

The Value, Dilemmas and Paths of Empowering Rural Revitalization in Higher Vocational Colleges under the Life Education Theory

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[**Abstract**] Vocational education, as a type of education closely linked to industry and society, is an important force to promote the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas. By analyzing Mr. Tao Xingzhi's theory of life education and the diverse values of vocational education in empowering rural revitalization, and in view of the practical predicaments in the process of vocational education empowering rural revitalization, taking Zhejiang Tongji Vocational College of Science and Technology's service to rural revitalization as an example, this paper comes up with practice paths for higher vocational colleges to empower rural revitalization from aspects such as dynamically adjusting professional settings, optimizing course content, reshaping campus culture, and enhancing social service capabilities, so as to provide references and guidance for other vocational colleges to serve the rural revitalization.

[**Key words**] life education theory; vocational education; rural revitalization; multiple values; realistic dilemma; practice paths

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Vocational education, as an educational sector most closely aligned with economic and social development, serves as a vital pillar of support for rural revitalization. The *Plan for Comprehensive Rural Revitalization (2024–2027)*, issued by the State Council, explicitly calls for “improving the higher education system related to agriculture, upgrading vocational education, and encouraging eligible village officials and farmers to apply for admission to vocational colleges”. The document underscores the pivotal role of vocational education in advancing rural revitalization.

Tao Xingzhi, a preeminent educator and thinker in modern China, championed the philosophy of “Life Education”, which aligns closely with contemporary educational imperatives for rural revitalization—namely, “life is education; society is school; and teaching, learning, and doing should be integrated”. By providing livelihood assistance, technical support, skills training, and cultural enrichment to farmers, education, life and production are integrated. In this way, it imperceptibly permeates every facet of rural revitalization. Grounded in this perspective, this study examines the multifaceted value of Tao Xingzhi's life education theory in empowering rural revitalization through vocational education, analyzes the practical challenges encountered in this process, and draws on a series of practical initiatives undertaken by Zhejiang Tongji Vocational College of Science and Technology in serving rural revitalization to distill transferable pathways for other vocational institutions.

1 Multifaceted value of vocational education in empowering rural revitalization from the perspective of life education

1.1 Contemporary value: meeting the strategic needs of China's modernization

The core proposition of Tao Xingzhi's "Life Education" theory is that education must serve social production and daily life. Tao believed that the fundamental purpose of education is to cultivate individuals who become masters of themselves and their nation, thereby driving holistic social development. This vision aligns seamlessly with the current philosophy of leveraging vocational education to revitalize rural areas. The Rural Revitalization Strategy stands as a pivotal policy initiative of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government. The *2025 No. 1 Central Document* specifically mandates: "Optimizing agricultural disciplines and majors based on industrial demands, elevating the standards of agricultural vocational education, and encouraging vocational colleges to form industry – education consortia with agribusinesses." By cultivating high – caliber, technically skilled, and innovative talent, higher vocational colleges are steering traditional agriculture toward smart, technology – driven modern agriculture. This endeavor represents not only a critical measure to enhance the adaptability of vocational education—addressing the intrinsic developmental needs of vocational institutions and revealing the underlying logic linking educational reform with rural industrial upgrading—but also constitutes a contemporary mission to carry forward Tao Xingzhi's educational legacy, fully consistent with national strategic priorities.

1.2 Educational value: manifesting the essential requirement of vocational education's distinctive identity

Tao Xingzhi's dictum "Society is School" posits that education should not be confined within the walls of traditional campuses. Instead, it conceptualizes society as a vast campus. By interacting and collaborating with society, schools can enhance their operational capacity to better serve societal development and progress.

As a distinctive form of education closely aligned with regional industries and society, vocational education embodies the contemporary application of Tao Xingzhi's "Life Education" theory. In 2025, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the *Notice on Implementing the Plan for Developing World-class Higher Vocational Colleges and Majors with Chinese Characteristics (2025 – 2029)*, which explicitly stipulates: "Aligning with key nodes of industrial chains and core positions in enterprises, precisely define the objectives and specifications for talent cultivation within specialty clusters; explore diverse linkages between formal professional education and vocational training; and cultivate high-skilled personnel urgently needed for the development of new-quality productive forces." In response, higher vocational colleges must dynamically adjust their talent cultivation schemes to meet diverse industrial and societal demands, ensuring alignment with industry standards and job requirements. This facilitates a close match between major offerings and industrial needs, as well as between graduates' competencies and employment opportunities, thereby establishing robust channels for employment of high-caliber technical and skilled talent. Concurrently, vocational training constitutes a vital responsibility of vocational education. By leveraging high-quality instructional resources, experienced faculty teams, and modern practical training facilities to conduct targeted training for military veterans and returning migrant farmers, these institutions fulfill their social service function of supporting rural revitalization and fueling regional economic growth. Such initiatives significantly reinforce the social accountability and broaden the societal impact of vocational education.

