical spatial affiliation but also deeper dimensions such as local knowledge, collective memory, and emotional connections. Symbolic reproduction refers to how indigenous groups creatively reinterpret traditional culture or foreign symbols, integrating them with contemporary life experiences.

This process is often accompanied by the involvement of media technologies [4]. For instance, short video platforms provide low-cost, high-impact channels for creators such as Bao Xiaoguang, enabling rural narratives to transcend geographical boundaries and enter the public sphere. Moreover, wall paintings—common visual media in rural areas—combine public accessibility with an enduring presence, serving as tangible carriers for community emotional expression. Both share a common origin: they emerge from local needs and creative initiatives rather than being imposed by external forces. This bottom-up artistic production fosters stronger community identity and engagement, injecting organic momentum into rural revitalization efforts.

3. Case Study: Mediatization Reconstruction of Rural Narratives and the Visual Engraving of Collective Memory

3.1 “Bao Xiaoguang’s Rural Three Kingdoms”: Rural Translation and Communication Empowerment of Classical Symbols

Bao Xiaoguang’s artistic practices originated from observing the daily life of rural Hebei Province, his hometown. He reimaged heroic figures from “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”—such as Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei—set in fields and farmyards, crafting a “time-travelling” humorous narrative through exaggerated performance and dialect dialogues [5]. For instance, in one video, Guan Yu appears with a flushed face but works with a hoe in a cornfield, muttering, “Reading Spring and Autumn Annals at night is no match for harvesting peanuts.” Moreover, Zhang Fei transforms into a pork vendor hawking his wares at the village market. Although seemingly absurd, these elements ingeniously blend classical literary motifs with modern agricultural activities, creating a striking cultural contrast.

This kind of creation is not simple parody but a creative transformation of traditional cultural resources. Bao Xiaoguang himself once said, “I want the characters from the Three Kingdoms to ‘come alive’ in rural areas—they are not statues on altars, but ordinary people just like us.” This desacralization approach bridges the gap between history and the present, allowing young audiences to rediscover the charm of rural life through laughter. In terms of dissemination effects, a series of videos have accumulated hundreds of millions of views on platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou, not only boosting online exposure to local agricultural products (such as sweet potatoes and corn frequently requested for purchase by viewers in videos) but also attracting some tourists to visit filming locations specifically for “check-ins,” creating an initial cultural-tourism synergy effect [1].

3.2 Tiananmen Wall Painting in Henan: Local Embedding of National Symbols and Community Identity

The mural project in a village in Henan Province exemplifies a distinct symbolic practice logic [2]. During discussions on village renovation, residents proposed transforming the blank walls along the main road into a mural depicting Tiananmen Square. The initiative originated from nostalgic sentiments among villagers who had previously worked in Beijing and later gained widespread support. Local masons and amateur artists collaborated on the project. While the craftsmanship was not particularly refined, the composition of elements such as Tiananmen’s iconic towers and the red flag created a visually striking balance between simplicity and solemnity.

After the mural was completed, it quickly became a landmark of the village. Elders often paused here to reminisce, sharing their wish to “visit Beijing” with their grandchildren, while young people used it as a backdrop for group photos shared on social media. Notably, this practice transcends the mere replication of political symbolism—it embodies a fusion of national identity and local sentiment. Through collective participation, villagers transformed personal memories (such as their migrant worker experiences) and shared aspirations (national identity and rural pride) into tangible public art. The village party secretary mentioned in an interview, “We painted Tiananmen because it symbolizes the ‘center,’ and our village aspires to become the focal point of this development.” This expression reflects the psychological mechanism through which local communities seek self-empowerment via artistic design.

