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Informing Postgraduate Curriculum Reform through the "Thousand-Village Demonstration and Ten-Thousand-Village Improvement Project": The Development of Research and Practice in Rural Development

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Abstract: In the context of comprehensively advancing rural development and building a strong agricultural nation, postgraduate education in design disciplines assumes a critical mission: cultivating high-level innovative talents for rural development. The "Thousand-Village Demonstration and Ten-Thousand-Village Improvement" Project—exemplifying Chinese modernization in the rural sphere—embodies a systematic approach, a people-centered philosophy, an ecological worldview, and a long-term developmental methodology. As such, it offers valuable insights for pedagogical innovation in higher education. This paper examines the postgraduate course Research and Practice in Rural Development within environmental design, addressing key challenges in its prior implementation, including the gap between theory and practice, limited instructional diversity, and insufficient integration of value-based education. Drawing systematically on the experiential wisdom of the "Thousand-Village" initiative, the study explores comprehensive reforms in curriculum content, teaching methodologies, practice models, and assessment frameworks. The reform aims to establish a new teaching paradigm characterized by research orientation, integration of knowledge and action, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. It seeks to cultivate graduate students' robust design competencies, deep social awareness, systemic ecological thinking, and a committed sense of responsibility toward rural communities. By aligning academic training with national development needs, this approach enables design education to contribute meaningfully to the sustainable and holistic revitalization of rural areas.

Keywords: "Thousand-Village Demonstration and Ten-Thousand-Village Improvement" Project; Curriculum Reform; Rural Development; Research-Oriented Teaching

1. Introduction

Now entering its third decade, the "Thousand-Village Demonstration and Ten-Thousand-Village Improvement" Project (hereafter referred to as the "Thousand-Village Project") has evolved from an initial campaign focused on rural environmental remediation into a comprehensive system of practice for holistic rural development—encompassing industrial development, talent cultivation, cultural continuity, ecological sustainability, and organizational strengthening. It now stands as a vivid illustration of China's distinctive path to modernization and its integrated vision for agriculture, rural areas, and rural people. Beyond transforming the physical landscape of Zhejiang's countryside, this initiative has distilled a robust set of guiding principles and methodological frameworks that offer broader relevance across sectors.

For design disciplines committed to enhancing the quality and sustainability of urban and rural environments, the "Thousand-Village Project" represents not merely a policy success, but a rich pedagogical resource—a "living laboratory" where theory engages with complex realities. It exemplifies how design, when situated within rural contexts, can transcend formal and functional shaping to become a multidimensional practice that integrates social equity, cultural identity, ecological integrity, and economic vitality. This marks a fundamental shift—from "building the countryside" toward

"managing," "regenerating," and "empowering" rural communities[1]. Recognizing its educational value, many Chinese universities have begun integrating the lessons of the "Thousand-Village Project" into their curricula. For instance, China Agricultural University and the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences have invited senior practitioners to deliver thematic lectures for graduate students, offering in-depth analyses of the project's historical background, conceptual underpinnings, and practical implications. Similarly, the Shanghai National Accounting Institute has adopted case studies from the project as living materials for thematic education and curriculum innovation. However, for design studies—particularly in postgraduate courses focused on environmental design—the question of how to move beyond mere theoretical exposition, deeply translate the core methodology of the "Thousand Villages Demonstration and Ten Thousand Villages Improvement" Project, and organically embed it into the entire process of professional talent cultivation to develop an operable, assessable, and sustainable model of teaching innovation remains an urgent and yet-to-be-explored challenge.

Addressing this gap, this paper focuses on the master's course Research and Practice in Rural Development in environmental design, led by the author. By critically analyzing the current state of the course and drawing on the philosophical and methodological insights of the "Thousand-Village Project" as both foundational principle and source of innovation, this study explores a reform pathway tailored to disciplinary characteristics and aligned with the national imperative of cultivating high-level talents for rural development.

2. Course Establishment Background: Addressing the Demands of the Era and the Intrinsic Needs of Disciplinary Development

The establishment of the course Research and Practice in Rural Development is based on a threefold consideration: educational trends both domestically and internationally, major national strategic directions, and the internal developmental needs of the environmental design discipline.