1.3 Humanistic value: meeting the inherent requirement of students' holistic development

Tao Xingzhi's principle of "integration of teaching, learning, and doing" underscores a student-centered approach. Through diverse pedagogical methods, teachers guide students in developing problem – solving capabilities during theoretical study, while stimulating their innovative thinking and practical skills. In imparting both professional knowledge and hands – on experience, educators foster the holistic physical and mental

development of students, positioning them as active agents in their own learning. Moreover, Tao asserted, “Life education is innate and accompanies us throughout our lives. Learning begins at birth and ends only when one enters the coffin”. He thus advocated for cultivating habits of lifelong learning, urging students to continuously refine their personal cultivation.

Vocational education inherits Tao Xingzhi’s student-centered educational philosophy. Adhering to the laws governing talent development, it emphasizes the holistic growth of students—encompassing individual capabilities, professional competence, and innovative thinking. By tailoring instruction to individual needs, vocational education employs diversified pedagogical approaches and interdisciplinary practical activities. While imparting specialized theoretical knowledge, it cultivates students’ communication skills, practical abilities, and innovative capacities, thereby stimulating their interest and motivation in learning and enhancing their interdisciplinary thinking and job adaptability. Furthermore, it guides students in forming sound outlooks on life and values, fosters their sense of social responsibility, and prepares them to assume corresponding societal obligations in their future careers.

2 Practical challenges in vocational education empowering rural revitalization

2.1 Mismatch between talent supply from vocational colleges and talent demand for rural revitalization

According to projections by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs in 2024, technical and skilled talents related to agriculture should account for over 15% of the workforce to revitalize rural industries. However, statistics from the Ministry of Education in 2024 reveal that nationwide enrollment in agriculture-related majors at vocational colleges stood at merely approximately 6.8% of total vocational education enrollment. Over half of these students are concentrated in central, eastern, and western provinces. Compounding this issue, the rate of graduates from county-level vocational colleges returning to their hometowns to work is less than 20%. Consequently, a substantial gap persists between the available talent pool and the actual demands of rural revitalization. Simultaneously, a disconnect between “education and life” has emerged in how some vocational colleges cultivate talent for rural revitalization. These institutions often overlook the correlation between industrial demands and their own operational capacities. Their perception of rural talent remains confined to the stereotype of traditional agricultural producers, resulting in ambiguous training objectives and severe homogeneity in talent cultivation models. Pedagogy continues to rely predominantly on a “classroom lecturing plus short-term training” format, with the penetration rate of real production scenarios falling below 30%. This has led to a significant misalignment between graduates’ practical skills and industry needs, leaving the talent supplied by vocational education far short of the high-quality workforce required for revitalizing rural industries.

2.2 Misalignment between major offerings in vocational colleges and rural industrial chains

Empowering rural revitalization constitutes a vital manifestation of vocational education’s distinctive identity, fulfilling its mission through value-added services anchored in its strength of close alignment with rural industries. However, a number of higher vocational colleges have yet to establish integrated planning and positive interaction with rural social governance and industrial convergence. This has resulted in a pronounced disconnect between “school and society”. Constrained by fiscal limitations and assessment-oriented incentives, many agriculture-related vocational institutions exhibit a drift in their institutional positioning, leading to the marginalization of agricultural majors. The prevalence of “agri-neglect” and “rural-departing” tendencies is reflected in non-agricultural majors accounting for over 50% of enrollments, with growth rates significantly outpacing those of agricultural disciplines. Even among retained agricultural majors, curricula often remain tethered to obsolete courses on traditional planting techniques, failing to keep pace with rapid technological iterations in agriculture. They lag in incorporating emerging industry demands such as digital technologies and eco-agriculture. While some institutions have introduced majors in emerging fields—including smart agriculture, rural tourism, rural e-commerce, and cold-chain logistics—the offering rate remains below 30%. Consequently, a structural misalignment persists

between major offerings and the evolving industrial landscape of rural revitalization.

2.3 Alienation between cultural cultivation in vocational colleges and cultural values of rural revitalization

Rural culture constitutes the genetic code of rural revitalization. Its living transmission provides sustained value consensus and innovative momentum for strategic implementation. Measures such as protecting, inheriting, and revitalizing rural cultural heritage can effectively amplify its influence and serve as the spiritual bedrock for fostering civilized local customs. However, urbanization, adjustments in agricultural structures, and the outflow of younger populations have fractured the chain of cultural transmission. Rural cultural development now faces a predicament marked by the erosion of cultural agency, the fading of local attachments, the loss of distinctive cultural resources, and weakened regenerative capacity. Although vocational education has undertaken exploratory efforts in preserving and developing rural culture, its cultural cultivation remains constrained by a traditional, discipline-centric legacy. There is a pronounced tendency toward “classroom-based transmission” and “fragmented knowledge delivery”. Structural deficiencies persist in pedagogically transforming the ethical principles of village governance and ecological values. Indigenous rural knowledge is often filtered into standardized textbooks, while dynamic cultural practices are reduced to simplistic training modules. This results in a distinct alienation from the cultural values essential to rural revitalization.