4. Path Analysis: Multidimensional Mechanisms of Art Design Driving Rural Revitalization

4.1 Cultural Reproduction: From Traditional Resources to Contemporary Narratives

A fundamental mechanism of grassroots art practices lies in reinterpreting local cultural resources. Bao Xiaoguang transformed three kingdoms stories from written texts into audiovisual narratives, embedding them within rural settings to create experiential and shareable contemporary storytelling [5]. Henan wall paintings localized grand national symbols by integrating them into villagers’ daily living spaces [2]. Both approaches break the static transmission model of cultural symbols, endowing them with new meanings and functions. This process not only enhances the visibility of rural culture but also serves as a bridge for younger generations to reconnect with traditions.

4.2 Economic Empowerment: Traffic Conversion and Activation of Implicit Resources

The economic impact of art design often manifests as indirect “traffic conversion”. Bao Xiaoguang’s videos naturally incorporate local products and landscapes during dissemination, stimulating latent consumer demand [1]. While Henan wall paintings do not generate direct revenue, they enhance village visibility, laying the groundwork for future tourism development and agricultural product branding. More importantly, such practices unlock rural latent resources—including villagers’ creative potential, local narratives, and collective memory—resources frequently overlooked by traditional development models yet capable of becoming distinctive advantages for specialized industries.

4.3 Social Cohesion: Participatory Creation and Community Strengthening

The community-driven nature of artistic activities represents significant social value in rural revitalization. From neighborhood collaboration in short video production (such as villagers acting as extras or providing venues) to collective discussions and hands-on implementation during mural painting projects, these initiatives strengthen interaction and community identity among residents [3]. This participatory approach not only improves rural physical environments but also redefines spiritual connections within communities. For instance, the Henan mural project—from its initial proposal to full execution—was entirely decided upon by local villagers, sparking enthusiastic discussions on other public affairs and subtly enhancing community governance vitality.

4.4 Emotional Connection: Reproduction of Rural Identity and Place Attachment

During modernization and urbanization processes, rural areas often face the dual challenges of population outflow and emotional disconnection. Local art practices have reshaped villagers’ emotional attachment to their hometowns through the creation of shared cultural experiences. Familiar agricultural scenes in Bao Xiaoguang’s videos resonate with those of migrant workers, while Henan wall paintings have become “emotional landmarks”, symbolizing collective belonging for locals. Such emotional connections may indirectly influence talent retention and local entrepreneurship incentives, resulting in the accumulation of human capital and psychological assets for long-term development in rural areas.

5. Reflection and Prospects: Sustainability, Cultural Authenticity, and Policy Synergy

While grassroots art practices demonstrate promising potential, their sustainability and underlying risks require careful consideration. On the one hand, overreliance on individual creativity or short-term popularity

may lead to unsustainable outcomes. On the other hand, symbolic transformations divorced from local contexts risk falling into superficial “spectacle traps”. For instance, if Bao Xiaoguang’s work remains limited to comedic elements without cultural depth, their vitality could diminish as audience interest wanes. Similarly, if Henan wall paintings are mechanically replicated as cookie-cutters “policy propaganda posters,” they risk losing their original emotional resonance.

Therefore, future practices should focus on three key aspects: First, enhancing deep engagement to prevent disconnection between art design and community life; second, fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders—such as introducing professional artists or scholars for technical support while maintaining local ownership; and third, providing flexible frameworks that allow rural areas to experiment with cultural expressions through trial and error rather than mechanically applying uniform standards. Only through these measures can art truly become a sustainable driving force for rural revitalization rather than a fleeting decorative element.

6. Conclusions

Case studies of Bao Xiaoguang and Henan mural art demonstrate that the artistic approach to rural revitalization hinges on stimulating the creative agency of local communities. Through symbolic reinterpretation, media dissemination, and community engagement, these practices transform indigenous resources into cultural capital, economic potential, and social cohesion. While not necessarily grand or elaborate, they thrive through deep-rooted connections to rural contexts. This study confirms that compared with externally imposed models, endogenous art interventions are more sustainable. However, the research is limited by its focus on two specific cases in northern China, and the long-term economic impact remains to be quantified. Future research should further examine the long-term impacts of such initiatives across different regions and explore quantitative metrics for measuring the social capital generated by participatory art.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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