2.1 Development Trends of Rural-Related Courses Internationally and Domestically

Internationally, rural construction and community participatory design have become significant directions in the education of architecture, landscape architecture, and planning design. Many universities and colleges guide students to immerse themselves in specific rural contexts through formats such as workshops and collaborative design studios, engaging in research and practice oriented toward real-world issues. For example, the "Spatial Design Course for Tribal Studies" at the College of Design of Chung Yuan Christian University emphasizes "stepping out of the classroom and into the tribes." Through a four-phase model of "design–communication–implementation–reflection," students learn to integrate cultural heritage with design innovation in the context of real-world construction projects. For instance, the rural development workshop jointly conducted by Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and Guizhou Minzu University explores a learner-centered "research-oriented integrated teaching" approach. It advocates for multi-dimensional learning activities that take place "in the countryside, for the countryside, with the countryside, and enabling the countryside to learn." Collectively, these practices reflect a profound shift in design education—from hypothetical projects to real-world social issues, and from mere skill training to the cultivation of systemic problem-solving capabilities.

2.2 The Strategic Context of Rural Development in China

The state has proposed and is implementing the rural development strategy, positioning it as the overarching framework for addressing issues related to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers in the new era. Subsequently, a series of top-level designs and documents, such as the *Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018-2022)* and *the Opinions on Effectively Linking the Consolidation and Expansion of Poverty Alleviation Achievements with Rural Revitalization*, have been issued successively. These documents clarify the overarching requirements for the "Five Key Aspects of Revitalization": industry, talent, culture, ecology, and organizational development. The 20th National Congress further emphasized the need to "comprehensively advance rural revitalization," pointing out that "in building a modern country in all respects, the most arduous and demanding tasks still lie in the rural areas."

Against this backdrop, higher education has been entrusted with the historic mission of serving national strategies and cultivating urgently needed talent for rural development. Universities must proactively and accurately channel their advantages in education, science, technology, and talent into the main arena of urban-rural integration and rural development. Therefore, establishing advanced professional courses focused on rural areas is a necessary and natural step for design disciplines to answer the national call and fulfill its social responsibility.

2.3 The Intrinsic Need for Development within Environmental Design

Traditional environmental design education has predominantly centered on urban spaces and individual buildings, often paying insufficient attention to the vast and diverse rural landscapes. Its knowledge framework and design methodologies exhibit a certain tendency toward "urban centralism." With the advancement of new urbanization and the rediscovery of rural value, rural areas have become an important sphere for design innovation that cannot be overlooked. The New Liberal Arts initiative advocates for interdisciplinary integration, calling on design education to break down barriers and engage in extensive dialogue with fields such as sociology, ecology, agronomy, and economics. The complex and systemic nature of rural development. precisely offers an ideal practical context for such interdisciplinary integration. The establishment of the course Research and Practice in Rural Development aims to guide students beyond a narrow focus on physical spatial design. It seeks to build a comprehensive competency framework that integrates social, cultural, and ecological perspectives, thereby cultivating "strategic designers" and "innovative practitioners" capable of addressing the real and complex challenges of rural areas.

3. Shortcomings in Previous Teaching: The Disconnect Between Theory, Practice, and Values

In the previous course instruction, although rural issues were preliminarily introduced, several deep-seated problems remained, hindering the improvement of the quality of talent cultivation.

3.1 At the Instructional Content Level

Theoretical Disconnection from Practice: The course content tended to overemphasize macro-level policy interpretation, systematic study of rural economics, discussion of social hot topics, and appreciation of successful domestic and international case studies. It lacked an in-depth understanding and analysis of China's local practices, particularly long-term, systematic initiatives such as the "Thousand-Village Project". Students' understanding of rural areas remains conceptual and superficial. They lack recognition of the social complexities within rural communities, overlook the importance of local knowledge, and fail to regard villagers as active agents. Students' field research in rural areas lacks depth, resulting in designs that often feel like externally imposed "objects" rather than "organic components" that emerge from the social fabric of rural communities. A disconnect exists between knowledge transmission and the cultivation of the ability to address real-world challenges in rural China.