2.4 Misalignment between vocational education's social service and rural industrial development

Aligning with the mandate of revitalizing rural industries, vocational education seeks to advance its high-quality development by calibrating talent cultivation to meet industrial demands, leveraging technological innovation to upgrade industries, delivering skills training to empower a new generation of farmers, revitalizing local culture, and utilizing digital platforms to enhance rural governance. However, a number of institutions face significant constraints. Limited funding has led to sluggish development of dual-qualified faculty and outdated practical training equipment, leaving them ill-equipped to keep pace with the rapid technological evolution in rural sectors. Furthermore, a lack of sustained tracking of industrial dynamics and the prevalence of superficial industry-academia cooperation agreements—devoid of long-term service mechanisms—have resulted in a stark disconnect between “teaching and practice”. This manifests as insufficient field experience among faculty, short-term social service cycles, inadequate R&D and commercialization of scientific achievements, poor alignment between entrepreneurial initiatives and industrial chains, and low local graduate employment rates. Consequently, a pronounced misalignment persists between the social service capacity of vocational education and the developmental needs of rural industries.

3 Exploring pathways for vocational education to empower rural revitalization: a case study of Zhejiang Tongji Vocational College of Science and Technology

Zhejiang Tongji Vocational College of Science and Technology serves as a designated base for cultivating technical and skilled talents in the water resources sector under the Ministry of Water Resources, a National Demonstration Institution for Water Conservancy Vocational Education, a participating institution in Zhejiang Province's “Double High Plan”, and a High-quality Institution in Zhejiang Province for nurturing talents to serve rural revitalization. Guided by the life education philosophy, the college has undertaken practical explorations in serving rural revitalization through several key pathways: dynamically adjusting major offerings, optimizing curriculum content, reshaping campus culture, and enhancing social service capacity.

3.1 Targeting regional demand for modern agricultural talent, and deepening the supply-side structural reform of talent

“What kind of people to cultivate and how to cultivate them” constitutes a fundamental question in education and a core tenet of Tao Xingzhi's “Life Education” philosophy. Within the context of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, this philosophy translates into a deep coupling between vocational education and rural development needs.

To align with the trend toward intelligent facility agriculture, the college dynamically revised the talent cultivation scheme for its “Facility Agriculture and Equipment” major. It implemented a sequential “3+2” articulation model linking secondary and higher vocational education, achieving a 92% certification pass rate in modern agricultural machinery operation among graduates. To safeguard the agro – ecological environment and adapt to regional economic demands, the college launched a new major—Water Ecological Restoration Technology, actively nurturing urgently needed talent for rural revitalization; notably, its teaching team in this field successfully passed the evaluation for the Second Batch of National-level Innovative Teaching Teams in Vocational Education in 2025. Addressing the need for low – altitude agricultural economy development, such as farmland monitoring and crop spraying, the college established the UAV Mapping Technology major. Furthermore, it co-founded the East China Industry – Education Consortium for Water Conservancy and Electric Power, uniting 141 industry associations, educational institutions, enterprises, and research bodies. This initiative achieves a seamless alignment between the talent supply from vocational education and the industrial demands of rural revitalization.

3.2 Aligning with the whole industrial chain of regional rural construction, and enhancing vocational curriculum adaptability

Tao Xingzhi’s dictum “Life is Education” posits that rural education and rural life are intrinsically interconnected and unified; only education rooted in the actual needs of rural life can truly serve the farmer. In alignment with this principle, the college partnered with Anji County, Zhejiang, to establish a “Rural Revitalization Teaching and Practice Base”. In response to the rapid growth of rural e-commerce, the Mobile Commerce major introduced skill – based courses such as Practical Operation of Livestream Marketing for Agricultural Products, Rural Short – video Creation, and Logistics Supply Chain Management. This led to the establishment of an integrated “curriculum—practical training—service” teaching framework. Student – produced short videos were repurposed as promotional materials for local specialties in Hongcun Village, Kaihua County, thereby broadening sales channels for farmers and enabling direct translation of teaching outcomes into industrial service. To improve the quality of the rural living environment, the Environmental Art Design major launched courses including Rural Homestay Design and Creative Design for Rural Revitalization. Concurrently, the Digital Media major offered courses in AI – assisted design and digital creative product development. Applying their specialized knowledge, students utilized digital imaging, animation, visual communication, and other design methodologies to undertake projects such as homestay spatial design and green space planning along rural roads. This ensures vocational curricula keep pace with the iterative advancements in rural industrial technologies. Notably, two of these initiatives were selected as National Innovation Cases of University Design Empowering Rural Revitalization in 2024, exemplifying the deep integration of the education chain, talent chain, industry chain, and innovation chain.