Knowledge Fragmentation and Lack of Systematic Integration: The teaching content is mechanically arranged by chapters—such as the history of Chinese urban construction, rural sociology, and population sociology—without being organically synthesized into a cohesive knowledge framework for addressing the complex system of "rural development." Students find it difficult to develop a "systematic perspective" that integrates multiple factors such as population, industry, culture, governance, and ecology. As a result, design proposals tend to fall into the trap of "focusing on objects while neglecting people" and "addressing isolated points rather than the broader context."

Weak Value Guidance and Insufficient Humanistic Care: Teaching often overemphasizes the technical and artistic aspects of design while relatively neglecting the cultivation of students' value orientation and sense of social responsibility toward serving rural areas. There is insufficient exploration of fundamental questions such as "for whom do we design" and "what is the purpose of design." The core principles embodied in the "Thousand-Village Project"—such as "adhering to a people-centered approach" and "taking public satisfaction as the ultimate criterion"—have not been deeply integrated into the curriculum.

3.2 At the Teaching Methodology Level

Teaching methods were relatively singular, often centered on the instructor: The classroom

instruction primarily relied on teacher-led lectures, with students passively receiving knowledge, leaving little room for active inquiry and critical thinking. Although case study sessions were included, they often remained superficial, failing to guide students in deeply exploring the decision-making logic, implementation pathways, and long-term operational mechanisms underlying the cases.

While the course includes a practical design component that guides students into real rural settings to interact with villagers, the respondents are mostly limited to villagers themselves. There is a lack of opportunity for deep interaction and collaborative co-creation with diverse stakeholders such as village officials and various types of entrepreneurs. The practice session remains weak: Although the course includes a practical design component that guides students into real rural settings to interact with villagers, the respondents are mostly limited to the villagers themselves. There is a lack of opportunities for deep interaction and collaborative co-creation with diverse stakeholders such as village officials and various types of entrepreneurs. This kind of "armchair strategizing" approach to practice results in students' design ideas being difficult to implement. It also prevents them from truly understanding the complexities of rural society and the actual needs of villagers, leading to an insufficient grasp of the real constraints in design.

The assessment method tends to prioritize outcomes over process: Course evaluation typically relies heavily on final design drawings and textual submissions, overlooking students' growth and performance during stages such as social research, problem identification, multi-stakeholder communication, and iterative refinement. This evaluation approach encourages a "fast-food" style of design, which is not conducive to cultivating students' patience for in-depth exploration or their resilience in solving complex problems.

4. Curriculum Reform and Innovative Pathways Guided by the Experience of the "Thousand-Village Project"

To address the aforementioned shortcomings, the core of the curriculum reform lies in "activating" the successful experience of the "Thousand-Village Project" into concrete, teachable, practicable, and assessable pathways. The reform unfolds across four dimensions—"content restructuring, methodological innovation, platform building, and evaluation reform"—to construct a completely new teaching closed-loop[2].

4.1 Restructuring the Course Content: From Knowledge Modules to a Problem Framework

Drawing on the iterative logic of the "Thousand-Village Project"—which evolved from "improvement" to "beautification" and then to "common prosperity"—the course content has been restructured into three progressively advancing modules: the Cognition and Diagnosis Module, designed for understanding rural society and identifying its challenges; the Strategy and Intervention Module, focused on systematic design and development planning; and the Implementation and Stewardship Module, aimed at collaborative place-making and long-term governance. These three modules are consistently guided by two overarching principles: systems thinking and bottom-line awareness(see Table 1).

Meanwhile, by integrating the supervisor's research projects and collaborating with typical local villages, the initiative aims to achieve the in-depth integrated development of "agriculture, culture, tourism, and commerce." Through this collaborative effort to devise strategies for rural development, it seeks to identify industrial models and development pathways for the rapid growth of Anshan's rural areas. By engaging with real-world projects, students not only apply their knowledge in practice but also experience profound growth in their emotional engagement, conceptual understanding, and sense of responsibility. This process fosters a deep recognition of the social value of their professional expertise and the significance of their personal contributions.