3.3 Reshaping the cultural connotation of vocational colleges, and integrating culture to nurture civilized local customs

Tao Xingzhi’s principle of “Society is School” asserts that only when schools integrate fully with society can the reach of education expand and its impact become more effective. Acting on this vision, the college has pooled multidisciplinary resources—spanning water conservancy, electromechanical engineering, and digital technologies—to establish a tripartite resource repository system for rural revitalization centered on “water ecology + digital governance + cultural preservation”. This repository incorporates exemplary cultural elements such as rural intangible cultural heritage items, farming traditions, and revolutionary narratives, thereby fostering sustainable rural development and cultural innovation while achieving the dual effect of “cultivating virtue and nurturing talent through culture”. In 2023, this initiative was selected for inclusion in Zhejiang Province’s 14th Five – year Plan Special Resource Repository for Vocational Education in Rural Revitalization. Beyond campus boundaries, students actively engage in grassroots outreach through thematic social practices such as “Journey to the Headwaters of the

Qiantang River: Empowering Hongcun Village out of Poverty”, as well as through innovation and entrepreneurship projects. By delivering instruction, technical expertise, and cultural enrichment to rural communities, they help activate indigenous cultural genes and revitalize cultural spaces tied to local industries. These experiences not only enhance students’ artistic accomplishment and cultural confidence but also ignite their enthusiasm for learning and innovative thinking in contributing to rural revitalization—infusing fresh youthful momentum into the cause. In 2024, student teams secured the Silver Award in the National College Student Rural Revitalization Competition and the Gold Award in the Zhejiang Provincial College Student Rural Revitalization Innovation Contest; and the college has been honored as both a “National Civilized Unit” and a “National Civilized Campus”.

3.4 Focusing on the rural technology value chain, and enhancing vocational education’s social service capacity

The principle of “integration of teaching, learning, and doing” constitutes a core component of Tao Xingzhi’s “Life Education” theory. It not only addresses how to implement education and cultivate talent within daily life but also charts a clear course for enhancing instructional efficacy and educational quality in vocational education. Drawing on its disciplinary strengths in Water Ecological Restoration Technology, Facility Agriculture and Equipment, Environmental Art Design, and Mobile Commerce, the college has deeply integrated itself into the rural revitalization agenda. The college introduced performance evaluation systems for teaching and research and established the Future Rural Innovation Design Center to encourage faculty to engage directly with grassroots rural communities, particularly in the 26 mountainous counties. Key initiatives include empowering flood control and drought relief in mountainous areas through smart water technologies, constructing operational management platforms for rural drinking water, implementing the “bamboo-tube drip irrigation” technique, training rural water affairs officers, offering training workshops on building “Happy Rivers and Lakes” in the context of rural revitalization, and developing research bases for Zhejiang’s Eastern Water Culture. These efforts target critical areas such as rural water infrastructure, preservation of traditional villages, and the integration of agriculture with tourism. By strengthening the synergy between industry, academia, research, and application, the college has forged a tripartite service model characterized by “technology promotion—talent cultivation—cultural revitalization”. This model secured the First Prize in the 2023 National Awards for Achievements in Water Conservancy Vocational Education. Furthermore, its innovative practice titled “Large-scale Water Conservancy Standards Model Driving Deep Industry-Education Integration” was selected as a National Exemplary Case in 2025. The college has also been honored as a “High-quality Institution for Nurturing Talent Serving Rural Revitalization in Zhejiang Province” and recognized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs as an “Advanced Unit for Volunteer Services in University-led Design Empowerment for Rural Revitalization”.

4 Conclusion

“Strong roots yield flourishing leaves.” Tao Xingzhi’s “Life Education” philosophy emphasizes that education must be rooted in the realities of daily life. Accordingly, major development in vocational education must ground itself in the genuine needs of rural industries—cultivating high-caliber, technically skilled, and innovative vocational farmers and rural artisans. Simultaneously, by forming industry-education consortia with rural enterprises, vocational colleges can deliver targeted technical services that address precise pain points in rural areas. This involves developing adaptive technologies and activating indigenous cultural genes, thereby achieving a state where educational reform resonates in sync with industrial demands. Such alignment ultimately drives rural industrial upgrading and fosters high-quality regional economic development. As Tao aptly observed, only when education truly “grows from the soil” can the branches and leaves of rural revitalization flourish in enduring vitality.

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