Table 1. Restructured Framework for the Course Content of Research and Practice in Rural Development

Advanced Module	Core Theme	Corresponding Experience of the Thousand-Village Project	Key Teaching Content
Module I:	Understanding	Investigation and Research;	Rural social structure and governance; Local culture

Cognition and Diagnosis	Rural Society and Problem Identification	People First	and spatial genes; Rural industries and economic logic; Rural ecological baseline and resource value; Field research and participatory methods in rural communities.
Module II: Strategy and Intervention	Systemic Design and Development Planning	Adapting to Local Conditions; Holistic Planning	Comprehensive improvement strategies for rural human settlements; Integrated design of rural public spaces with culture and tourism; Ecological restoration and low-carbon technology applications; Cultural heritage and innovation in rural design.
Module III: Implementation and Operation	Collaborative Development and Long-Term Governance	Policy Guidance; Co-construction, Co-governance, and Sharing	Management of rural project implementation; Localized transformation of design outcomes; Cultivation of rural business formats and community management; Post-assessment and adaptive maintenance of design projects.

4.2 Innovation in Teaching Methods: From One-Way Instruction to Multi-Dimensional Co-Creation

The course will completely move away from the teacher-centered classroom model by introducing diverse interactive, immersive, and research-oriented teaching methods[3].

"Dual-Teacher Classes and Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue": Invite experts in agriculture and rural affairs, seasoned practitioners in rural construction (such as representatives of "Science and Technology Commissioners"), grassroots rural officials, and various types of business operators into the classroom to co-teach alongside specialized instructors. Through formats such as thematic lectures and roundtable discussions, an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral dialogue platform is established, enabling students to understand rural areas from multiple dimensions.

Research-Oriented Project-Based Learning (PBL)[4]: Using the authentic research project from the local area or partner rural community—Research on Countermeasures for Promoting the Deep Integrated Development of Agriculture, Culture, Tourism, and Commerce in Anshan's Rural Areas by Applying the "Experience of the Thousand-Village Demonstration and Ten-Thousand-Village Improvement Project"—as a long-term driving project. Students form interdisciplinary teams (encouraging collaboration with peers from planning, sociology, economics, and other fields) and, under the guidance of instructors, complete the entire process of "problem research – field investigation – strategy development – proposal design – model/prototype creation – community feedback – proposal iteration." This simulates the working methodology of "from the masses, to the masses" employed in the "Thousand-Village Project".

Immersive Field Workshops[5]: Each semester, 1–2 weeks are dedicated to an intensive, immersive research and design workshop in a typical rural village. Students engage deeply with villagers through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, spatial mapping, and shared labor. This approach allows them to acquire "on-site knowledge" of the rural context, ensuring that design proposals are practical, down-to-earth, and aligned with the genuine needs of the villagers.

4.3 Establishment of Practice Platforms: From Closed Classrooms to Open Ecosystems

The success of the curriculum reform relies on stable, diverse, and in-depth support from practice platforms.

Establishing a "University-Locality-Village" Collaborative Practice Base[6]: Sign long-term cooperation agreements with local government rural development departments, townships, and representative villages to jointly establish teaching practice and innovation bases. These bases serve as fixed field sites for courses, a topic bank for graduation projects, and zones for transforming research achievements, fostering positive interaction among teaching, research, and social services.

Establish a "Digital Twin" Teaching Resource Repository: Conduct digital archiving of typical rural cases to create a "Digital Village" resource repository that encompasses spatial data, social information, industrial materials, and cultural assets[7]. This repository can serve as case study material for routine instruction and also support students in conducting proposal simulations and testing within a virtual environment.

Integration into the " Rural Development. Innovation Network": Encourage and guide students to participate in high-level domestic and

international rural design competitions, as well as innovation and entrepreneurship contests focused on rural development. This provides a broader platform for evaluating and exchanging course projects. Additionally, introduce social welfare funds and corporate resources to offer small seed funding support for the implementation of outstanding design concepts.

4.4 Innovation in Assessment and Evaluation: From Summative Judgment to Holistic Developmental Assessment

Establish a diversified, comprehensive evaluation system centered on the growth of capabilities and the formation of values[8].

Process-Oriented Evaluation: Students are required to develop a personal learning portfolio, systematically documenting field notes, research reports, process sketches, group discussion records, community feedback, and multiple iterations of project proposals. This portfolio serves as the primary basis for assessing their learning engagement, cognitive development, and collaborative skills.

Evaluation of Achievements: The final assessment adopts the form of a public defense. In addition to faculty from the university, evaluators must include industry experts and representatives from the village community. The evaluation criteria focus not only on the professionalism and creativity of the design proposal but also place greater emphasis on the accuracy of problem identification, the comprehensiveness of systemic thinking, the feasibility of acceptance by villagers, and the reflection of socio-ecological considerations.

Evaluation of Value Contribution: A new dimension assessing "Social Value and Impact" is added to examine whether the design proposal genuinely addresses rural needs, facilitates consensus-building among villagers, and possesses the potential for sustainable operation. This guides students to treat "revitalizing rural development" as both the starting point and the ultimate goal of their design.

5. Expected Outcomes of the Curriculum Reform

Through the systematic reforms outlined above, the course Research and Practice in Rural Development is anticipated to yield significant outcomes in the following aspects:

5.1 Significant Enhancement in the Quality of Talent Cultivation

Graduates in environmental design will no longer be mere "creators of space." Instead, they will become "collaborative innovators in rural development" who possess a deep commitment to "understanding agriculture, cherishing the countryside, and caring for farmers," master systemic thinking and interdisciplinary knowledge, and are capable of conducting comprehensive rural diagnostics, engaging in collaborative planning, and promoting sustainable implementation. Their professional competency framework will be better aligned with the demand for interdisciplinary talent in rural development..

5.2 Deep Integration of Teaching, Research, and Social Services

The in-depth fieldwork and real-world project practices driven by the course will serve as primary sources for academic research for both instructors and students, fostering a body of theoretically valuable research grounded in China’s rural practices. Simultaneously, the high-quality proposals and plans developed by students can provide direct intellectual support to partner villages. Some outstanding proposals are expected to be implemented with support from various stakeholders, achieving a win-win outcome where academic knowledge spillover translates into tangible social benefits.

5.3 Formation of a Replicable Teaching Reform Paradigm

The teaching model explored in this course—inspired by the essence of the "Thousand Villages Demonstration and Ten Thousand Villages Improvement" Project and characterized by "research orientation, integration of knowledge and practice, and multi-party collaboration"—can provide a relatively comprehensive, adaptable, and referential solution for postgraduate curriculum reform in related disciplines such as design studies, architecture, and landscape architecture at similar institutions across China. This will contribute to the overall enhancement of talent cultivation for rural development nationwide.

6. Conclusion

The far-reaching significance of the "Thousand-Village Project" lies not only in creating numerous beautiful villages across Zhejiang but also in revealing a practical pathway to profound

rural transformation through persistent and scientifically informed approaches. The wisdom embedded in this pathway represents an invaluable asset for higher education in design—serving to innovate educational philosophies, reshape curriculum systems, and redefine the role of designers.

Deeply empowering the reform of the Research and Practice in Rural Development curriculum with the experience of the "Thousand-Village Project" is, in essence, a profound revolution in educational philosophy and practice. It calls for a shift from imparting static knowledge to cultivating dynamic systemic problem-solving capabilities, evolving from theoretical deductions in the classroom to collaborative co-creation in the field, and returning from the pursuit of dazzling design forms to the fundamental value of serving people's better lives. This is a long-term endeavor. As postgraduate supervisors, we bear the mission of cultivating future leaders in rural development. Through ongoing teaching innovation, we have the potential to guide a new generation of environmental design talents—not only in shaping beautiful rural spaces with sketches and models but also in dedicating themselves to the grand endeavor of rural development with profound patriotism, scientific thinking, and solid practical skills. In the magnificent blueprint of modernization, they will leave a unique and remarkable imprint of the design discipline.

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2025 Anshan Philosophy and Social Sciences Research General Project: Research on Countermeasures for Promoting the Deep Integrated Development of Agriculture, Culture, Tourism, and Commerce in Anshan's Rural Areas by Applying the "Experience of the Thousand-Village Demonstration and Ten-Thousand-Village Improvement Project"(as20253042)

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